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“*Organizational vocabularies allow participants to name and reconstitute their experiences, bodies, and selves in organizational terms, and this reconstitution is affirmed in ongoing interaction.*”

**FROM APPEARANCE
TALES TO
OPPRESSION TALES**

Frame Alignment and
Organizational Identity

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Based on participant observation and taped interviews with participants and leaders in Weight Watchers, Overeaters Anonymous, and the National Association to Advance Fat Acceptance (NAAFA), this article considers how organizations accomplish frame alignment with their members. All three organizations construct frames of meanings concerning participation, appearance, and food that reflect their own objectives. However, these frames must be aligned with members' own meanings, which, at times, contradict the organizational frame. Frame alignment is accomplished in Weight Watchers by group leaders emphasizing rationality with regards to food, body, and social relationships. Within Overeaters Anonymous, a redemptive frame is constructed that transforms the dieting practices of its members into a spiritual activity. The injustice frame of NAAFA transforms mundane aspects of everyday life, such as eating, into a political activity. As all members adopt the meanings of their respective program, they come to embrace a new personal identity that serves the organization.

Traditional paradigms for studying organizations—including population ecology (McKelvey and Aldrich 1983; McPherson 1984), structural contingency theory (Hsu, Marsh, and Mannari 1983), network analysis (Galaskiewicz and Wasserman 1993; White 1992), organizational dramaturgy (Meyer and Rowan 1977), and “new institutionalism” (Powell and DiMaggio 1991)—generally adhere to a shared definition of organizations as “boundary maintaining, goal-directed, activity systems” where society and culture are socially reproduced (Perrow 1986). This conception of formal organizations treats them as unitary actors rather than bundles of practices and routines negotiated and contested through the daily interaction of their members. Both symbolic interactionist and feminist theories have challenged this reification by focusing on the meanings, narratives, discourse, and interaction through which women and men socially construct organizations (Fine 1984; Fine and Ross 1984; Pierce 1995; Smith 1993). Along with this research, critical theorists have attended to the ways in which participants mobilize symbols, identities, and resources in creating but also resisting organizational structures and power (Burawoy 1979; Grenier 1988).

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Feminist scholars have advanced studies of organizational power by focusing on the masculinist assumptions and discursive practices that guide their operations. Dorothy Smith (1993) and Joan Acker (1991; Acker and Van Houten 1992), for example, examined how gender subtexts underpin the formal structures of organizations, leading to the social reproduction of patriarchy. While textual analyses of gender relations provide insights into how the formal blueprints of organizations embody male experience, they do not reveal how these relations are constructed, contested, or renegotiated in face-to-face interaction.

Interest in the reproduction of male privilege through conversation has been longstanding in feminist research (Adams and Ware 1984; Henley and Thorne 1975; West and Zimmerman 1977). Yet, only recently has a small body of feminist research been dedicated to analyzing talk and discourse within complex or formal organizations (Pringle 1989; Witz and Savage 1992). Among other organizational sociologists, there appears to be only a nascent interest in theorizing organizational rhetoric and language (Moch and Fields 1985). By contrast, substantive interest in organizations and language has been expansive within cultural anthropology and organizational social psychology. Research within these disciplines has assessed a variety of discursive forms including narratives and stories (Martin 1982; Rudy 1986), humor (Pogrebin and Poole 1988; Roy 1959; Ullian 1976), profanity (Leech 1980), and professional discourse (Conrad and Schneider 1980; Emerson 1972), as well as language in managerial relations.¹ Yet, even here, only a few studies, such as those in the area of alcohol research, have been interested in understanding how formal organizations assist in the creation of self-understandings among participants through the vocabularies that they provide (Denzin 1987a, 1987b; Denzin and Johnson 1993; Rudy 1986; Rudy and Greil 1987).

Concerns with organizational language in the construction of identity and self-image have received significantly more attention among social movement theorists, culminating in the growth of "frame analysis" (Benford and Snow 2000; Noakes 2000; Snow et al. 1986). Frame analyses of recruitment and commitment have sought to ascertain the ways in which collective action frames enable mobilization (Gamson, Fireman, and Rytina 1982). Recent contributions to the paradigm have been made by feminist scholars investigating the importance of gender in collective action frames (Ashley and Olson 1998; Ferree and Merrill 2000; Noonan 1997). Beyond social movement analysis, however, the

question of how frames of meaning are created and mobilized has been limited to analyses of media practices (Hutchby 1999; Rosales and Lowry 2000; Tucker 1998) and social problems (Powers and Andsager 1999; Taylor 2000). Frame analysis has been underused in the analysis of complex organizations, where consideration of participants' identities and self-understandings is central in understanding entry as well as ongoing participation in organizations.

The present article attends to this lacuna in organizational studies, exploring the rhetorical practices and organizational "frames" that are used in three different organizations,² including Weight Watchers Inc. (WW), Overeaters Anonymous (OA), and the National Association to Advance Fat Acceptance (NAAFA). In assessing the meaning-construction processes of the organizations and their members, this article investigates three interrelated questions: (1) What definitions and vocabularies of motive, "frames," are constructed by the organizations about member participation, appearance, and food? (2) What accounts do members themselves construct about these features of lived experience? and (3) How are these accounts adjusted within the organizations' frames of meaning? As frame alignment within the organizations is assessed, particular attention is paid to dimensions of gender.

THE ORGANIZATIONS

Over the course of approximately two years, I collected data at women's and men's meetings of WW, open meetings and the local tape library of OA, and the local chapter of the NAAFA. At the time of data collection, WW was the leading diet organization in the United States, boasting a worldwide membership of 15 million members distributed throughout thirty-two countries. Approximately 95 percent of all WW members are women. A subsidiary company of J. R. Heinz, WW totaled annual profits of \$1.6 billion at the beginning of the 1990s (Winters and Dagnoli 1990).

I also attended open meetings of OA. Because anonymity in OA is the central tenet of participation, the exact size and composition of OA's membership is unknown. Analysis of subscribers to OA publications suggests that 86 percent of its members in the United States are female (OA 1992, 1). The last enumeration of OA chapters placed the number

at approximately seven thousand worldwide (OA 1987, 10); because chapter size varies between five and twenty-five people, estimates of total membership are indeterminate.

The NAAFA describes itself as a civil rights organization in the “size rights movement” and as a social support organization for fat people (NAAFA 1990, 1-6). NAAFA members in the local chapter I studied engaged in a variety of social and political activities. These included parties, dances, community conferences, holding protests, and conducting write-in campaigns. The group, organized in 1969, estimates its membership to be between 2,500 and 3,000 members. NAAFA’s national office is located in Sacramento, California. Like WW and OA, the majority (78 percent) of members within NAAFA are female.

METHODOLOGY

During the course of my research, I conducted participant observation and in-depth interviews at both WW and NAAFA. A theoretical interest in the topic of shame along with experience in collegiate wrestling—a sport beset by extreme weight loss, binge eating, and forms of bulimia among its participants—initially led me to the topic of the body, emotions, and gender ideology. In the sport of wrestling, masculine meanings legitimate dieting and weight loss, activities commonly associated with women. I was interested in exploring the forms of gender-structured practices in an array of settings where the body is the focus of attention. Unfortunately, the scope of my research was narrowed after WW refused access to their marketing division. I had hoped to gain information on how WW “interrogated” dimensions of gender in their market analyses and then mobilized its cultural meanings in attracting women and men to the program. My request was met by a statement from WW informing me that program information was proprietary—it would be available only if I joined the ranks of regular paying customers. I interpreted WW’s refusal for wider access as a measure of heightened sensitivity to the ongoing federal investigation into the diet industry, an investigation culminating in law suits against several weight loss organizations including Nutri/system, WW’s main competitor. Frozen out of WW’s corporate offices, I conducted participant observation at WW’s weekly meetings, which I attended for approximately two years. I also solicited interviews from WW clients through local newspapers.

Concurrent with data collection at WW, I attended organizing sessions and engaged in an array of social activities with NAAFA members ranging from potlucks to local chapter board meetings. My work with the racially and economically disadvantaged students at the university served as necessary evidence of my political commitments for skeptical group members who interpreted my research at WW as a sign of conflicting interests. As they saw it, how could I join a weight loss program, be losing weight, and claim to share the political sympathies of fat activists? Repeated assurances along with the sharing of preliminary findings from research on WW allayed the suspicions of all except for one member of the local chapter.

During the very first meetings of WW, I participated in the usual procession of member activities, including paying weekly dues, being weighed on physician's scales by WW personnel, receiving organizational literature concerning meal plans along with promotional materials distributed by the organization (such as the monthly newspaper), and finally selecting a seat in the meeting area. As a participating observer, I experienced the anxiety that members later recounted in interviews about "facing the scale." Having failed weigh-in several times throughout the course of participant observation, I found that the practice evoked anxiety and then embarrassment on the occasion of a violation. It also elicited feelings of dependency on WW personnel who helped deviating members construct accounts of their failures, providing the remedial work necessary to retain paying customers.

At OA, I was frozen out of the local chapter's "closed meetings" (meetings closed to OA members only) after a group leader deemed my potential presence a violation of member anonymity and refused entree. Allowed to conduct participant observation in "open meetings" (meetings open to the general public), I was fortunate to meet OA members who led me to OA's extensive audiotape library. The proprietor of the library guided me to personal stories and presentations of OA members that had been recorded at national and local conferences. I used the strategy of "theoretical saturation" recommended by Glaser and Strauss (1967), selecting audiotapes that contained complete life stories until the data yielded marginal returns in the development of new conceptual categories. The total number of interviews for all three organizations is given in Table 1. Because the organizations themselves constituted the sampling frames, little variation in race, class, or ethnicity

TABLE 1: Interviews with Members of Weight Watchers Inc. (WW), Overeaters Anonymous (OA), and the National Association to Advance Fat Acceptance (NAAFA)

<i>Organization</i>	<i>Women</i>	<i>Men</i>
WW	20	5
OA ^a	41	8
NAAFA ^b	8	4
Total	69	17

a. Defines the entire population of active chapter members during the period of the author's observation.

b. Includes recorded personal stories of members from the OA audiotape library.

was provided within the samples. All of the informants in this study were white, and most were middle income.

GENDER, APPEARANCE, AND IDENTITY

Goffman (1979, 1) argued that bodily appearance is foremost a “gender display,” a performance communicating gender as people are evaluated according to cultural definitions of femininity and masculinity. Appearance is part of the “identity work” that people do in the social construction of gender.³ Schwalbe and Mason Schrock (1996) have recently focused on identity work as a group process, arguing that it is “largely a matter of signifying, labeling, and defining. It also includes creation of the codes that enable self-signifying and the interpretation of others’ signifying behavior” (p. 115). Their interest lies in understanding identity formation by examining “not only individual self-presentations, but the joint creation of symbolic resources upon which those presentations depend” (p. 115). The present study expands this focus by examining how organizational frames mediate not only the meaning of appearance and identity but also other features of everyday living, including organizational participation, food consumption, and social relationships.

Attention to the topics of appearance, gender identity, and power relations has been longstanding within feminist scholarship. Stannard (1971), in “The Mask of Beauty,” observed, “The ideal beauties teach women that their looks are a commodity to be bartered in exchange for a man, not only for food, clothing and shelter, but for love. Women learn

early that if you're unlovely, you are unloved" (p. 124). An extensive review of studies of appearance in Western societies subsequently supports the thesis that "physical attributes are more important in establishing sexual desirability of the female than male, and most societies consider fat females more attractive than thin" (Sobol 1984, 118). According to Sobol (1984), "One of the reasons that female body type is often more important than males in marriageability is that women are frequently treated as a commodity in marriage" (p. 118). Research on physical attractiveness has demonstrated its importance for African American women: "attractiveness plays an important role in getting a high-status husband, whether or not she goes to college. But it plays a stronger role if she goes to college than if she does not" (Udry 1977, 160). Still, while appearance is less an asset for women who achieve a college education, it remains that these women "have greater awareness and are more concerned with bodily appearance" than are their male counterparts (Wooley, Wooley, and Dyrenforth 1979, 84). Moreover, it appears that a high premium is placed on female appearance by males in heterosexual dating: "Frequency of dating correlates highly with attractiveness in females but not in males" (Freedman 1986, 156). Consequently, the social practices through which the production of slender bodies is pursued are those overwhelmingly engaged in by women. An estimated 95 percent of all weight-loss customers are female (Wolf 1991, 94). Throughout the early 1990s, studies found a fear of obesity among girls as young as nine years of age and suggest that a disproportionate number of ten- to eleven-year-old girls (80 percent within one sample) may consider themselves too fat and thus be dieting (Seid 1989, 4; Reynolds 1990). Among adolescents, "Heavy boys often believe they have 'excess bone and muscle' and see their extra weight as desirable. Girls, however, attribute their fat to overeating and respond by dieting" (Freedman 1986, 156-57). The effects of gender are revealed just as starkly in the case of cosmetic surgery. Dull and West (1991) observed that 90 percent of all cosmetic patients are female. Even though men seek such services as well, it is women who are supplied with accounts linking cosmetic surgery to beautification (Dull and West 1991, 65).

Other studies of bodily transformation have focused on identity work through which people construct a felt experience and image of their "true self" before and after sex change operations (Mason-Schrock 1996), as they anticipate a radical alteration of the body and

self due to chronic illness (Charmaz 1994), as they construct a postmortal sense of self when faced with death from AIDS (Sandstrom 1998), or as they experience shame over an obese body (Martin 2000). These studies suggest that identity work is most problematic when the body serves as both the object and signifier of a debased identity, that is, stigma. It is to this topic that we now turn.

NARRATIVES OF STIGMA AND SHARED LIVED EXPERIENCE

Women and men in WW, OA, and NAAFA who had experienced an overweight appearance during childhood and adolescence commonly identified that time of life as a period marked by stigma, exclusion, and feelings of isolation. While members' descriptions of stigma revealed a high degree of similarity, the meaning of this lived experience was vastly different as it was formulated according to the "frame" of the respective programs. And, while experiences of stigma were common to most women, only a minority of men within each organization talked about them.

Research on body image and stigmatization has revealed that, for obese children, adolescence in particular can be a turbulent stage of life. As cultural appearance norms become increasingly salient for adolescents, obesity comes to be regarded as an overriding feature in peer evaluation (Sobol 1984). Studies on body image indicate that obesity leads to stigmatization and low levels of self-esteem for both adolescent girls (Blyth, Simmons, and Zakin 1985) and boys (Blyth et al. 1981). This dynamic is deeply embedded in the lived experience of the women whom I interviewed:

Connie (WW): Physical education classes were the worst. . . . Our teacher would weigh us in the gym in front of everybody. The person who was recording our weights was down on the gym floor so our teacher would yell the weights to her, and of course everyone else got to hear what they were. I had just lost 30 pounds that summer, but I still weighed about 165. I was totally embarrassed. And guess who weighed in after me? The cheerleaders! I still remember the cheerleaders bouncing off the scales and across the room as the teacher called out, "115 pounds!"

While fat bodies may be desirable in other countries, they are subject to stigma in the United States (Allon 1982; Cahnman 1968; DeJong 1980; Hatfield and Sprecher 1986). Narratives of stigma detailing preorganizational experience commonly situate the self as a debased social object, one residing in a body requiring restoration. Not all women in WW, OA, and NAAFA constructed narratives marked by feelings of bodily inadequacy, embarrassment, or shame. However, these themes were evident in the biographies of most women who were obese as children, regardless of their organizational affiliation. Moreover, stigmatizing experiences were indelibly etched on the emotional memories of some men as well:

Carl (WW): People would just laugh at me and call me “fatso” and, you know, names . . . if I went to lunch no one would sit with me. I would sit at a table by myself . . . people treated me like I was just a freak.

For women, a thinner personal appearance was commonly pursued in the anticipation or maintenance of an intimate relationship. This theme is found in the stories of women in all three organizations and cogently expressed in the case of “Sally.”

Sally (NAAFA): My father used to tell me, “Guys don’t like fat girls. You have such a pretty face if only you’d lose 30 pounds” and “you’ll never find a guy.” I was told that if I was thin I’d have guys knocking the door down, that’s what he use to say. I got a lot from both of my parents, actually.

Concerns for personal appearance among female members emanated directly from interaction with parents and significant others who made issues of appearance, love, and acceptance salient. While men’s accounts also included desires and concerns regarding intimacy, they were devoid of stories in which significant others, as social control agents, played on these anxieties.⁴ In addition, while almost all of the women I interviewed experienced some degree of shame or embarrassment resulting from a stigmatized appearance, this was true for only a minority of men (Martin 2000). However, acknowledgment of the similarity of experience does not tell us why women and men select different programs, how personal meanings conflict with organizational objectives, or how member experiences are redefined by WW, OA, and

NAAFA. The question remaining is how lived experience, personal definitions, and identities are organizationally transformed so that they are both subjectively meaningful and ideologically congruent with the respective programs.

ORGANIZATIONAL FRAMES OF MEANING

While political sociologists concerned with “micro-mobilization” have masterfully applied the insights of Goffman’s (1974) “frame analysis” to the study of social movements, its application to the study of formal organizations has been minimal.⁵ A frame, according to Goffman, is a set of “definitions of situations . . . built up in accordance with the principles of organization which govern events—at least social ones—and our subjective involvement in them” (pp. 10-11). Snow et al. (1986) have pointed out that for ideologies, objectives, and actions of social movement organizations to be personally meaningful, they must facilitate a linkage of individual interpretations to the meanings and definitions that are offered by the movement. That is, they must facilitate “frame alignment.” Frames organize both social interaction and subjective experience. To the degree that the storytelling and narrative construction on the part of movement members disseminate a set of shared meanings that stirs emotions, engenders commitment, and leads to a new consciousness of self, what has been achieved is “frame resonance” (Snow and Benford 1988). But frame alignment is also important in other kinds of organizations where membership represents a cost in time, money, or other resources. Such is the case in WW, OA, and NAAFA where the organizations compete for “frame dominance” over the meaning of food, the body, and social relations. Differences in organizational frames are summarized in Table 2 and discussed in the following sections.

WW: THE FRAME OF RATIONALITY

While meetings represented opportunities for the organization to sell products such as cookbooks, food scales, and “calorie calculators,” they primarily served as times when clients’ weight could be measured and

TABLE 2: A Comparison of Organizational Frames

<i>Feature</i>	<i>Overeaters Anonymous</i>	<i>Weight Watchers</i>	<i>National Association to Advance Fat Acceptance (NAAFA)</i>
Type of organization	Twelve step program	Multinational corporation	Civil rights organization
Organizational frame	Redemption	Rationality	Activism and sociality
Goal of organization	Support members in abstinence from overeating	Enlarge profits by helping clients lose weight	Organize against "size discrimination"
Problem in need of resolution	Compulsive overeating	Fat body created by overconsumption	Societal definitions of beauty and cultural appearance norms
Meaning of food	Food as addiction	Food as a technical choice in need of "portion control"	Food as fellowship
Meaning of the body	Body as symptomatic display of spiritual deficit. Thinner body as a symbol of regaining control over personal, spiritual, and emotional life	Body as a site of contestation over appetite—self-control versus self-indulgence	Body as symbol of self-acceptance, locus of political transformation
Vocabulary of motive in accounts of the body	Overeating as a disease	Overeating due to irrational management and lack of education. Program as a skilling process for a total lifestyle change	Genetic accounts: large body as a product of nature. Program for empowerment
Type of narrative	Recovery of self, body, and spirit	Appearance, medicalization	Oppression tales, genetics
Definition of power	Power resides in a "higher power," that is, a source outside of oneself such as God, the group, or some other image members construct	Power resides in the self. Personal assertion in "portion control" and social relations that militate against portion control and food selection	Power resides in the social relations found in NAAFA, which encourage activism and the contestation of stigma and discrimination.

NOTE: Portions of this chart have been previously published (Martin 2000).

their progress monitored. Like members of OA, clients of WW commonly talk about their inability to exercise discipline over appetite. In part, what these clients pay for is organizational surveillance. According to one client (Mark), "I think coming to the meetings every week makes it hard for me to rationalize my eating. It provides accountability." As clients anticipate inquiries by group leaders—and the possibility of "exposure"—it would appear that organizational surveillance is internalized as self-surveillance, which becomes "permanent in its effects if it is discontinuous in its action" (Foucault 1979, 201).

The materials distributed to new clients during the first week of membership include a basic program guidebook, a "food diary," and daily menus. In each subsequent week, members are given additional diaries, menus, and guides on various topics including exercise, dining out, socializing, tips for better eating, and strategies for overcoming obstacles to weight loss. "Portion control," the measured allotment of meal items, is the fundamental principle underlying WW's program. Unlike discourse in OA, the locution "compulsive overeating" cannot be found within WW's literature. Instead, the term "volume eating" is used, and what is emphasized is the type rather than the amount of food that is consumed. Portion control is deemed necessary within food groups that lead to the creation of fat bodies but can be ignored within food groups where calories are negligible.

Much of the information that WW distributes to its members is simply nutritional. Yet, WW also stresses that members must restructure their lives so that new social patterns reflect this information and "support" weight loss. The quintessential component for this restructuring is not spiritual redirection, as in OA, but

a support program for managing your attitudes and behavior. It helps you identify your food-related behavior patterns and teaches you new skills for dealing with them. Challenges & Choices helps you understand your problems and take positive action, thereby helping to make your weight-loss skills permanent. (WW 1991, 1)

In contrast to OA, where "sponsors" ensure that members acquire the spiritual precepts of the program, the acquisition of skills in WW entails learning strategies for making technical adjustments in interpersonal relationships so that these relationships support one's food choices.

OA: THE FRAME OF REDEMPTION

Like Alcoholics Anonymous (AA), OA publishes its own books, pamphlets, and newsletters. *The Twelve Steps of OA* (1990) is considered the basic text of OA, though the book is supplemented by other brochures such as *To the Newcomer* (1987), *A Commitment to Abstinence* (1989a), and *The Tools of Recovery* (1989b), as well as OA's international monthly journal, *Lifeline*. In the publication *To the Newcomer: You're Not Alone Anymore*, OA explicitly acknowledged its reliance on AA's program of recovery: "The OA Fellowship was founded in 1960, and our program of recovery was adapted from that of Alcoholics Anonymous; we use the same twelve steps and twelve traditions, changing only the words 'alcohol' and 'alcoholic' to 'food' and 'compulsive overeater'" (OA 1987, 2). In the spiritual program that OA prescribes for compulsive overeating, the organization urges members that recovery can be found only when "We admit to God, to ourselves and to another human being the exact nature of our wrongs" and are "entirely ready to have God remove all these defects of character." Redemption of self and body occurs as members take responsibility for damaged relationships, following the OA prescription: "We humbly ask Him [God] to remove our shortcomings," and "We made a list of all persons we had harmed, and became willing to make amends to them all" (OA 1990, 114).

Central to the OA frame of redemption is a vocabulary of motive that relies on the idea of compulsive overeating as a disease:

OA believes that compulsive overeating is an illness—a progressive illness—which cannot be cured but which, like many other illnesses, can be arrested. . . . Once compulsive overeating as an illness has taken hold willpower is no longer involved because the suffering overeater has lost the power of choice over food. (OA 1988, 2)

According to OA, recovery from overeating can only be achieved as members turn to "a power greater than themselves." Empirically, power over the self is formulated through a set of coping strategies, the foremost of which is *periodization*. Members are pressed to "realize that the current 24 hours is the only period we can do anything about. Yesterday is gone. Tomorrow isn't here yet." "But today," the OA says, "I will not

deviate from my program of recovery. . . . Today is all that matters" (OA 1988, 6).

What members of OA hope to achieve working the twelve steps "one day at a time" is "abstinence"—that is, "the action of refraining from compulsive overeating" (OA 1989a, 2). However, a key paradox exists for OA members with regards to abstinence. Unlike members of AA, who may organize their lives around the total avoidance of alcohol, members of OA must consume food to survive. OA tells family members of the compulsive overeater the following:

Many of us know smokers who have quit smoking, alcoholics who have quit drinking and other groups who have "quit." The difference in all of these groups is that they never have to drink alcohol or smoke or gamble or take drugs again. This is not so with the overeater, who cannot quit eating altogether. (OA 1979, col. 1)

Consequently, OA members are encouraged to select both a home group and a sponsor after joining OA. Sponsors perform a variety of roles including mentor, advisor, friend, and confessor. Described in one of the many pamphlets that OA publishes for its members,

Sponsors are OA members who are living the twelve steps and twelve traditions to the best of their ability. They are willing to share their recovery with other members of the Fellowship and are committed to abstinence. . . . Sponsors share their program up to the level of their own experience. Ours is a program of attraction; find a sponsor who has what you want and ask that person how he or she is achieving it. (OA 1989b, 3)

NAAFA: THE FRAME OF INJUSTICE AND ACTIVISM

Snow et al. (1986) have identified the process through which people move from a frame where they share common grievances and orientations to a frame where they see personal involvement in collective action as the answer to their problems as "frame bridging." Frame bridging in NAAFA is accomplished when members employ an "injustice framework" that links personal and vicarious experiences of stigma and discrimination to the organization's collective action frame, a frame defining activism as the only viable strategy through which acts

of injustice might be effectively contested.⁶ NAAFA (2001) declared in its literature,

Because many fat people have internalized the oppression they have experienced, they are often too ashamed to stand up for their own rights. Activities such as letter-writing campaigns, petition-gathering, public rallies, demonstrations, pickets, and economic sanctions can raise the public's consciousness and arouse fat people and thin allies to take political action. . . . Activism events may protest general existing conditions for fat people or may target individuals, groups, or businesses regarding specific incidents, advertising, products, or practices . . . fat activism can also praise and highlight positive size acceptance efforts and achievements.

Since its creation in 1969, NAAFA has lobbied state legislatures for antidiscrimination bills, held protests and political rallies, brought discrimination suits against airlines, and garnered media attention on the issue of "fat phobia." In 1990, NAAFA referred to itself as both a "human rights organization" (p. ii) and "a self-help group" (p. 2). Over the past ten years, NAAFA appears to have shifted from a frame emphasizing not only activism but also social events for members, such as parties, dances, and dating services, to a frame exclusively focused on empowerment (NAAFA 2001).

For NAAFA members, however, it is both intensive involvement in social activities along with activism that continues to constitute the dominant frame—in the words of NAAFA members, "a way of life." Activism, as defined by the organization, includes a broad array of personal and political activities that are marked by a displayed willingness to engage in confrontation. Such activism, as described by the organization (NAAFA 2001), may be directed at the following targets:

- television shows that depict fat characters positively or negatively and advertisements that insult or enhance fat people's self-image,
- clothing stores or manufacturers that provide less than satisfactory merchandise or size availability,
- articles or ads that make especially blatant weight loss claims or promote especially dangerous diets and require rebuttal,
- private companies or public agencies that discriminate against fat people in hiring or personnel policies, and
- schools that refuse to let fat children participate in activities.

By framing its primary goal as activism, NAAFA effectuates frame bridging that moves members from a frame of injustice deeply rooted in lived experience to a collective action frame where practical sets of activities, strategies, and targets are determined by the organization.

As members of all three organizations appropriate organizational vocabularies of motive in making sense of lived experience, the stories being told are no longer simply narratives but accounts that justify the organizational objectives. However, the respective accounts given by officials across all organizations for why members joined their organizations are not totally uniform, unproblematic, or readily embraced by members or clients themselves. It is not the case that participants in WW, OA, and NAAFA adopt the organizational frames unreflectively; rather, they do so pragmatically, assessing the fit between their own personal experience and meanings offered by the organization. What still remains unanswered is how these tropes and vocabularies of motives shape participation and fundamental aspects of living. I begin by discussing differences in frame alignment as the organizations transform the meaning of participation, assessing differences between members' own definitions and those of the organizations. These are presented in Table 3 and discussed below.

FRAME ALIGNMENT WITHIN WW

The frames developed by WW, OA, and NAAFA appear influential as the preorganizational experience of new members is reorganized through both the narratives and emotion work of personnel and established members. Frame alignment within WW occurs through the storytelling and emotion work of group leaders, consumption of WW literature by clients, and narratives of established members. Through the early 1970s, the organizational frame imposed on members' lived experience was one of shame and the possibility of shame reduction through the transformation of a "fat" appearance (Martin 2000, 138 ff.). As WW clients exited the program in mass numbers, the organization realigned its frame, co-opting accounts of appearance and health found among its members for reuse within its meetings, literature, and advertising.

TABLE 3: Accounts of Member Participation

<i>Organization</i>	<i>Organization's Public Accounts</i>		<i>Men's Accounts</i>		<i>Women's Accounts</i>
	<i>Men</i>	<i>Women</i>	<i>Older Men</i>	<i>Younger Men</i>	
Weight Watchers	Health	Appearance	Dominant: medical Subordinate: none	Dominant: health Subordinate: appearance job related desirability	Dominant: appearance Subordinate: health
National Association to Advance Fat Acceptance	Civil rights activism		Discrimination		Sociality/dating discrimination
Overeaters Anonymous	Compulsive overeating, spiritual deficit		Dieting/health, compulsive overeating		Dieting/appearance, compulsive overeating

TRANSFORMING THE MEANING OF PARTICIPATION: A WAY OF LIFE

Prior to entry into the program, WW members commonly defined the organization as a diet program, a definition incongruent with that proffered by the organization. While the official purpose of WW's program is to help clients lose weight, WW emphasizes that its program is a "way of life and should be your first and only choice to help you reach your goal and realize your dream" (WW 1991, 2).

Because many new clients continue to define the program as a diet, personnel reiterate the organizational claim, emphasizing that weight loss can only be achieved through a "total lifestyle change." As one group leader told her members,

The Lose Weight program is not a diet, it is a way of life, a behavior change, and a new lifestyle. If it's deprivation, then it's a diet. We are not about diets, we are about a change in lifestyle—a program we will have the rest of our lives.

This claim is eventually adopted by clients as they are resocialized through the course of program participation:

Interviewer: Do you think of the program as a diet?

M: I don't see the program as a diet, I see it as a lifestyle change, a change in eating habits more than a diet. *I initially I saw it as a diet* [emphasis added].

Interviewer: What changed that?

M: I think the meetings . . . once you're done with the program you're not really done with the program; you may be able to increase your calorie count, but you still have to watch the sweets, the calories, and keep track of what you're eating.

Thus, WW personnel strive to facilitate a total restructuring of clients' eating patterns, family traditions, and social relationships in ways that support the organizational product. However, only through long, continuous participation in WW's program do members come to define their participation as a lifestyle change and not dieting. And this participation may never end; clients are encouraged to attain the "lifetime member" status, free to attend meetings as long as they do not exceed their goal weight. While such an arrangement may serve the interests of

clients who benefit from ongoing socialization in the program, it decidedly serves the interests of WW in two ways. First, all clients, including those with lifetime memberships, will eventually gain weight, ensuring a continuous revenue flow for WW (Rosenthal 1992; Subcommittee on Regulation 1990). Second, lifetime members are commonly called on within meetings to supply stories of trials, tribulations, and ultimately successes as they reached their goal weight. Within the context of group meetings, then, lifetime members reinforce the “organizational frame,” providing the organization with free “narrative labor” that is managed by group leaders.

TRANSFORMING THE MEANING OF APPEARANCE: MEDICALIZATION, SOCIATION, AND SEXUALIZATION

Within WW, both the female personnel, who led men’s group meetings, and male clientele themselves shared in the joint construction of accounts that *medicalized* the meaning of appearance and participation for men. This theme is evident in the interview of one group leader, Jill, who elaborated:

Men usually come as a last resort, they try to diet on their own. . . . They see weight loss simply as something they need to find a formula for. Men see their fathers suffering from poor health and know that if they don’t change, they will be too.

In contrast to how both men and personnel publicly defined the meaning of an overweight condition for men—almost exclusively in terms of health or medical explanations—interview data suggest a private, deeper meaning of weight loss for some men. Older informants in the study (approximate age fifty and older) gave exclusively medicalized accounts of their participation in WW. These accounts commonly emphasized the importance of physician referrals or members’ own decision to pursue a healthier lifestyle:

Interviewer: What factors were important to you in deciding to lose weight?
Jerry (age forty-eight): There were health issues, shortness of breath and not being able to do things that I would like to do, from a size perspective. . . . Appearance was not a major concern. It was mostly, ah . . . I’d say number one was the health issue.

However, these meanings were not shared by all. The accounts of younger, middle-aged men (approximate age thirty to fifty) reiterated concerns for health but also revealed personal meanings that placed a premium on appearance, contradicting the organizational frame. In the construction of these accounts, men commonly framed concerns with appearance and participation at WW in terms of some aspect of their job:

Keith (age thirty-seven): I worked at Finger Hut at the time. I immediately went upstairs, found my best friend who was also overweight, and I said, "We're gonna join." I forced him to join Weight Watchers with me. . . . And I said, "Hey you, you gotta camouflage yourself around here because if they ever find out your real age you're out." Because I personally think that they were very prejudiced against older people. You know, young, energetic, eager people who would work extra hours and not be paid, they were fine. But once you got to a certain age, then they kind of anticipated, "Well he's not doin' as much." And those people just seemed to disappear. And there again, in terms of having a full head of hair, being thin, not smoking, not drinking, I could keep a younger appearance and I used to joke about it. . . . "Hey you don't want to look old around this place or you'll find yourself out the door."

At the age of thirty-seven, Keith would seem to be a relatively young middle-aged man. Yet his appearance, within a company where youth is equated with aggressive sales, is a liability. Older workers are defined as less productive within this context, placing a premium on, in his words, "young, energetic, eager people who would work extra hours and not be paid." Here, weight loss is a strategy for managing the impression of youth by making certain that one is "in costume," maintaining a slimmer body is a matter of "dramaturgical prudence" (Goffman 1959, 222).

The value of these accounts is not only in what they reveal about men's bodily experience per se but also in what they tell us about how men negotiate expectations of masculinity with regards to appearance. While attending to personal appearance may occupy the daily activities of both women and men, a concern for appearance is considered intrinsic to females (Dull and West 1991). In the accounts presented above, men explicitly identify this concern as something that is *extrinsic* to themselves. Appearance is presented as having a strategic rather than a deep personal significance. But men do have concerns about intimacy,

social approval, and their social attractiveness to others. Among the younger men that I interviewed, accounts signifying the importance of appearance in relation to professional matters represented only a partial explanation of their participation in WW. Personal concerns with social attractiveness were also evident.

Keith: So . . . you're a researcher. . . I'll admit it to you . . . I mean, I like to look good. Ah . . . whether it be for my wife, whether it be for her [female] friends . . . ah, whether it be for my friends. I don't want to look sloppy and so forth.

Another male member weaves together concerns of health, appearance, and social approval, in accounting for his participation:

Tim (age twenty-four): My girlfriend Julie has a group of friends, and they're all thin and very active and very attractive. And I think the main reason why I wanted to lose weight was medical—I mean, I think it's just healthier to be thin. . . . I wanted to look thin so I could fit in more with her friends. . . . Some of them didn't really accept me. Some of them made fun of me and essentially put me down.

Overall, few men talked about concerns regarding their appearance, and even fewer talked about anxieties over personal appearance connected to intimate relationships—these men represented the “deviant case” among all of the men I interviewed. The importance of appearance, social approval, and attractiveness was more commonly disclosed by women in all organizations.

Joyce (age thirty, WW): Well, I'd be crazy to say that appearance didn't have anything to do with it. When I weighed 150 pounds and couldn't get my clothes to button. I thought, Oh yeah, what guy's gonna want to go out with me?

Older women also talked about their concerns and efforts at weight in terms of appearance. As stated by one female member,

Virginia (age sixty-five, WW): One day I went shopping and tried to get into a pair of slacks. And the saleslady said, “Try the next size dear.” And I said, “Forget it,” (chuckle). And, I realized that this [weight loss] is not something you do alone. So, I went to a meeting. . . . I always had a very,

very enviable figure. I thought . . . I'm going to get back to my once ideal. Any woman who tells you that appearance isn't important is lying.

In the data above, appearance is represented as a dominant concern for women. The nature of this concern would appear to vary in accordance with the ability of individuals to achieve normative, cultural definitions of attractiveness. However, the relevance and meaning of appearance is ultimately mediated through interaction with others. When asked during an interview about how emotions are connected to both food and appearance, a topic commonly discussed in women's meetings, Kari (WW) responded,

I feel less sexual and less desirable when I'm heavier. But it [being heavier] doesn't bother me now because I have a wonderful husband who . . . has made me feel like it doesn't really matter to him. I just wanted to lose weight so that I could do outdoorsy things with my husband, like going to the Black Hills. Of course, appearance *is* important. It's tied into my feelings of being feminine, of being sexual as a woman. Fortunately I have a very loving husband who has been just wonderful, who could really care less what I looked like. But when I was larger I felt a lot less feminine.

Struggles in the process of identity can be seen, as physical appearance is imbued with meanings that contradict cultural gender scripts, even as women engage in the bodily transformation that they prescribe. Above, Kari, a member of WW, indicated that she felt diminished sexual desirability and femininity as she gained weight. Identity work, under this condition, represents the disidentification with a fat body and the deployment of cultural meanings associated with femininity as participation in WW is reinforced by personnel. However, even as Kari loses weight, it is not simply feelings of desirability with which the body is vested but meanings of sociation and intimacy negotiated in interaction with her husband. The new meaning of bodily appearance for Kari is one in which the physical capacity for shared activity rather than sexual desirability defines weight and bodily form. Still, while concerns about femininity and desirability may be attenuated, they are clearly present.

Group leaders in women's meetings relied heavily on a discourse of appearance in their work with female clientele. However, both younger

and older female clients also emphasized medical problems and considerations of health in making decisions to join WW:

Sheryl: Health was a concern too. I found that when I ate healthier, more fruits, more vegetables, I felt more energetic, I felt better about myself. Even though I wasn't necessarily losing all the weight I wanted to, I still felt better. . . . My husband had expressed a lot of health concerns about my eating (chuckle) habits. . . . It made me think twice about my health.

While the accounts of participation in WW's program by women and men display a high degree of uniformity, appearance is underemphasized in men's groups, playing a more central role in the experience of women. For almost all female members of WW, the meaning of appearance was predominantly defined in terms of social and sexual desirability, even though concerns with health were clearly present. In contrast, it was only among younger men in WW that this theme was found. Given the differential importance of this theme, we might expect that discussions led by group leaders on the topic of appearance management resonated with the concerns and lived experience of female clients in ways that it did not for male members.⁷

TRANSFORMING THE MEANING OF FOOD: RATIONAL ADMINISTRATION

WW commonly defines fat bodies as the result of overeating, where overconsumption is normatively expected (e.g., holiday or family occasions), or the result of poor food choices, where a disproportionate volume and number of high-fat foods are consumed. According to WW, while fat bodies may be bestowed by nature, they are more commonly the products of faulty practices and are, hence, ultimately mutable. In talking about patterns of food consumption, both clients and personnel of WW also observe the moral implications of eating.

Karl (WW client, from field notes): Part of it's just the morality or immorality of the thing. . . . I have not been able to break myself of the habit of, the morality of, not finishing the food that's on my plate, even after I'm full. I grew up being told that I should eat everything on because there are starving children in Armenia or wherever without food and to not eat it was to waste it.

What WW personnel strive to do is to replace a common civic morality—finishing the food that’s on my plate—with a new ethos and set of rules and about consumption, as shown in the following interaction between the group leader (GL) and clients (C):

GL: Why do we resist measuring our food? [Measuring food is a rule of the program]

C3: Because it reinforces that we have a problem.

GL: Okay, because it reminds us that we have a problem. Or because it’s kind of a pain? Do you ever feel like there are too many rules [in the program]? (Members nod their heads, signifying yes).

GL: And then what do you do when you start feeling that way?

C4: Pig out.

GL: We need to think about *DISCIPLINE* as a safety valve. Where do we have to have discipline in our lives? (Emphasis in the original)

C1: At our jobs.

C2: In our checkbook.

C3: At the grocery store.

C4: For health reasons.

GL: Or even in our car! If you drive anyway you please, say down a one-way street the wrong way, you’re going to get some complaints. You can’t do whatever you like. Think of discipline like a string on a kite. What does the string do for that kite?

C5: It keeps it under control, from flying away.

GL: It keeps it grounded. Weight Watchers Inc. is just like that kite string.

Here, the meaning of food is *discipline* and rational administration—“portion control” is emphasized as the primary ethos around which members must organize personal eating habits. However, disciplinary practices of food selection, measurement, and control are seen as problematic because they necessitate a transformation in the relationships that client members have with family and friends. Clients are encouraged to become agents of their own self-transformation by taking charge of social situations and relationships, actively fending off social pressure to eat “unhealthy food.” Interpersonal relationships with friends and family come to be defined by the organization and by members themselves as rife with danger because they often support old ways of living and eating.

Carl: When I went back home one weekend I noticed that my mom . . . she served me. She brought me a plate just full of meat and potatoes. And

I just realized, “My God, I didn’t go and get my own portions, my mom did.” And I think that’s why I was overweight since I was a little kid . . . my mom decided what portions I should eat. And when I didn’t finish [the meal] she said, “You’ve got to finish it.”

Food consciousness begins to emerge as clients like Carl employ the prescriptions of WW’s program (most notably portion control)—however, this experience is contradictory. Clients seek to draw support from the very relations they intend to change, relations in which food is an important medium of emotional expression. Festive occasions and family traditions are often built on the sharing of food, attesting to the power of its social, not merely nutritional, value. Food for many people becomes a form of sociality; when refused, it may lead to insult. Hence, WW provides strategies for managing situations in which friends and family are defined as “saboteurs”:

- Talk with your saboteur . . . identify the unsupportive behavior or comments. Share how it makes you feel. Then teach the person how to be supportive.
- Manage on your own, if you can’t discuss the sabotage with the saboteur or if your discussion is ineffective. . . . You can take food, take one taste and leave the rest. [Or] . . . you may want to consider staying away from the saboteur, if you can, for the time being. (WW 1990, 25)

In mandating that clients transform preestablished social relationships in ways that support good food choices, WW emphasizes that members are active agents of change, able to transform themselves and their situations through adherence to the WW program. In this respect, WW is no different from OA or NAAFA. Of course, significant ideological differences do exist between the three programs and manifest themselves in divergent sets of practices and orientations to living, relationships, food, and self.

FRAME ALIGNMENT WITHIN OA

Frame alignment in OA involves not only immersion in the extensive OA literature but also occurs through “testimonials” and in continual interaction with OA sponsors. Sponsors perform a variety of roles

including mentor, advisor, and confessor for new initiates. Described in one of the many pamphlets that OA publishes,

Sponsors are OA members who are living the twelve steps and twelve traditions to the best of their ability. They are willing to share their recovery with other members of the Fellowship and are committed to abstinence. . . . Sponsors share their program up to the level of their own experience. A member may work with more than one sponsor and may change sponsors at will. (OA 1989b, 3)

Testimonials are generic, discursive structures that, by definition, contain "statements testifying to the benefits received." The accounts of participation that OA members construct become testimonials by virtue of the organizational language in which they are cast and the claim of OA's indispensability in member's lives. The testimonials of OA members are composed of two primary phases: "qualifying" and "giving a pitch." Through their testimonials, members retrospectively define autobiographical events in accordance with the primary frame of the OA program. The phenomenon includes the process of "doubling" found among alcoholics in the AA program: "That is, the individual is able to turn his back on himself, see himself as subject and object, and distances himself from who he previously was" (Denzin 1987b, 190). Thus, conversion to the OA program alters not only the present lives of members but also past experience by virtue of retrospective interpretation. Incidences of bingeing, stealing food, lying about consumption, and other autobiographical revelations are reconstructed by OA members in accordance with OA precepts:

Howard: I've gone through seven treatment centers, okay? I've gone through three hospitalizations . . . two operations. Because I'm a compulsive overeater and I didn't want to admit that I have this disease and the only cure for it is abstinence and coming to these meetings. I'd get abstinent for a while, things would get going good and then, "I don't need you anymore God, I can handle this, I don't have the problem." Alright? Then when I'd be flat on my ass, down and out, I'd say, "Well you know maybe I have a little bit of a problem." And I keep crawling back. It is so strong the denial. . . . I remember a little over two years ago I was three hundred and some pounds again. . . . I had isolated myself from all of my friends, all of my OA people, all of my AA friends. And I was sitting in the bar eating and drinking and dying. There was no hope for me. I was one of these people who was just constitutionally incapable of

being honest with himself. That's what I thought. And I went to say goodbye to my therapist and, God love her, she's probably the reason that I'm standing here today. She's a recovering alcoholic and she told me that she was going that night to give a medallion to . . . a friend of hers who had been through eleven treatment centers in fifteen years in AA. After the eleventh treatment center it finally clicked. And she was giving that woman her ten year silver medallion that night. And I guess that was just the little spark I needed to say, "Okay, one more time. Just one more time." And I came crawling back one more time. And that was just about two years ago.

In the testimonials of OA members, lived experience is commonly reconstructed with reference to a future time: a time when they would be in need but in denial of OA's program and the point at which they would eventually accept the precepts of the program. In Howard's testimonial, the concept of denial is only viable as a motive in a retrospective interpretation of past actions. What is observable in Howard's testimonial is an awareness of the process of *alternation*: that is, the realization that the process of "conversion" to OA may not necessarily be final but that one may be "reconverted" to a former (preabstinent) identity and pattern of living (Berger 1963, 63).

Members' testimonies at the open meetings of OA include a process OA members refer to as *qualifying*. As described in OA's (1986) *Group Handbook*,

Many members begin their sharing by "qualifying"—telling the rest of the group the length of time they are recovering in the Fellowship and the inner [self] and outer [body] change experienced as a result of abstaining and working the twelve step program of recovery. (p. 5)

Geraldine (OA): Hi, I'm Geraldine and I'm a foodaholic. (Group: "Hi Geraldine"). Hi. It's good to be here. Ah, I've been in program sixteen years. Real swift like, I came into the program at three hundred and nine pounds, smoking two to three packs of cigarettes a day. I drank a fifth of JB scotch every two to three days. And I spent five nights a week in the bar. I physically and verbally abused six children. Hated my husband's guts. Spent all of our money so that we couldn't even afford to buy anything. My average day was to get up about ten or eleven o'clock in the morning, move to the couch, watch soap operas, read *True Story* magazines 'til the children got home from school, yell and scream at them until I could get them to clean up the house, cook supper and I'd hit the bars about six, seven, eight o'clock at night. . . . When I walked through

the doors of OA at three hundred and nine pounds I had just gained a hundred and twenty pounds in a little over eight months. . . . Ah I have lost a hundred and forty pounds in this program and I have maintained it for quite a few years. And it's worked for me all this time. If it didn't work I wouldn't be doing it. I just want you to know that. If it didn't work I'd do something else. This works.

“Qualifying,” as in the example above, establishes one as a credible source. It consists of witnessing to new or prospective members about experiences of degradation due to compulsive overeating, providing evidence that one has “been there.” Credentialing of this kind is crucial for the marketability of the OA program with prospective members who may be in attendance at both closed and open meetings. After qualifying, members fashion their narratives in a process referred to by OA members as *giving a pitch*. Giving a pitch entails distilling one's personal experiences with compulsive overeating in a way that readily communicates the message of OA, the effectiveness of the OA program in salvaging self and body, and the personal benefits of doing service for the organization. For example, at the end of Howard's testimonial (above), he stated,

If I can leave you with one word or one phrase, and if my story means anything to you, I hope it means that you just never give up. It's always possible, no matter how far down you go, it's always possible if you keep coming back into these rooms. And hopefully I'm some sort of testimony to that. . . . So no matter how far down you've gone or how many times you've been in and out of these rooms just never give up. Thank you. (applause) Now we're gonna open the floor I guess for three-minute pitches for anybody who wants to come up here and talk.

Giving a pitch is an idiom of salespersonship. As one informant explained,

Giving a pitch means giving a pitch to a newcomer, telling them about the program and letting them see for themselves how effective OA can be by sharing experiences with them. It can also mean giving a pitch for service, trying to get others involved in the service aspect of the program.

Hillel Schwartz, in her book *Never Satisfied* (1986), depicted the OA program as having a future orientation, urging its members to move

“one day at a time into the future” (p. 208). But the program also orients members with respect to the past. Through the processes of qualifying and giving a pitch, the OA audience is reminded of what may transpire in the absence of the program or a delinquent membership.

Gail: I didn't go to meetings for six days. And I quit calling my sponsor after a couple of days. And then I went to this meal and drank and ate. I ate nonstop for about three days. And on the fourth day I stood in front of my bathroom mirror and, and I planned my suicide. I was that desperate. I knew that I couldn't, I just wouldn't go on.

In their pitches, OA members often detail the inherent dangers of taking a “moral holiday” (James [1907] 1964, 58). Above, “Gail” described an episode of binge eating that leads to the contemplation of suicide. While accounts involving suicide are infrequent among OA members, they are not unheard of and serve to reinforce the organizational frame developed by OA—a frame that cites death as the ultimate and natural consequence of the “disease” of overeating. Yet, this frame is not readily adopted by all prospective members and must be aligned as they begin “recovery.”

TRANSFORMING THE MEANING OF PARTICIPATION: FROM DIETING TO RECOVERY

Accounts of participation offered by OA identify episodes of compulsive overeating, which culminate in humiliation as core events that lead prospective members to OA. Because the organization supplies all members with a common vocabulary for recognizing and talking about their own experiences, it would appear that the gendered nature of lived experience is obscured behind organizational grammar. However, like their counterparts in WW, women and men in OA initially developed accounts of participation that differed both from OA and from each other. Indeed, 80 to 90 percent of all OA members attend their first meeting believing the organization to be an alternative weight loss program (OA 1992).

Joe: In the doctor's office I took my first step. . . . What happened was . . . he [doctor] said, “You need to lose the weight because it's really affecting your health.” . . . And I told him “I've been thinkin' about going to Overeater's Anonymous.” . . . I didn't go for quite a few months not

only because of my fear of people, but because I was afraid that the program wouldn't work for me. *I was not a diet person and I thought this was a diet club. Because any time I tried a diet it just didn't work.* (emphasis added)

Men, like Joe above, commonly constructed narratives interwoven with medical themes, stories in which joining OA was precipitated by visits to family physicians or medical emergencies at home. By contrast, women in OA emphasized that a desire to change their physical appearance rather than medical concerns was their primary reason for joining the organization:

Heather: I do remember the day that I consciously decided to really have a go at purging. I was like, "That's it." I looked at myself in the mirror, in a swimming suit, and I thought, "I am so fat and disgusting. My boyfriend will not like me. I don't like myself. I'm sick to death of this dieting thing, of restricting myself. And I'm really sick of exercising." And it was at that point that I began purging. . . . I came to this program and I was on my knees. On my knees! By the time I got out of treatment for the second time, I realized that what they were doing just wasn't really addressing my disease.

Thus, while men in OA talked about an emergent awareness of health concerns emanating from patterns of compulsive overeating, women identified the importance of a thinner appearance as a reason for their decision to join the organization. For women like Heather, this pattern appears linked to an awareness of the body as a resource that might be used in the acquisition of an intimate relationship. However, for members who initially defined OA as a weight loss organization and talked about concerns for health or appearance as their motives for affiliation, the early phase of membership was commonly filled with confusion or resistance. In light of this experience, the organizational literature that new members receive provides an unambiguous frame: "OA is not a diet club. Members recover by practicing OA's spiritual program. They find, among other things, freedom from food-obsession, power to act rationally in difficult situations, and a better way to live" (OA 1988, 4). As members retrospectively interpret their own lived experience, the concept of *disease* that is contained in OA's vocabulary of motive shapes their own definitions and meanings.

TRANSFORMING THE MEANING OF APPEARANCE: DISEASE

In acquiring OA's vocabulary of motive, all members redefine their experiences and appearance by *medicalizing* their disorder—viewing themselves as being diseased.⁸ The “disease concept” (Conrad and Schneider 1980) seemingly permeates all personal narratives, allowing OA members to abrogate responsibility for compulsive overeating.

Janet: And I know that there are a lot of more hard core anorexics out there, I really don't proclaim that as a big part of my disease. But certainly it was a, a start to my disease. And that was this intense need and desire I had to purify my body. And I think that that's been a big part of my desire, a big part of my obsession to be thin and a big part of my disease.

Tim: This disease isn't a moral issue. If you thought to yourself, or heard people say, “I was bad, I binged. I ate too much of this, I binged. I didn't get to that meeting on time I'm bad. I forgot this, I'm bad.” If you really believe you have the disease there's no bad, good involved in it, it's not a moral issue, it's a disease. I don't know of other diseases that are moral issues.

For members of OA, disease explanations of compulsive overeating are similar to accounts constructed by AA members about their drinking in that they “provide a rationale to explain, understand, and account for many problematic behaviors . . . they are excuse accounts in which members admit that their own behavior was bad but deny full responsibility” (Rudy 1986, 47). By referring to patterns of compulsive overeating as a disease, OA members construct a “natural” etiology of compulsive overeating that is intertwined with their life experiences. In his analysis of AA, Rudy (1986) observed how the concept of disease is used in the retrospective interpretations of AA members vis-à-vis alcoholism.⁹ He has suggested that these interpretations “are no more or less true than current of future interpretations. They are simply different ‘vocabularies of motive’ or different interpretations of reality constructed to explain or give meaning to a situation, setting or experience” (p. 7). But for members of OA—and I suspect AA as well—some interpretations *are* “truer” than others. What makes some interpretations truer, in part, is the degree of ratification or rejection they receive according to a felt inner experience and other members. That is not to say that

experiences objectified through organizational vocabularies are the only ones recognized or considered “valid,” only that those cast in such a language may more readily receive ratification because they are articulated in recognizable terms. But the “trueness” of an interpretation involves more than simply ratification; it also involves the way in which this interpretation enables organizational members to proceed, efficaciously, in improving their lives.

TRANSFORMING THE MEANING OF FOOD: DEATH

Viewed as a *disease*, OA members stress that compulsive overeating, if left untreated, may lead to pernicious results. A discourse of death might logically be expected in the narratives of recovering alcoholics who have been *at risk* for alcohol poisoning or other dangerous circumstances while in an inebriated state. Such an assertion is similarly made about the overconsumption of food by members of OA:

Jean: I was truly desperate. Nothing was working at that time. I was paying an enormous amount of money to go in and get shots [to relieve feelings of hunger]. And they [medical staff] had me on a five hundred calorie a day diet. And so they gave me thyroid [shots]. The disease was killing my body. My emotional and spiritual bankruptcy was going to kill the physical Jean. And I was starting to think about dying.

Ellen: People come to the program *very* desperate and often scared. More than any other program I have tried, people in OA are very aware that their eating can kill. Many in OA are aware that overeating may be a fatal disease and I think that is why turning to a Higher Power is the last choice many people have.

Narratives containing the theme of death support the organizational claim of compulsive overeating as a disease, despite the fact that events (e.g., unneeded medical treatments) other than overconsumption may serve as precipitants. This is evident in the case of Jean, above. But these events are also claimed as symptomatic of a disease whose etiology is spiritual and emotional. As Jean stated, “My emotional and spiritual bankruptcy was going to kill the physical Jean.” Such statements, shared in open meetings, would seem to heighten the organization’s own claims with dramatic effect.

FRAME ALIGNMENT WITHIN NAAFA

Within NAAFA, the frame alignment of meanings concerning food, relationships, personal appearance, and member participation is effectuated structurally as well as discursively. Myriad activities such as letter writing campaigns, public speaking, conference organizing, and monthly business meetings integrate group members into organizational networks through the local chapter. Such activities represent *narrative occasions*—social gatherings in which established members construct accounts interwoven with organizational ideology. Accounts of lived experience are cast in a grammar of oppression that might readily be termed *oppression tales*. I use the phrase to denote a broad category of stories wrought by NAAFA members that communicate experiences of coercion, persecution, and stigma. While such stories can also be found among members of OA and WW, the concept of oppression is a fundamental precept in NAAFA and one around which lived experience is retrospectively organized. NAAFA, itself, recognizes the importance of narrative occasions premised on the concept, “Whenever two or more ‘liberated’ fat people gather, we celebrate our fat culture, creating a common language, a common dream of a world without fat oppression and share a history and a belief system” (Hemenway 1990, 9).

The oppression tales of NAAFA members may be differentiated into two classes. In *personal oppression tales*, autobiographical accounts are constructed for the purpose of objectifying the personal, social, economic, and emotional costs of being fat in a size-biased society. *Vicarious oppression tales* communicate stories of persecution, stigmatization, or the humiliation of others. The importance of sharing such tales is evidenced by NAAFA member Nancy Summer (1992) who, after conducting a survey of sexual harassment for NAAFA, wrote in a newsletter,

Reading your stories triggered memories of other incidents in my life . . . the discomfort I felt when a NAAFA colleague photographed me from the rear without my permission while I was wearing a bathing suit at the beach. . . . The main lesson I’ve learned . . . is how important it is that we share our stories. There is so much strength that we can gain by dragging harassment out into the open. I learned a lot from your stories, and they helped me deal with some ugly experiences in my own life. (p. 4)

For NAAFA members, the narratives developed by fellow participants cognitively and emotionally affirm personal lived experience, transforming it into a shared event and collective resource. The social gatherings of NAAFA provide opportunities not only for the sharing of oppression tales but also for demonstrations of fat activism, shaping the basic meaning participation.

TRANSFORMING THE MEANING OF PARTICIPATION: OPPRESSION TALES

While all female members, and a small minority of male members, in the local chapter of NAAFA had attempted dieting as children, it was female members who had attended weight loss programs as adults. Indeed, many of the women had, at one time or another, been members of WW.¹⁰ For these women, experiences with physical trauma due to weight loss represented turning points that led them to reorganize their way of thinking toward acceptance of a fat body. However, most female members initially described their participation in terms at variance with the official objectives of the organization. Rather than join NAAFA to fight size discrimination, almost all female NAAFA members entered the local chapter in pursuit of social opportunities denied them earlier in life:

Jennifer: I kind of originally got in it with the idea of maybe I would meet a guy. Then once I got into it, I got a lot more involved with, in everything else that was involved. You know, the political stuff.

Debra: I joined because I thought, "Oh this'll be a great way to meet men." (laugh) So that was why I joined. But now I'm more interested in the activism, helping other people come into NAAFA, helping other fat people feel, you know, like they deserve a decent life just like anyone else.

For women, it was not political consciousness that led to activism but the initial, sometimes almost unwitting, participation in activist activities that led to an awareness, a consciousness, of self as an agent of social and political change. Above, Debra explained, "I joined because I thought, 'Oh this'll be a great way to meet men' . . . But now I'm more interested in the activism," an account mitigating the initial reason for joining the organization. While this search for a romantic other was a

recurrent theme among the majority of female members in the local chapter, only one male member talked about joining in this way:

Lowell: What drew my interest in NAAFA? I guess I liked heavy women, you know, for many years. And I was interested that, gee there's a group, NAAFA, where I could meet some.

Lowell's account represents the "deviant" case among men in the local chapter. Moreover, his romantic interests are enabled in a way not done for women. According to the accounts of NAAFA women, entry into the organization was met by the realization that because of its sex ratio and small size, the local chapter was ill equipped for providing them with romantic opportunities. Regardless of the motives given for joining NAAFA, continued participation for both women and men was transformed through an organizational frame that placed a premium on "fat activism."

Linda: Before we start, Ruth has a story to share with us.

Ruth: Debbie's five years old now. I have always brought her up to believe that there's nothing wrong with being fat. . . . In first grade and throughout the rest of the school year, part of the physical education testing is a pinch test, you know where you sort of pinch your skin to find out how much body fat you have. And I talked to her physical education teacher. And I said, "Well I know that you do this but I don't want it done on my daughter. Because I do not believe that if you're fat you cannot be physically fit. I don't believe in it." . . . She said, "Well I'm gonna have to talk to my supervisor." And the very next day she called me back and she did say, "Of course we will abide by your wishes. But we do want you to understand why we're doing this." I said, "Thank you very much." So it won't be done.

Mary: All right! That sounds like a pretty difficult situation, I don't know if I could have done that!

The emphasis on activism resonated with the majority of men in the local chapter. For them, the organization represented a vehicle by which power could be leveraged for accomplishing either political or personal objectives. These informants anticipated the achievement of these objectives through some form of political activism, though nebulously defined:

Brad: I found out about NAAFA as a result of my wife's getting stomach surgery, a stomach stapling operation. That's about 1980. An operation which I still oppose. . . . My wife and I were both involved in the civil rights movement in the sixties and I'm kind of a sixties person. I was involved in the anti-war movement, against the Vietnam War. . . . I kind of knew that this was an organization that I wanted to investigate.

Narrative construction such as that above reinforces the organizational frame of activism, providing stories that supply new members with both a language of oppression and (vicarious) experience that may be lacking as they cultivate their own accounts. Through stories like Ruth's, for example, NAAFA members make claims about the prevalence of "fat oppression" in everyday life, framing NAAFA's mission in terms of acts of defiance, rebellion, and challenges to this oppression. Members frequently celebrate such acts, emphasizing that even small challenges to oppression are personally difficult and to be lauded.

TRANSFORMING THE MEANING OF APPEARANCE: DISCRIMINATION AND THE FEMINIZATION OF FAT

Because most men in the local chapter were not obese, their interviews were marked by a conspicuous absence of personal experience with discrimination. Only one male member I interviewed claimed to be the recipient of (health insurance) discrimination. By contrast, the stories of female members were replete with instances of discrimination across a variety of social contexts, including work.

JoAnn: I went to an employment agency once and filled out an application. They didn't find anything for me so I left. I came back months later, they must have not recognized me. I saw my personnel file on the desk of the person helping me. He evidently didn't know what was in my file because he had it laying flat and opened it up and then he immediately raised it up so I couldn't see what was in the file. I did see it though. Someone had written "FAT" in big red letters across the application sheet in my file. You know, if someone had written the word "BLACK" they'd be in big trouble.

The sharing of stories represents a collectivizing of individual experiences into an organizational stock of knowledge that members draw

on in articulating organizational ideology. Narratives as well as organizational literature commonly compare the lived experience of NAAFA members to the racial oppression of African Americans. In such stories, NAAFA members represent themselves as subjects of “oppressive identity work,” the objects of debasement and pernicious “othering” (Schwalbe and Mason-Schrock 1996, 139).¹¹ Bolstering claims of discrimination when autobiographical evidence is lacking can be accomplished through the use of *vicarious oppression tales*. Stories from local and national news sources are commonly used in validating claims about the ubiquity of “fat” oppression. In reference to Walter Hudson, the thirteen-hundred-pound man who lost six hundred pounds after going on the Dick Gregory diet, the following rhetorical claim was made:

Unfortunately, Hudson was fat, the one socially unforgivable physical difference. Society . . . hounded him into dieting behavior that is self-destructive at least 19 out of 20 times. Hudson became convinced that the only way to personal salvation and social acceptance was to engage in an act of self-starvation that would require that he be desperately hungry for every hour of every day of his life. When his starving body followed the perfectly normal human behavior of regaining the lost weight, the mob rejected him as a failure. (Williams and DeHass 1992, 6)

Here, NAAFA members fashioned the narrative according to the ideology of oppression propounded by the organization, even though news sources themselves presented the incident as a human interest story. As stories are transformed into vicarious oppression tales, they provide opportunities for vicarious experience. Of such experience, Brissett and Snow (1969) have contended,

The essential element is that vicarious experience is an activity in which one acts out the behaviors associated with an identity without becoming committed to that particular identity. In brief, vicarious experience most fundamentally entails a person's involvement in a situation without a commitment on his part. (Pp. 430-31)

Where this commitment has been made through prior organizational participation, however, the vicarious experience of oppression reaffirms the organizational identity and engenders future involvement.

What, then, is the new meaning of a “fat” appearance advanced by the organization? In suggesting that the human body itself may be interpreted as a cultural text, Dorothy Smith (1993) has observed that “The fat woman is not ‘read’ as feminine” (p. 182). However, the textual reading of the fat female body by NAAFA members defies cultural definitions of femininity. Women in NAAFA infuse the body with oppositional meaning; for them, large—not slender—female bodies represent mature womanhood. In “A Fat Woman’s Manifesto,” an article published in a NAAFA-affiliated magazine, Jean Soncrant (1991) wrote the following:

I am a fat woman because I want my figure to be full, soft, warm, and curvy. I look more like a woman than Twiggy ever did. While I have some difficulty finding clothing, at least I have a bustline which can support a strapless dress. I shudder at the thought of anyone ever viewing my silhouette and being unsure of my gender. From my breeder’s hips to my fully defined face, I want every pound to shout the news of my womanhood. (P. 11)

While the meaning of fatness presented above contrasts with hegemonic definitions of beauty, it is the (fat) body as a signifier that is contested—not the cultural meanings that are associated with “womanhood.” This redefinition of the fat body constitutes “oppositional identity work,” which Schwalbe and Mason-Schrock (1996) observed

is a matter of trying to transform discrediting identities into crediting ones, that is, to redefine those identities so they come to be seen as indexes of noble rather than flawed character. . . . Oppositional identity work often involves the subversion of a dominant group’s identity codes. (P. 141)

In coming to terms with painstaking attempts at weight loss that yielded little success, members with dieting experience commonly constructed *geneticized* accounts of their dieting and body size:

Karen: I’m a large woman, I’m 5 foot 8, big bones, big healthy [flexes her arm muscles], I’m German, English, and Irish. I can’t weigh less than 120 lbs without really looking pitiful.

John: I’ve been fat all my life. I left high school, I graduated, I was a wrestler, I weighed three hundred and eighty-three pounds. So I’ve been

heavy. When I was one year old I wore a size twelve boys shorts, they fit me perfect. When I was little I was always on a diet. But *this is all genetic see?* I have always been the heavy set, fat kid. (emphasis added)

According to members of NAAFA, fat bodies may be mutable but only within biological parameters set by nature. Attempts at dieting and weight loss, in light of these natural limits, are regarded by NAAFA members as inherently self-deceptive. In contrast to the claims of weight loss companies, NAAFA members cite studies demonstrating both low success rates among dieters and the high probability that, after dieting, weight will be regained.¹² By using a vocabulary of motives based on genetics, NAAFA members are able to neutralize the culpability otherwise assigned by society.

TRANSFORMING THE MEANING OF FOOD: FELLOWSHIP

Like members of OA, NAAFA members disavow the moral implications of corpulence and eating. Like clients of WW, members of NAAFA also cite the deleterious effects of consumptive practices; NAAFA members, however, claim that it is not overconsumption but extreme forms of dieting that have proven fatal. Of Walter Hudson, NAAFA members responded as follows in their national newsletter:

Fat People of America: The diet vultures will try to scare you into parting with your money and health while engaging in diets that have no long-term studies to prove that they are safe and effective. The lesson to be learned from the tragedy of Walter Hudson's life and death is not one of diet or die. It is don't diet. We must fight for the right to live life in the bodies we possess. Let Walter Hudson teach us that our very lives depend on it. (Williams and DeHass 1992, 6)

In his observation of "civil inattention," Goffman (1963) observed that, in public arenas, anonymous others must paradoxically be taken into account and attended to, if the privacy of all is to be left intact. As he stated,

One gives to another enough visual notice to demonstrate that one appreciates that the other is present (and that one admits openly to having seen him), while at the next moment withdrawing one's attention from him so

as to express that he does not constitute a target of special curiosity or design. (P. 84)

Yet, according to NAAFA members, being fat is one condition under which civil inattention is eroded.

Jennifer (NAAFA): I think now that I feel free to eat more what I want to, that it [food] doesn't have as much meaning as when you were really watching [what you ate] or felt like everyone else was watching what you ate and you couldn't eat this and you couldn't eat that and it [being monitored] doesn't have as much power, you know? I still feel sometimes like people are probably watching what I am eating like, "why is she eating that?" But, I guess my attitude now is like "Tough!" you know?

Indeed, being fat is a condition that invites not only meddling and intrusion but makes one susceptible to harassment:

Beth (NAAFA): I've had snide comments made as I walked down the street. You know, anonymous kinds of things, sittin' at a stop sign and some guy yelling over, "Oh look at that fat slob." You know, I'm sittin' there, at a stop sign, in the car! Or, you know, I'm lookin' around, walking down a street in Ireland last summer and somebody said, "Fat bitch." You know I'm just standing on the sidewalk doing . . . not doing anything.

Given this experience, it is not surprising that to find that "obese persons monitor their diet in public to minimize critical appraisal" (Maykovich 1978, 454). However, in contrast to the strategies distributed by WW for managing relations around issues of food and consumption, NAAFA members employ a very different organizational frame regarding food and consumption:

When fat people gather we break bread together. It is richly important that we eat together, enjoying both food and company. Eating with others is an exquisitely intimate act—taking nourishment from the same source together. It says that we are no longer oppressed by diets and restricted, secretive eating. Sharing a meal symbolizes and reclaims this freedom. Eating no longer connotes shame. It brings joy, company, sensuality and aesthetics. Eating together is a political act. (Hemenway 1990, 10)

Here, the meaning of food is framed in terms of its ritual significance, viewed as a symbol of shared lived experience and political

solidarity. To claim the sharing of food as a *political act* is to contest the experience of public surveillance and the strategy of secretive eating that is used to escape it. What NAAFA members engage in is not the public management of eating or the neutralization of stigma per se but oppositional identity work involving confrontation (Schwalbe and Mason-Schrock 1996, 141). To share with others who are like-minded, emotionally and cognitively, ratifies this contestation; this is why eating, as it is mediated through the organizational frame, “brings joy, company, sensuality and aesthetics. Eating together is a political act.”

CONCLUSION: ORGANIZATIONAL RESELFING

The term “reselfing” has been used by Wexler (1998, 173) in reference to postmodern social processes involving “transformative, recreations of the self.” Reselfing, according to Wexler, involves “spiritual transmutation”—a process through which “the empty self is refilled, the alienated, exhaustion of being is replenished by regenerative rituals that recreate the original, primordial plenitude of being in collective ritual in which a new, initiated self is reborn” (p. 173).¹³ I would argue that reselfing in postmodern culture is foremost an organizational process, one that involves frame alignment on the part of organizations and “ideological embracement” on the part of participants (Snow and Anderson 1987). Reselfing within appearance organizations such as WW, OA, and NAAFA occurs as organizational frames are aligned through narrative rituals that are a part of identity work. The organizations manufacture “narrative occasions” in which organizational grammar and vocabularies of motive are used, observed, and adopted by new members. In so doing, organizations redefine both preorganizational as well as ongoing experience in the process of reselfing.

My argument here is derived from the insights of Mead (1934). For Mead, consciousness involved the symbolic transformation of stimuli and behaviors into relational objects—a transformation that allows for their mental manipulation in the “telescoping” of an act. Human experience is the sum total of social meanings (what Mead called “social objects”) that are constructed and related to each other in the ongoing process of reflective appraisal. Mead’s conception of the “relationality” of social meanings is twofold. First, social meanings (such as “fat

pride”) are symbolically constituted in relation to other meanings (such as stigma and “fat oppression”). Second, the symbolic transformation of stimuli into a social meaning occurs not only in relation to the ongoing social act in which one is engaged but also in relation to the perspective of others. Once employed, the symbols provided by the organizations constitute a new form of consciousness as members transform past experience, selves, bodies, food, and social relationships into objects of reflection and redefinition. Organizational vocabularies allow participants to name and reconstitute their experiences, bodies, and selves in organizational terms, and this reconstitution is affirmed in ongoing interaction.

Anselm Strauss (1959) observed that “The naming of an object . . . provides a directive for action” (p. 22). Through their narratives, members and clients frame their experiences in the vocabulary of the organization. Organizational precepts prove relevant and workable within the lives of members and clients in practical application. As members of WW, NAAFA, and OA evaluate similar sets of lived experiences through the grammar and precepts of the respective organizations, the meanings and actions that are subsequently constructed are very different. Through their adoption of the WW frame, members rationally manage the body, food, emotions, and social relationships, avoiding further stigmatization by conforming with cultural appearance norms. For members of NAAFA, narratives cast within the injustice frame place a premium on activism; reselfing occurs as the self is defined as an agent of change through this frame. In OA, reselfing occurs as members construct accounts in which bodies are reclaimed and selves are redeemed in a process guided by a “higher power.”

As the language of the organizations 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 organizations. Yet this process is never complete or final. Even as the organizations may shape the interpretive practices of members and clients and facilitate reselfing, members may define their experience and their commitments in ways that depart from official definitions of reality. Understanding how various frames of action are enabled or constrained by organizational rhetoric necessitates that we investigate issues beyond the scope of the present study. What is needed is further research that adds to our understanding of how organizations are instrumental not only in supplying vocabularies of motive to their

members but also in the provision of identity-altering events, emotion work, and processes of commitment through which reselfing occurs.

NOTES

1. For an excellent review of the literature on language in administrative relations, see Heracleous and Hendry (2000).

2. Elsewhere, I have referred to these organizations as “appearance organizations” (Martin 2000).

3. Stone (1986) criticized symbolic interactionists for neglecting the “non-discursive” dimensions of identity, the foremost of which is appearance and, hence, gender. West and Zimmerman’s (1987) analysis pointed to the ways in which all features of gender, including appearance, are constructed in interaction but molded institutionally.

4. Males typically referred to adolescence as a period in which concerns of dating and intimate relationships were paramount. Few males expressed the importance of appearance for intimacy as a present concern. While this might possibly be attributed to the marital status of the men, some wives were compelled to maintain their appearance because of their husbands.

5. Notable works by Gamson and colleagues (Gamson 1995; Gamson, Fireman, and Rytina 1982) as well as Snow et al. (1986) have advanced social movement theory, building on Goffman’s (1974) insights.

6. Collective action frames are action-oriented sets of beliefs and meanings that not only explain and justify but also inspire social movement activities and campaigns. By the term “injustice framework,” Gamson, Fireman, and Rytina (1982) meant “a belief that the unimpeded operation of the authority system, on this occasion, would result in an injustice” (p. 14).

7. The question of social desirability is itself complex and cannot be reduced to any one characteristic that a person possesses. However, cross-cultural research by David Buss (1989) suggested that the social desirability of men as potential marriage partners is more commonly formulated by women on the basis of men’s professional status.

8. The similarity between Overeaters Anonymous (OA) members and members of Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) is acute. This is not surprising given OA’s outright adoption and espousal of AA’s twelve-step program. For a full discussion of medicalization and AA, see Conrad and Schneider’s (1980) analysis of alcoholism as well as Trice and Roman’s (1978) work.

9. The term “retrospective interpretation” is one adopted from the work of Schur (1971).

10. Two members of the group had also attended OA.

11. The limitation of such claim is evident—there is no subpopulation in U.S. history that has been beaten, raped, or lynched simply for being fat.

12. Notably, these same studies were cited by federal regulators investigating fraudulent claims made by weight loss companies (Subcommittee on Regulation 1990).

13. In a recent analysis of anorexia nervosa, psychologists Baerveldt and Voestermans (1998, 165) used the term "selfing" to describe a process that includes identity construction, self-understanding, and self-experience. Boulton and Jerrard (2000, 303), in an analysis of fashion, elaborated the point, arguing that the body becomes a "selfing device" as people use it in establishing a self-image, a sense of self-efficacy, and social identity.

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