

# Women's Experiences of Looking and Being Looked at

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# ABSTRACT

This thesis seeks to better understand women's lived experiences of looking and being looked at. Unstructured interviews with 14 women were used to gather data. A hermeneutic-phenomenological methodology provided the framework. This approach relied on the hermeneutic spiral to unfold the back and forth between parts and whole, allowing the phenomenon to emerge. The study draws on the thinking of Gadamer [1900-2002], recognising that all attempts at understanding are interpretations and that all interpretations are from a particular horizon—revealing the prejudices of the one who is interpreting.

Poetical thinking, and the use of poetry to analyse and (re)present findings, offers a way in to the lived experience; distilling and disclosing meaning and facilitating deeper understandings. The research provides significant insight into women's lived experiences of looking—at others and self—and being looked at. This is important since there is currently little research that offers an account of the meanings women make of such experiences.

Women described largely negative experiences of looking at self and being looked at, and how looking at others stirred feelings of disappointment with their own bodies. Inherent to women's experiences is the power of looking and being looked at to shape, and sometimes disturb, the self. Yearning, comparing and feeling exposed are revealed as essential meanings in the lived experience of looking and being looked at. Yearning and comparing mean women feel disappointed and disappointing, as well as longing for that which is looked at. Feelings of being exposed disclose the vulnerability inherent in women's experience, as well as illuminating looking and being looked at as foundational to being itself.

The meanings revealed in the research prompt questions and offer insights useful for psychotherapy practice. The use of poetry to crystallise the meanings of the phenomenon also reveals the potential for the use of poetic inquiry in research and psychotherapy practice to surface and distil meaning, and promote deeper understandings of a phenomenon. Furthermore, the method will be of interest to those studying psychotherapy as a 'way in' to the clinical material, affording opportunities for more profound reflection and engagement with the work.

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# **ATTESTATION OF AUTHORSHIP**

I hereby declare that this submission is my own work and that, to the best of my knowledge and belief, it contains no material previously published or written by another person nor material which to a substantial extent has been submitted for the award of any other degree or diploma of a university or other institution of higher learning.

Signed:

Date: 30 June 2020

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# 1. INTRODUCTION

This chapter sets the scene for the thesis, a hermeneutic phenomenological poetic inquiry into women's experiences of looking and being looked at. It provides context in terms of my prejudices and positioning. The chapter sets out the research question and the aim of the study and offers insight into what I have called a feminist research ethic, those principles of my relationship to feminism that have guided my research. It introduces philosophical concepts relating to hermeneutics and phenomenology, and provides a rationale for the methodology. It also offers explanations of key words and concepts used in the study, including poetic inquiry; as well as providing an overview of the thesis.

## **Beginning**

As a psychotherapist, I often find myself listening to women's pain-filled stories of their bodies and the ways in which these bodies fail to measure up. Mostly, these are not stories of physical pain but emotional and psychological pain. Seemingly, no matter what brings each woman to therapy, at some point we will find ourselves listening to her body and the difficulties she has in inhabiting and enjoying, that body as it is. She will tell me the stories of the ways in which she battles to change or compress her body; to transform it in the hope that she might feel happy or satisfied with herself (and her body). It often seems as if these stories underpin something essential about her being in the world.

As a woman, I have my own lived experiences of feeling my body does not measure up, of not looking (or appearing) the way I want, or perhaps the way I feel I *should* look. I know what it is to feel that my body is not co-operating and the sense that if I could just 'look' a certain way, all might be well. My clients' stories resonate in my own being—yes, I think, *me too*.

As a feminist and academic I have critical understandings I can draw on such as the 'male gaze' (Calogero, 2004; Mulvey, 1975), the culture of skinny and the role of media in the idealising of thinness (Bordo, 2004; Orbach, 2016), or objectification theory (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997) that help me situate these experiences in a broader, socio-cultural context that is undoubtedly gendered. The task of psychotherapy, however, is not to proselytise or disseminate theory; rather, its task is one of careful listening, a being with, an exploring together. Psychotherapy is about meaning-making and working towards greater understanding. It is about making a relational home for feelings that have long been diasporic.

## **My Psychotherapeutic Orientation**

My orientation as a psychotherapist is relational, intersubjective and phenomenological. A phenomenological psychotherapeutic context is concerned with emotional experience and how that experience is organised, (re)locating the isolated Cartesian mind within its world and context (Stolorow & Atwood, 2019). Such a relocation was Heidegger's turn toward ontology, and Gadamer after him. In my clinical work, I strive to consider the ways in which what happens in the therapy space is co-created, in the relational or intersubjective space between therapist and client. Intersubjective systems theory, proposed by Robert Stolorow, George Atwood and Donna Orange (2002), maintains that analytic understanding (the therapist's understanding) "is always from a perspective shaped by the organising principles of the inquirer" (Stolorow & Atwood, 2019, p. 58). Such a perspective suggests a hermeneutic understanding, after Gadamer (1975/2013), in that it is our prejudice or pre-understandings, these organising principles of the inquirer, that shape our potential understandings.

## **Arriving At The Topic Of Looking/Looked At**

The origins of this research topic lie amongst some of my own personal experiences of looking and being looked at, but the themes of looking at other women (especially in social and print media) and being looked at are a leitmotif in my work as a psychotherapist. Some women come specifically because of a particular difficulty that appears to centre on the body. Yet, over the years I have noticed it does not really matter where we start—at some point we get to the ways in which her body disappoints her. Her body does not look/appear as she wants it to, or as she feels it should. Often I find myself listening to the ways in which her body disgusts her, the ways it lets her down. There is often a profound hatred for her body as it is; sometimes these feelings come as a surprise to the client, sadly no longer for me. It is a story I have heard too often to be surprising. I might reflect to her that she seems to be idealising a very different body. There is a rejection of the body she has and a wish that she could look different, if only she could diet/gym/starve/run her way to that look. When her body looks as it should, then perhaps she can be happy/peaceful/worthy/good enough. The feminist literature is filled with explanations as to *how* and *why* this happens (Bordo, 2004; Chernin, 1981; Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997; Gutwill, 1994; Orbach, 1978; 2016; Steiner-Adair, 1991; Wolf, 1991); however, hermeneutic phenomenology seeks to understand what the lived experience is *like*.

## **Prejudices**

When I stand back to reflect on my own pre-understandings or prejudices, I am aware of a long history of both looking (to others around me for a sense of how to belong, how to be, and

also for acceptance and reassurance) and being looked at. At times in my life, being looked at by men has felt sexualising, threatening and invasive, or ego-boosting, depending on the man and my state of mind. Being looked at by women has at times felt like passing a test where one does not know the criteria, as if I was being evaluated or judged. I am the oldest daughter to parents who, when I turned 7 years, began running a large pub and restaurant in the North of England. Looking back, particularly to my time in pubs between the ages of 7 and 19 years, I can see how the seeds for this project were sown. As Romanyshyn (2013) suggested, the research topic chooses the researcher “as much as, and perhaps even more than, he or she chooses it” (p. 4).

Growing up I looked to the adults around me, in my case my mother and father, for how to be, as I am sure most children do. They were the centre of my small world. On entering the pub trade my world, my horizon, as Gadamer would say, expanded radically, and probably not for the better. We had moved from a small village to a large town—from our small village home with a 4 person family and occasional grandparents, to an open ‘home’ of sorts, where any and all were welcome at all times of the day and night. Literally, a ‘public house’ (for which pub is an abbreviation), our home was now also a public space.

This new world proved very different, and very adult. It would have been very difficult for my parents to shelter me from it. In total, we would live in 5 ‘public houses’ such as this one. I suspect that, like my father, I fell in love with the performative element of living in these public spaces/houses, at times enjoying ‘having an audience’. And, like my mother, I learned to be wary of the evaluative element, the judgments of others. If there is an audience and there is a performance, then there is also an evaluation of that performance. There is ‘public opinion’.

### **Wanting to be seen**

My early years contain these contradictions, a love of performance and a terror of ‘getting it wrong’. Wanting to be seen, to be looked at and appreciated, but afraid of being seen ‘in the wrong light’, afraid of the others’ disapproval. Whilst early on it was almost certainly my parents’ disapproval I sought to avoid, later this would become generalised to the ‘public’ in my ‘public house’. In trying to reconstruct a timeline of events in my writing the poem below emerged.

### **Performing a life**

Somehow  
*(because I saw my mother doing it)*  
my body became part of what would be evaluated  
in the performance of my life

Somehow  
*(because I saw my father doing it)*  
the performance grew and grew  
to include my whole life

everywhere,  
others were watching, looking on  
I was evaluated, measured, judged  
Twelve years of age and my parents separate

No father looks out for me now  
and I look to the men  
in my very public house for approval  
perhaps applause

The approval comes  
as sexualized attention  
I have not added *unwanted*  
*(even though I didn't want it)*

because I sought your approval,  
I craved the applause,  
the nod that my performance was good,  
that I was worthwhile, loveable.

I first wrote the thoughts and events above as prose. When I reached the end and read the words back I liked the rhythm of it. I began to play with line breaks, creating stanzas, taking words out and thinking about form, rhythm, and flow. Perhaps, in attempting to separate the writing above from my writing here, I wanted to have a separation between the me who is writing now, and the me these events happened to; a sort of demarcation of past and present. Gadamer would argue we cannot separate out our past—we carry our past into the present, it is the ground from which our prejudices grow. The important thing is to be aware of how I have been shaped, how my understandings have been shaped by my past, and to hold these prejudices up to the light for a closer look. A poem is less than prose, heightening emotional resonance by stripping away unnecessary words. At the same time, a poem is more revealing, showing something of how the poem works to distil and disclose.

### **Wanting to hide**

A later memory from the last public house I would live in before leaving home. I would have been about 17 years of age. One afternoon, a man who regularly came into the pub told me that he had recently seen me walking to college (equivalent to Year 12 and 13 in New



the insidiousness of social media, and despite increased awareness which has resulted in a movement toward body positivity and a call for more body inclusivity.

My master's dissertation about working psychodynamically with the anorexic client (Green, 2016) brought me into contact with an abundance of feminist writers, exposing me to the notion of a patriarchy and its dominant discourses, the pressures of mass consumer culture and the impacts on the female body (e.g., Bordo, 2004). Carol Bloom and colleagues (1994) presented an articulate account of how dominant cultural symbols are absorbed in a kind of internalising of culture through the development of relationships to powerful visual symbols, often a "hard, thin, young, restrained female body" (p. xiii).

My immersion in the feminist literature helped me develop new understandings about my body and about my designation as female. This new way of thinking about the world included an understanding as to how the 'science' of advertising seeks to cultivate "eternal vigilance" in women "about their body and looks as the key to personal happiness, security, and personal control" (Gutwill, 1994, p. 10). Of course, women do not just passively breathe in the culture around them, they have agency, engaging with their world and making meaning; nevertheless, the impact of culture on the unconscious ought not to be underestimated. Indeed, a range of global, multi-billion-dollar industries bank on it. This study does not present a critical feminist analysis but these understandings do form part of my prejudice and are, therefore, important to mention. The fact that the impacts of culture, including social and print media and advertising, are largely unconscious means that an exploration of the *experience* of looking and being looked at potentially yields understandings to which a more epistemologically oriented study may not have access.

### **An emerging research question**

Whilst looking for wardrobe inspiration in preparation for a trip to Europe at the end of 2016, I spent some time looking through online images using Pinterest<sup>1</sup>. The images were largely 'street style' images; that is, of supposedly 'average' women snapped going about their day. However, these women are anything but 'average'. They all fit a certain 'look'—tall, very slim, flawless skin, thick, glossy hair, perfect make up and clothing, with carefully chosen accessories. Most likely these women were models. After about 30 minutes or so of looking I noticed that I felt incredibly dissatisfied with my body and my wardrobe. It felt like a kind of restlessness that spread out, occupying more and more of my thinking. The more I reflected,

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<sup>1</sup> Pinterest is a well-known social media platform to search for, collate and share images

the more interested I became in how this could be. The impact that such a short exposure had on me and my psyche led me to ponder whether other women had similar experiences. My looking at others had prompted a corresponding change in how I looked at myself. I had gone from being pleased with my body, from feeling happy with it, to feeling disappointed and even disgusted with it. From satisfied to dissatisfied in an instant. I wanted to make sense of this experience for myself, to know if this was something other women experienced, and to understand the phenomenon more fully.

My body had not changed in the amount of time I had been looking at these images; yet, the way I felt toward my body had changed profoundly, despite my new, feminist understandings. I wondered whether I would even have noticed this discontent had it not been sudden? It was as if somehow the absence of such dissatisfaction, created by my reading of feminist literature, became the space within which the phenomenon could emerge to be noticed, like Heidegger's (1962/2008) clearing. I wanted to understand more about what the looking experience was like for other women and to disclose the inherent meanings.

As well as looking, women are also looked at. There is an abundance of feminist literature exploring the nature of socio-cultural, gendered demands on women to see themselves as reflected (e.g., Bartky, 1990; Berger, 1972; Orbach, 2016); that is, through the eyes of others. In this way, women's looking carries an awareness of, and includes, being looked at. There is also much written about body dissatisfaction (e.g., Grogan, 2017; Tiggermann & Pickering, 1996). The literature on women's body dissatisfaction again addresses more the what and why, it does not necessarily tell us about women's lived experience. Body dissatisfaction also presupposes the experience and, to some degree, the meaning. In order to remain open to the possible meanings, the question guiding the research became: what are women's experiences of looking and being looked at?

### **Aim of the Study**

The aim of this research is to engage with and explore a particular aspect of women's lived experience; that is, the experiences of looking and being looked at. It is hoped that deep engagement with and reflection on the phenomenon will facilitate the emergence of a range of possible meanings that will allow for a more nuanced understanding of women's lived experience in an area that often causes considerable distress. Whilst there is a significant body of literature aimed at identifying, explaining, and theorising as to how and why women experience difficulties in looking and in being looked at, I was unable to find any literature that deeply engaged with women's experience of the phenomenon as lived. Chapter 3 identifies

and discusses literature that relates to the experience, but much of this seemed to be unintentional and incidental, rather than the primary motivating factor.

### **Choosing Hermeneutic Phenomenology**

Exploration of this research topic, women's experiences of looking and being looked at, requires a qualitative approach. The foundational premises I start from include the notion that we are always interpreting that which is before us and streaming toward us; that understanding is related to the unique socio-historical context (horizon) of the individual seeking to understand; and that our understanding is never complete but rather always unfolding (Gadamer, 1975/2013). Further, that our 'coming to an understanding' fundamentally changes us in ways we may not be prepared for but crucially must stay open to (Caputo, 2000; Gadamer, 1975/2013). Gadamer (1975/2013) used the phrasing 'at risk' and 'in/to play'. We place ourselves in play and thus our self-understandings are at risk when we extend ourselves toward the other in our attempts to come to greater understanding.

I considered autoethnography, a critical feminist analysis and heuristics as alternative approaches to this research; however, I believed that hermeneutic phenomenology, especially in combination with poetic inquiry, gave me the most scope for working creatively with the data whilst attending to my own prejudices or preunderstandings. In particular, Gadamer's attention to the other, to openness, understanding, our embeddedness in language and how we are changed by coming to an understanding, aligned well with my approach as a psychotherapist.

### **Key Terms and Notions**

#### **Understanding & meaning**

Hermeneutic phenomenology refers to the study of lived experience. The two approaches are perfectly paired for, as Smith and colleagues (2009) suggested, "without the phenomenology, there would be nothing to interpret; without the hermeneutics, the phenomenon would not be seen" (p. 37). The focus of hermeneutic phenomenological research is often an aspect of life that is overlooked or taken for granted (Lavery, 2003). The call and answer questioning in the back and forth of hermeneutics, together with the illuminating light of phenomenology, reveals the nature of the phenomenon and its possible meanings. The goal of this kind of research is revealing meaning and deepening understanding (Wilson & Hutchinson, 1991). For Gadamer (1975/2013), after Heidegger, understanding is more than a way to know the world; rather, it is the way we *are* in the world.

### **Prejudice & horizon**

Each of us is embedded in the world in terms of our background, culture, the period of time in which we are in the world, and so on—this is one's horizon. These elements shape our pre-understandings or prejudices (Gadamer, 1975/2013). Rather than being impediments to understanding that must be put to one side, these prejudices are, in fact, what make understanding possible. Any attempt at understanding is an interpretation, and an interpretation must be made from somewhere. Where we interpret from, our horizon, is comprised of all the things that have shaped who we are and how we see, experience, and interpret the world around us. For Gadamer (1975/2013), interpretation, language and understanding are inseparable such that "language is the universal medium in which understanding occurs. Understanding occurs in interpreting... [and] [a]ll understanding is interpretation" (p. 407). The use of poetic inquiry and poetry within a hermeneutic phenomenological frame offers a way of seeing the world and the phenomenon, that can take us outside of that which is already known. Poetic inquiry is introduced more fully later.

### **Language**

Language, and its inextricable relationship to interpretation, understanding and being, is a particular aspect of Gadamer's thinking that I have drawn from in this thesis. For Gadamer (1975/2013), language is not merely a tool, something that we have in the world but rather something that allows for the world to exist:

Language is not just one of man's possessions in the world; rather, on it depends the fact that man has a world at all. The world as world exists for man as no other creature that is in the world. But this world is verbal in nature... Not only is the world world only insofar as it comes into language, but language, too, has its real being only in the fact that world is presented in it... man's being in the world is primordially linguistic. (p. 459)

A hermeneutic phenomenological approach, then, pays particular attention to language since it is through language that the world comes into being. In listening to participants, one pays careful attention to the language used as it brings the participant's world into being and fresh understandings are made possible. In paying attention to language, I often explore the etymology of words. Sometimes these are included in the thesis. It is hoped these contribute to deeper understandings.

### **Openness**

Understanding requires openness, since one puts oneself (one's self-understandings) into play (Gadamer, 1975/2013), so to speak, when one attempts to understand what is presented to

us. Openness is a crucial quality as the researcher opens themselves to the participant's world whilst carefully attending to one's own prejudices.

### **Questioning**

To understand means more than simply repeating or representing the meaning that someone else has made. For Gadamer (1975/2013), it is questioning that opens up the possibilities of meaning. Through questioning "what is meaningful passes into one's own thinking on the subject" (Gadamer, 1975/2013, p. 383). When we speak of reaching an understanding, therefore, the fusing of horizons means being changed by what we come to understand. Gadamer says we do not remain what we were, but are "transformed into a communion" (p. 387).

### **Self**

I use the term 'self' in this thesis to acknowledge personhood; for example, in describing the act of looking at oneself in the mirror I have written "looking at self". Like Bromberg (1996), I find it helpful to think about the multiplicity of self, as opposed to a unitary self. I acknowledge the complexity of the human being and the inextricability of self from context, including human relationships. In this way, one can move between different self-states, often quite unconsciously, as part of one's experience of self or selfhood. To use the example of looking in the mirror, there is the self who is looking and the self who is looked at. In the context of intersubjectivity theory (e.g., Atwood & Stolorow, 1984) and object relations theory (e.g., Fairbairn, 1963) the self is not isolated but contains elements of self-with-other. The self is shaped by its context and through human relationships.

### **Looking/being looked at**

In this research when I use looking/being looked at; or, looking and being looked at, I am relying on shorthand. It is too cumbersome to write in full each time: women's experiences of looking at others in person and via social media, print media, on screen and so on. Looking refers to the more active process of looking where one can be thought about as being the subject, the one who looks. Being looked at refers to the more passive experience of being looked at, by other women, by men, by the camera, by the culture and so on. Here one is perhaps more object. Looking at self (in the mirror, in photographs, on screen and so on) encompasses being both subject and object as one both looks and is looked at.

Beginning the process of searching for literature reminded me that the verb 'to look' is used in so many ways. For instance, we do not just 'look at', we also use the verb to speak of

caretaking, as in 'looking after' (someone or something), or remembering and reminiscing as 'looking back'. Anticipating an event becomes a 'looking forward to', and in searching for something we might say we 'look for', 'look through', or 'look up', either literally or by using a search engine. We can inspect something; for example, when we 'look over' or 'look around'. We can investigate by 'looking into'. We speak of *how* someone looks or looked; that is, giving a particular appearance of a way of being, so we say, for example, 'she looked happy'. We can 'look to' someone to provide something or expect something, 'we are looking to them for support', for example. Even inanimate objects can look, so we speak of a room or a building that 'looks out' over a particular environment. We can also use 'look' as a noun; for example, 'getting a closer look', 'being given an odd look', or expressing that we need to 'take a look'. Something or someone can have a particular 'look', so we can speak of the house having a 'modern look', or the person who has a 'classy look'. That same person might be said to have 'good looks', or a particular style, 'the most current look'. We can also use 'look' as an exclamation; for example 'look out!' or 'look here!' This was an important consideration in the process of searching for relevant literature.

## Introducing Poetic Inquiry

**Poetry as/in/for research<sup>2</sup>**  
tap into universality  
radical subjectivity  
personal experience and research  
create something from the particular,  
which becomes universal  
as we relate to,  
embody,  
experience the work  
as if it were our own

Poetic inquiry (Prendergast, 2009) encompasses the diverse use of poetry as/in/for research (Faulkner, 2017). Poetry invites interactive, felt responses, creating or making "the world in words" (Leggo, 2008, p. 167). Poetic inquiry, thus, lends itself to hermeneutic phenomenology beautifully because both share the common aspiration of being able to express human experiences in ways that evoke recognition, emotion, and new possibilities in the reader. The use of found poetry and the creation of generated poetry in this thesis is both method and product (Faulkner, 2017); that is, poetry is used to analyse and (re)present data.

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<sup>2</sup> *Poetry as/in/for research* is a found poem taken from Sandra Faulkner's (2017, p. 210) chapter of the same name

The poetry in this thesis is my original work, and includes found poems drawn from the literature, and those created from the participant data. Poetry is intended to be read aloud, just as music is meant to be played (Lenz, 1992). The reader is invited to read some or all of the poems aloud and notice the difference in emotional resonance.

### **Orienting the Reader**

The comments below provide the reader with information as to the conventions used in this thesis. They are followed by an overview of the thesis.

### **Formatting**

This thesis is typed in Calibri 11pt font using 1.5 line spacing. Poems are differentiated from the rest of the text with the use of Times New Roman 11pt font and single line spacing. APA 7<sup>th</sup> referencing is used throughout. Double quotation marks are used to indicate quotes from literature or other sources such as participant interview material. Single quotation marks are used for colloquial expressions or to highlight a particular word.

I have used italics in several ways; to differentiate, highlight or emphasise words for the reader, particularly in some of the found poems; to show the etymology of words or for non-English words; when referring to found poem material in the text; for the titles of books and articles; and to refer to the findings, particularly in the discussion chapter. In quoting poetry in the body of the text I have used the convention of using italics and / to indicate a line break.

### **Gadamer and in-text citations**

Throughout this thesis, frequent references are made to Gadamer's thinking. For ease of reading and flow I have made the decision to limit in-text citations to Gadamer's most well-known work, *Truth and Method*. Often just the first reference in a paragraph or section has an in-text citation orienting the reader. Where I am quoting Gadamer directly I have provided an in-text citation with page number. My copy of *Truth and Method* is the paperback Bloomsbury Academic 2013 edition. The original work was published in English in 1975. The 2013 translation was revised by Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall. Unless otherwise specified, a reference to Gadamer in the thesis is to *Truth and Method* (1975/2013).

### **Use of pronouns**

Occasionally, in my work, I use first-person pronouns (I, my, me). This is in accordance with a feminist research ethic (Hildebrand, 1998). There is a making visible of the researcher's subjectivity rather than attempting to obscure it with the use of a passive voice and

impersonal pronouns (although these are sometimes used) (Hildebrand, 1998). This is in part a claiming of “the authority of the autobiographical” (Ritchie & Boardman, 1999, p. 34). The more personal poems that relate to my own experiences utilise ‘I’ and bring in the autobiographical. There is a disruption of the traditional academic convention of passive voice (Hildebrand, 1998; Sprague, 2005). I hope that this work contributes to the expansion of “the conventions of scholarly discourse” to include “the personal narrative as a way of situating oneself in one’s scholarship” (Ritchie & Boardman, 1999, p. 34). The poems in the findings chapters (Chapters 6, 7, and 8) retain the participants’ ‘I’, ‘me’ and ‘my’ and so on. This is an honouring of participant voice. The resulting blending of researcher voice and participant voice in some places in the thesis provokes the reader to consider who is this ‘I’ who addresses me?

There are places in the text where I use ‘we’, ‘our’ and ‘us’. This is not intended as an assumption that the reader is in agreement with me but rather reflects Gadamer’s (1975/2013) notion of understanding as the “original character of the being of human life itself” (p. 230). Further, it reflects Gadamer’s later idea of understanding as entering communion, and the reciprocal nature of language and life in which human beings are bound to each other (Gadamer, cited in Grondin, 1994). The use of ‘we’, ‘our’ and ‘us’ in places echoes psychoanalyst Harry Stack Sullivan’s sentiment that “we are all simply more human than otherwise” (cited in Stern & Hirsh, 2017, p. 63). The use of ‘we’, ‘our’ and ‘us’ is not an attempt to smooth over difference; rather, the hope that ‘we’ might enter into a dialogue and reach an understanding in spite of ‘our’ inevitable differences.

### **What is a feminist research ethic?**

Whilst this thesis is not a critical feminist study I am informed by my values and understandings as a feminist. Rather than get bogged down in the debate of what constitutes a feminist methodology or method, since there are myriad interpretations of such, I have settled on my sense of a feminist research ethic that has informed my work. In articulating my sense of a feminist research ethic for this thesis I owe a great debt to the work of Mary Maynard (1994) and Shulamit Reinharz (1992). In her presentation of a feminist research methodology (which I had initially thought to employ in relation to my thesis) Reinharz sets forth ten themes. Three are of particular relevance to my approach in this thesis; the inclusion of the researcher as a person, an attempt on the part of the researcher to develop relationships with the people studied, and defining a “special relation with the reader” (p. 240). For example, the reader will notice they are sometimes addressed directly by the text or that I have tried to include the first names of authors where those authors are women. This is

a response to the way in which academic writing can tend towards being impersonal, as if the writer was as disembodied as those written about. These are also stylistic choices and relate to finding my voice as a researcher and writer (Reinharz, 1992, p. 16). The inclusion of myself in the research as an embodied knower, adopting “the role of human knower complete with feelings and ambivalence” (Reinharz, 1992, p. 215) is an important part of my sense of a feminist research ethic. I have also tried to pay attention to revealing my process, mapping out what was done so that there is a *showing-of-the-seams* of the work. Helen Stephenson and colleagues (2018) describe a hermeneutic phenomenological sense of “leaving the roots on” (p. 264) so that the context of what is written about is there for the reader. In this way a feminist research ethic extends to the way I am in relation to the reader and what is written about.

Feminism is a perspective, rather than a method and there are multiple definitions of feminism as there are ideas about its application to research methods (Reinharz, 1992). Mary Maynard (1994) suggested that feminist research could be characterised by a critique of the notion of value-free qualitative research, a rejection of the exploitation of participants by researchers and the cultivation of intimate research relationships, especially woman to woman. Elisabeth Porter (1999) suggested three key features of feminist thinking on ethics; personal experience, context and nurturant relationships. Rosalind Edwards and Melanie Mauthner (2002) identified an ethic of care and responsibility, noting that this is rarely described, although often implicitly turned towards in feminist research. The threads that are of particular importance to my sensibility of a feminist research ethic are care and relationship and in this way that ethic extends to the way I am in relation to the participants.

There are similarities here with my practice as a psychotherapist. I take my responsibility towards my clients seriously and even without a code of ethics, there is an inherent ethic of care and relationship to those clients. Like Mary Belenky and colleagues (1986) I “wanted to hear what women had to say in their own terms rather than test out [my] preconceived hypotheses” (p. 11). They described how they “proceeded inductively, opening our ears to the voices and perspectives of women so that we might begin to hear the unheard and unimagined” (p. 11). This resonates with the openness that a hermeneutic phenomenological stance calls for and the inclusion of poetic inquiry speaks to the creation of new methods (Reinharz, 1992). In this way, a feminist research ethic speaks to the way I am in relation to method and methodology.

## **My Context in Aotearoa, New Zealand**

In thinking about my situatedness, and orienting the reader to my context, I acknowledge tangata whenua<sup>3</sup>, the people of this land and my position in Aotearoa, New Zealand as Pākehā<sup>4</sup>. I have English and Scottish heritage and spent my formative years in the very beautiful landscape of the Peak District, later moving to Lancashire, then Yorkshire, London and Leicestershire. I have lived in Tāmaki Makaurau (Auckland) for nearly twenty years with my husband Sol who is of Ngāpuhi, Ngāti whātua, Ngati Korokoro and English descent. Our three children were all born in Aotearoa. Elsewhere (in press) I have written about what it means to me to be bicultural and to live and understand myself in a bicultural context. Reading Gadamer has helped me begin to grasp what it means to *be* bicultural, that is, to embrace openness to the other as a way of being, rather than an epistemological concept. An Auckland University of Technology (AUT) noho marae<sup>5</sup> at Te Paea<sup>6</sup> in early 2012 sparked my learning about who I am and where I am from. That learning has helped me find a place in the world through the Te Ao Māori concepts of whakapapa<sup>7</sup> and tūrangawaewae<sup>8</sup>. Despite nearly 10 years of unfolding myself into a bicultural context I still feel at the very beginning of my journey in this regard.

## **Overview of the Thesis**

Chapter 1 introduces and contextualises the topic and the research question, including situating myself as researcher through an exploration of my prejudices and positioning as a psychotherapist. It explores how I am influenced by feminist scholarship and how this extends to a feminist research ethic. This initial chapter sets out the purpose and aim of the study, introducing philosophical concepts, key terminology and the rationale for hermeneutic phenomenology. The chapter introduces the reader to poetic inquiry which adds an important dimension to the data analysis and the (re)presentation of findings.

Chapter 2 sets out the aim and intention of a hermeneutic re-view of the literature (Smythe & Spence, 2012), exploring the way in which such a review fits within a hermeneutic phenomenological framework. Aiming to provide context, this chapter introduces literature that backgrounds the study, including two (feminist) texts that were influential in generating

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<sup>3</sup> Tangata whenua, meaning people of the land, refers to the indigenous Māori inhabitants of Aotearoa

<sup>4</sup> Pākehā refers to non-indigenous inhabitants of Aotearoa, New Zealand

<sup>5</sup> noho marae is a stay at a marae, a traditional Māori gathering place

<sup>6</sup> Te Paea is the marae near Māngere Bridge in Auckland

<sup>7</sup> whakapapa is the process of placing oneself in a wider context including one's ancestors and the land

<sup>8</sup> tūrangawaewae, literally a standing place for the feet, connects identity, a sense of belonging and home; linking sense of self and the land

the research question(s) and in the initial stages of the research. Chapter 2 also explores some of the literature that shapes my context/thinking as a psychotherapist and researcher.

Chapter 3 explores in more detail the literature directly relating to the phenomenon under investigation and provides justification for the study. The overarching aim of Chapters 2 and 3 is to stir thinking on and around the topic of looking and being looked at, particularly in the context of identifying as female.

Chapter 4 offers a methodological overview of the framework that underpins this research; that is, a hermeneutic phenomenological approach using poetic inquiry. This chapter uncovers Gadamer's thinking as it relates to this research and addresses how these threads have guided the course of the study including the interpretation, analysis and (re)presentation of the data.

Chapter 5 describes the research method, what was done and how, including a rationale for the use of found poems as data. This chapter links the philosophical underpinning set out in Chapter 4 to the research process, paying careful attention to the use of poetic inquiry in a hermeneutic phenomenological frame. Examples of the process of making and using poems are provided. This chapter also addresses rigour.

The findings chapters (6, 7, and 8) draw on participant data in order to explore possible understandings of women's experiences of looking at others (Chapter 6); looking at self (Chapter 7); and being looked at (Chapter 8). In each of these chapters, potential understandings about the phenomena are conveyed through poetry and prose.

Chapter 9 offers a discussion of the key findings, as well as strengths and limitations of the study, implications for practice, and recommendations for future research.

## 2. RE-VIEWING LITERATURE

In this chapter I explore the qualities of a hermeneutic literature review as well as giving background context for the research. This context includes a consideration of our earliest experiences of looking, how we develop a looking life, and how looking has been referenced in myth and folklore as well as art history. The chapter includes a feminist lens on looking and offers some reflections on looking that are pertinent to the context of psychotherapy.

### Looking Hermeneutically

A hermeneutic phenomenological review of literature aims to provoke thinking (Smythe & Spence, 2012). *Re-viewing* literature suggests a looking again, perhaps at something that has seemed old or tired, and looking now with fresh eyes. It tries “to bring words, meanings and the thoughts that arise into viewing-afresh” (Smythe & Spence, 2012, p. 14). This way of exploring literature is consistent with a hermeneutic phenomenological methodology in that it requires more than the setting down of “pre-articulated knowledge, merely to show a gap in the literature, or as a means to argue the catalyst for on-going research” (Smythe & Spence, 2012, p. 14). Rather such a re-view wants to call researcher and reader into thinking. The reader is invited to “share this thinking experience” (Smythe & Spence, 2012, p. 14). Engaging with literature in this way means that texts, be they journal articles, poetry, novels, videos, podcasts and so on, become partners in the research journey (Smythe & Spence, 2012). With this in mind, I also turned to fictional literature and film that featured the themes of looking or being looked at in some way; for example, Margaret Atwood’s (2010) *The Handmaid’s Tale* and George Orwell’s (1949) *1984*, discussed in the subsequent chapter. Such a *re-viewing* of literature provides a way of looking at and thinking about the topic, backgrounding the study and offering context whilst it shows up researcher prejudices; “selection in itself becomes a means of signification” (Dolack, 2014, p. 61). It stirs us to thinking.

### Serendipitous Looking

My approach to re-viewing literature lends itself to something rather more Dionysian than Apollonian (Heron, 1996). Where an Apollonian approach is more systematic, for Heron (1996) a Dionysian approach to inquiry is more tacit, more *ad hoc*. Searching in this way means finding things that might be otherwise obscured or hidden—this is the work of disclosing, or shining light on a phenomenon. I imagine shining a torch into a darkened room. We cannot see the whole room (as in a systematic or exhaustive search; and even with this kind of search areas will remain obscured or in shadow), but we might see new and surprising

things illuminated before us in different and unexpected ways. This is reflective of the idea that our understanding can only ever be partial.

In a New York Times article, *How to cultivate the art of serendipity*, Pagan Kennedy (2016) described how a “surprising number of the conveniences of modern life were invented when someone stumbled upon a discovery or capitalized on an accident”. She wondered whether “we can train ourselves to become more serendipitous”, asking how we might “cultivate the art of finding what we are not seeking?” As Kinsella (2006) suggested, some of the most fascinating texts are stumbled across by way of a serendipitous encounter whilst looking for something else. A hermeneutic literature review feels like this to me, the art of finding what we are not necessarily seeking; yet, somehow knowing when we have found it.

### ***Re-Viewing Literature as Making Towards Something***

There is a dialogue, a back and forth play that unfolds, particularly through the use of question and answer, in a hermeneutic literature review (Smythe & Spence, 2012). Any view, or in this case re-view, is a view *from somewhere* (or someone). In this way, the hermeneutic researcher is interested in the self that is reviewing, as well as the literature that is being reviewed. A hermeneutic review throws up questions as well as answers. *When was this written? What is the socio-historical-cultural context of that time? Who wrote it? What do I know about the writer and their time, their beliefs? How might the writing relate to the here-and-now? How do I read it (now, in my time and place)? Why do I interpret this piece of literature in this way? How is it I think that? What prior knowledge/understanding has formed my views? What (in)forms me? What is revealed about me in what I have chosen to attend to? Which of my prejudices are shown up?*

The quote below is by Romanian poet, Paul Celan. He is talking about poetry but it occurred to me that the same could be said for the reading of literature in re-view as we attempt to uncover or reveal something, moving towards a greater, although never complete, understanding (Gadamer, 1975/2013).

A poem, as a manifestation of language and thus essentially dialogue, can be a message in a bottle, sent out in the – not always greatly hopeful – belief that somewhere and sometime it could wash up on land, on heartland perhaps. Poems in this sense too, are underway: they are making towards something. (Celan, cited in Dolack, 2014, p. 68)

That which we read, that which we attempt to understand, makes its way toward something, toward us. Celan was interested in the dialogic nature of understanding, particularly in his

work translating poetry. He used the metaphor of the sender, the original writer who puts the message in the bottle and floats it out to sea; and the receiver, the one who is translating, finding the bottle and attempting to read the message within. He saw his work as a reaching into the past, extending a hand to the Other. Celan urged us to read such poetry dialogically, “as a collection of voices, each of which allows the existence of the other’s voice in so far as one speaks through the other” (cited in Dolack, 2014, p. 71). All text, all discourse, Dolack (2014) concluded, is imitative; that is, it has been said before and is multi-voiced. It makes its way towards us, from the past, from a particular context, and into our present. We are the ‘other’ Celan speaks of, that the poem or the discourse is seeking to reach. Gadamer (1975/2013) too had a feeling for this other, making its way toward us. Unlike the simplicity of sender and receiver, for Gadamer, both are transformed through reaching an understanding.

A hermeneutic literature review reveals something of the reviewer, the original author who is read or reviewed, as well as focusing on the topic being reviewed. This may be true of all literature reviews, they are all *re-viewed* from somewhere after all. The hermeneutic researcher makes this consideration explicit.

### **Re-Viewing as Context**

As Dolack (2014) has suggested, in a Gadamerian sense, “a translation, like any speech act, gains its meaning not only by the denotative meaning of its words, but by its interactions with a given milieu and an understood history” (p. 62). This means that any re-viewing of literature requires mindfulness of the milieu within which the writer/interpreter is situated, and similarly for the reader/interpreter. In this way, understanding is dialogic. There is a back and forth, a spiralling, between us and around and back. Unlike the back and forth of a conversation, a text remains an “enduringly fixed expression of life” (Gadamer, 1975/2013, p. 405) and so “one partner in the hermeneutical conversation, the text, speaks only through the other partner, the interpreter” (p. 405). Celan (Dolack, 2014) pictured his poetic translation work as reaching back into the past in order to shake hands. This resonates as a Gadamerian notion, that understanding is interpretive and, therefore, akin to translation, making the unfamiliar familiar or *re-cognizable*, able to be pictured in mind and thought about. The metaphor of a hand-shake contains within it recognition and a greeting, an openness as we welcome new potential understandings. There is a synergy between Smythe and colleagues’ (2008) “something which we wish to point the reader towards” (p. 1392) that provides context, and Celan’s ‘making towards something’. The literature reaching toward us, making its way towards our understanding as we turn to grasp it.

## Searching for Literature

I searched for literature using Google Scholar and the PEP (Psychoanalytic Electronic Publishing) Database. I also searched more broadly using Google, because I have found that this is sometimes the brilliant flash of the torch in the darkness—one is never quite sure what is going to be thrown up towards us in its illumination.

My searching (towards the end of 2017) returned an extraordinary number of results, most of which were unrelated to my topic. For example, my search of the PEP Database for [“looking” AND “looked at”] returned 3,958 results, the vast majority of which were not relevant to the topic. A search of Google Scholar using the terms [looking and being looked at], without quotation marks, returned 1,440,000 results; even a cursory reading of which would not be possible. Searching Google Scholar using quotation marks [e.g., “looking and being looked at”], produced 1,760 results. I also searched for [women’s experience being looked at] and [women’s experience looking].

Searching for some specific topics (e.g., [“looking and psychotherapy”]) proved less useful because the verb ‘to look’ also means to investigate. So, for example, articles appeared in the search such as *Looking inside the psychotherapy process: Assessing clients’ visions of helpful and harmful psychotherapy* (Mohr & Woodhouse, 2001) or *Looking at the psychotherapy process as an intersubjective dynamic of meaning-making: A case study of discourse analysis* (Salvatore et al., 2010). These are examples of literature that are unrelated to the kind of looking I am interested in as a phenomenon.

## Looking in Other Places

Since I am interested in women’s experiences of looking and being looked at, it occurred to me that I could look in the places where women voice their experiences, such as social media, podcasts, blogs and other online platforms. Using Google to search I looked at blogs, online ‘popular’ media articles (e.g., ones found in *Psychology Today*, *Glamour Magazine* and *The Spinoff*), and other areas online where women described their experiences of looking or being looked at.

One such example I came across was the *“That’s What She Said” Project* (now no longer online). This was a UK project where young women were asked to comment on their feelings about their bodies, their relationship with social media, and their feelings about how women’s bodies were portrayed. One young woman said, “women are trained to look in the mirror and pick out parts of their bodies they hate and want to change. This is constantly promoted as

good". Her commentary shows a part of the picture. It offers a sliver of something of her experience of looking. The experience of looking at social media, print media and screen media has "trained" her to look at her own body in a critical way, resulting in a sort of cutting up of her body into acceptable and unacceptable when she looks at herself in the mirror. She has been "trained" to "pick out parts" that must be changed, a response that is "promoted as good.

### **Beginning to Look**

When we are newly in the world, before we have co-ordination of our limbs and before we can muster a smile, we can look (assuming we have the ability of sight). Unfathomable shapes, movement, colours loom close and withdraw, appearing where we look and, just as mysteriously, disappearing. All of this happens without explanation or understanding. The world around us draws our looking towards what we do not yet know. The closest I can imagine is travelling through the deepest parts of the ocean with unidentified 'things' all around, moving toward, moving past. Without language, without knowing the names for things, we are in an alien land. Everything is unknowable, except through sense impressions. If I really live into this experience of alien-ness I imagine myself to be fearful of everything that looms closer, unsure of its intentions—friend or foe? Relaxing only as it proves itself to be benign or perhaps pleasant. Is it pleasing to look upon or soft to the touch? What is stirred in me as I encounter the elements of this unknown world? Good, pleasant feelings or bad, unpleasant feelings? I am trying to make sense of this new world; how do I have a reference point for what is pleasing? Surely a grotesque creature is no more or no less 'pleasant' to my inexperienced eye? Perhaps there is only the novel and then the gradually familiar. Over time, the familiar (sensed before) can be discerned as that which stirs restful emotion, calming me; or that which stirs fear or a sense of foreboding. Quite quickly, if one enters into the imaginative space of such an exercise, it becomes apparent that "[b]eing which can be understood is language" (Gadamer, 1975/2013, p. 490).

Most will be able to conjure the image of a new infant, wide-eyed, looking at their world as it unfolds around them but it is hard to fathom what it is to experience the world without the ability to name or make sense of it. Gadamer would say that there is no world without naming, without our embeddedness in language, because language constitutes our world. However, the infant's world exists before language and is experienced through the senses. We cannot language this world, only experience it, and our inability to language it means we cannot perform that reflective glance (Schutz, 1976); that 'looking-back-reflectively' that constitutes our experiences as meaning-full.

One way in which infants self-regulate intense emotion is by looking away (Ekas et al., 2018). They do this in response to stimulus that is “intense or inconsistent” (Planalp & Braungart-Reiker, 2015, p. 130). This suggests that looking, or specifically looking away, is one of the earliest ways in which we begin to master this new world, and ourselves in relation to it. It also suggests that looking, and what we look at, can have profound impacts on our internal feeling states, sometimes causing distress that in turn triggers a cascade of behavioural responses.

### **Wired for Looking**

Some of our earliest experiences involve looking. When I taught antenatal classes (earlier in my life) we would tell soon-to-be-parents that a newborn infant gaze is optimal at approximately the distance a parent would hold the child, around 8-12 inches, suggesting that we are born ready for looking, and looking at faces (Stern, 1977).

The literature on infant brain development and developmental psychology suggests that human infants prefer to look at human faces above other patterns (Farroni et al., 2006). Newborn babies show perceptual bias that orients them to faces, specifically “high-contrast areas such as the eyes and mouth” (Farroni et al., 2006, p. 299). This perceptual bias may be foundational for later social and cognitive development (Farroni et al., 2006). Simion and colleagues’ (2007) research suggests that human infants become more attuned to faces over the first three months of life, and that infants’ early preference for faces is due to the way the human visuo-perceptual system develops rather than being due to a representational bias for faces per se. Other research has demonstrated this; for example, Turati and colleagues (2002) showed that infants appear to have a preference for “nonfacelike stimulus” (p. 875) that has more elements in the top half. This suggests that infants pay attention to, or have a preference for, the top half of the stimulus they are looking at. Perhaps humans are ‘hard-wired’ to look at eyes, or at least to pay attention to gaze. Teodora Gliga and Gergely Csibra’s research (2007) suggested just this, that humans become “experts in facial recognition” via a developmental process that “heavily biases human infants and children to attend towards the eyes of others” (p. 323). Indeed, earlier work by Farroni and colleagues (2002) found that newborns look significantly more at a face that is directly gazing at them, than a face where the eyes are diverted away. This raises interesting questions regarding the use of the couch in psychotherapy, the clients’ having less access to the therapist’s face (and gaze) and the potential impact of this for some clients.

The importance of mutual gazing for both infant development and bonding/attachment in humans has been written about extensively in the psychological and psychodynamic literature (e.g., Beebe & Gerstman, 1980; Stern, 1977; Winnicott, 1971). Looking, particularly in the context of gaze, eye-contact and mutual gaze, has been written about extensively in the context of psychoanalysis and psychotherapy. Outi Malcolm (2016) has done an excellent job of reviewing the psychodynamic literature on the topic (see also Malcolm & Puls, 2017).

One might reasonably hypothesise that humans are born wired for attending to faces, and particularly eyes. The human infant is in a vulnerable state of not-knowing/not-discerning what is friend or foe. During that time, there is no better, more reliable guide than the faces and expressions of those around us.

### **‘Looking’ Historically and Culturally**

Historically, many cultures share a sense of how looking can impact those looked at. The ‘evil eye’ is a malicious look from someone that then in some way, large or small, harms the person on the receiving end of the look. It is said that a person can bring the evil eye on themselves by acting without humility, and in many cultures there are rituals and tokens that provide protection against the evil eye. This phenomenon can be found across the globe, in many different cultures.

We find *al-‘ayn* or *ayin harsha* in Arabic speaking countries. *Mal de ojo* in Spain, as well as Latin and Central America, becomes *mal-olhado* in Brazil and *mau-olhado* in Portugal. The same concept is *Nazar* in Pakistan, *Drishti* or *Buri Nazar* in India, *mati* in Greece, *áyin hā-rá* in Hebrew, *Cheshmeh Hasood* in Persian culture, *дурной глаз* in Russian, and *Droch Shuil* in Scottish Gaelic. Evil eye equivalents appear in Chinese, Ethiopian, Polish, Kurdish, Hungarian, German, Dutch, Armenian, Irish, Somali, Tamil, and Turkish cultures. There is even a Sanskrit phrase which translates as *drishti dosha*, or ‘malice caused by the evil eye’.

The earliest references to the evil eye seem to come from the empires of Ancient Greece and Rome, dating back thousands of years. Carved idols with large eye shapes at the top, dating back to over 3,500 BC, have been found in Tell Brak, Syria. Judaism, Christianity, Hinduism, Buddhism, and Islam all have symbolism that references the evil eye in some way.

### **The Power of the Eyes**

Psychoanalyst Barbara Wharton has explored the eyes and looking, particularly in the therapy session. She wrote:

Our eyes seem to be both powerful and subtle instruments of expression and communication. They can attack or repel; they can appeal or invite; they can convey warmth or coldness, love or hate. (Wharton, 1993, p. 78)

She returns us to the presence of the evil eye as an “extreme development of the idea of a malevolent power exerted by the eye” (Wharton, 1993, p. 77) noting that we speak of ‘black looks’, ‘looking daggers’, and ‘if looks could kill’. Wharton (1993) also quotes the biblical reference, “Mine enemy sharpeneth his eyes upon me” (Job 16:9, p. 77) suggesting perhaps the murderous capability of a look or the murderous intent that might be conveyed in a look. “To put the eye on someone”, Wharton observed, “is a most dreaded fate in some primitive cultures”; binding a person “by a malignant spell from which there is no escape” (p. 77). In Wharton’s thinking, the fear of being envied plays out as a fear of the evil eye, where this is “often a projection of acting envying” (p. 77). In other words, one might imagine oneself as envied, rather than recognising (and admitting) our envy of others.

### **A Word About Envy**

Envy is one of the seven deadly sins, which is perhaps why we are so loathe to admit our envy, as Wharton suggested. It is interesting to note that the word ‘envy’ has its roots in the proto-Indo-European (PIE) *in-* meaning into, and *videre-* to see, giving us the Latin *Invidia*. Meaning to regard maliciously or begrudge, the word becomes *envie* in Old French. Quite literally there is an invasive sense of this *seeing-into*, or *into-seeing*. There is perhaps a ‘seeing into’ someone begrudgingly or with malice, potentially causing lasting harm to the recipient of the gaze. Perhaps this seeing-into, or into-seeing, conveys something in the looking which is transferred to the person being looked at. Whilst we might admire and appreciate with our looking, might we also covet and envy? In psychoanalytic thought, Klein proposed that envy is the feeling of anger that arises when someone else has something enjoyable. In noticing their enjoyment and pleasure, our envy is the desire to take that thing from the other person, presumably to have it for ourselves, or to spoil it such that they can no longer enjoy it (Bott-Spiilius et al., 2011). The biblical story of Cain and Abel attests to the murderous intent in envy.

These ideas suggest a time when we might look at what someone had (much needed resources for example) and potentially kill for it. Before we learned a more ‘civilized’ response, looks really could kill. If we have evolved to look to faces for information about our world, to study the eyes of those in our tribe or family group, then it would make sense that looking is connected with survival needs. Looking at what is determined desirable by our tribe then becomes a powerful influence on our behaviour.

## **Folklore of Looking**

There are several myths and biblical stories that further the notion that looking can be dangerous, underscoring the taboos and costs associated with looking. Orpheus looks back when it has been expressly forbidden, losing his beloved Eurydice. Psyche loses Eros after looking upon him at night despite being warned not to do so. Despite warnings to the contrary, and such high stakes, neither Orpheus nor Psyche can resist looking. There is something they *must* see, or know, for themselves. We use expressions such as “seeing is believing”, “I’d have to see it to believe it”, or we might perhaps express the need to “see it with one’s own eyes”. Knowing is so important, “seeing it for oneself” becomes an urgent need. This need to know compels Orpheus and Psyche to look upon their loved ones, even though they know this will result in them losing that which is most precious.

Throughout myth, legend and biblical allegory there are ‘lessons’ warning about the potential pitfalls of looking, at other and at self. Looking can be costly as with Orpheus and Psyche, but looking can also be fatal. Looking upon the gorgon Medusa results in being turned to stone, but Medusa herself was cursed with such terrible power in part because of her vanity (she was reported to have once been incredibly beautiful) and in part because of Athena’s envy of Medusa’s looks. We also meet Narcissus who, so beguiled by his own reflection, is condemned to fade away. In the bible, Lot’s wife disobeys God’s command and looks back toward the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah and is turned to a pillar of salt as punishment.

There are cultures wherein looking (and eye-contact) is considered rude and socially unacceptable. These cultures tend to avoid direct eye contact as a sign of politeness and respect; for example, Japanese culture and some Middle Eastern cultures. The ‘punishment’ for looking is not death, but perhaps a social death of sorts since direct eye contact is considered rude, even hostile.

The enduring prevalence of the symbolism of the evil eye as well as the references to looking in texts such as the Bible, folk tales and myth speaks to the importance of the phenomenon of looking woven throughout. The paucity of academic literature on the phenomenon speaks to the difficulty in articulating something about the experience of looking and being looked at. Reflecting on the meanings of looking and being looked at, I jotted down some associations in my process journal. These became the poem that follows:

### **(on) looking**

If looks can kill  
maybe they can do other things  
like say a thousand words  
or convey a caress.  
Maybe a look can threaten,  
seduce, undress.  
Perhaps a look can be tender,  
hateful,  
charm or disarm.  
A warning,  
Look out!  
Affirming, looking good!

I can look you up,  
I can wither you, make you squirm  
I can make you feel  
special  
                  invisible  
                          ugly  
                                  uncomfortable,  
crawl out of your own skin

Good looking,  
so refined,  
wouldn't you like to know  
what's going on in my mind?  
Hey gorgeous,  
hey, doll,  
come on now,  
don't be shy.

Look at me!  
Look me over.  
Look me up  
and down.  
Or not.  
Maybe I don't want to be looked over,  
maybe I don't want to be overlooked  
Looks tricky,  
how do I look?  
I can look alive, sharp, here,  
a looking-good-on-looker,  
looking at me,  
looking at you,  
kid.

### **Looking in Psychotherapy**

The treatment of the subject area within the field of psychotherapy has tended to focus on the developmental and the complications or issues that can arise when 'normal' or optimal looking and/or being looked at goes awry. The importance of looking features in the work of several key theorists; for example, Kohut and Goldberg (1984) suggested that mirroring is an important provision for the developing child, where mirroring is the child's experience of being

“the gleam in the [parent]’s eye”, facilitating self-esteem (Kohut, 1971/2009, p. 117). I have taken the liberty of replacing Kohut’s ‘mother’ with parent. Lacan (1953) described a ‘mirror stage’, beginning around 6 months, with the infant’s developing capacity to recognise themselves in a mirror. In his later work, Lacan developed this idea so that the mirror stage came to represent the development of subjectivity. There is not the space here for a full exploration of Lacan’s work; however, it is worth noting that as he progressed his thinking, the importance of the mirror stage shifted from a developmental moment in the child’s mental development to more of a focus on how it constituted something essential about the child’s relationship with body image (Lacan, 1953).

### ***Schaulust***

In writing about looking, Freud (1905/1974) used the German word *Schaulust* which can be translated as curiosity, an insatiable curiosity, voyeuristic pleasure, or as visual desire. The German *-lust* translates as something much more closely connected with our Anglo understandings of lust, but to have lust (*Lust haben*) can also mean to feel like doing something (*ich habe Lust, diesen Film zu sehen*; I feel like watching this film) (Watt-Smith, 2014). *Schau* comes from the German *schauen*, to see; whilst *die Schau* is a show. The *schau* or *Schau* in *Schaulust* has the quality of pleasure in both looking and being looked at, in looking and being a show. Greek terminology was in fashion at the time Freud’s work was being translated into English and so we originally had the term *scoptophilia*, later changed to *scopophilia*, intended to indicate pleasure in looking. The correct Greek *-scope* indicates an instrument for examining, looking, at or seeing. The translation does not quite capture the combination of sexual desire/lust and curious looking/contemplating that *Schaulust* suggests in German (Bettleheim, 1983), and which Freud felt was related to the development of the forming personality and to sexuality, and in defining a perversion of looking.

Freud was also writing at a time when there was some outrage in educated German society about the *Völkerschau* (‘people shows’) happening in England. These involved an exploitative use of ‘primitive’ people who were displayed for the entertainment of the public. Freud was making a distinction between the studious, perhaps scientific, looking of the educated (German) observer and the “visceral, overexcited pleasures of boisterous, uneducated, and working class audiences” (Watt-Smith, 2014, p. 24). *Schaulust*, then, conjures a sense of curiosity that perhaps goes against our better judgment, where we are compelled to look, a sort of rubber-necking. We ‘ought’ to look away, like civilised people, but cannot drag our eyes away from *die Schau*. In this sense, *Schaulust* points toward looking as related to desire, a sense of hunger for, or a devouring of, that which is consumed by/through our looking.

## **Looking at the Therapist**

Catherine King (2016) explored clients' associations with therapist appearance in her doctoral studies. Her findings include a discussion of the ways through which clients use the therapist's appearance to establish safety, trust and a sense of belonging in the therapeutic relationship. She also explores how therapist appearance can be experienced as jarring, creating ruptures and disconnection. Clearly, clients look at and are impacted by their therapist's appearance, and it can impact the therapeutic relationship.

Freud (1913) rather famously said he used a couch because he could not put up with being stared at by other people for eight hours a day or more. His daughter, Anna Freud, said that her father was not fond of his looks and did not like to be photographed (Lieberman, 2000) which perhaps explains Freud's sensitivity to being looked at. Writer and psychoanalyst, Nancy McWilliams (personal communication) commented she felt similarly, sometimes using the couch for a reprieve from clients' looking. As psychotherapists we look at (and listen to) our clients, but they also look at us and this scrutiny might become wearing for some. An experienced psychoanalytic psychotherapist colleague commented that not being subjected to a particular client's looking enabled her to feel free to think in a way that might not be available if the client was face-to-face. This suggests that we impact each other with our looking.

## **Looking in Therapy**

Lieberman (2000) explored looking and being looked at and its clinical relevance in psychotherapy. She commented on the paucity of literature on the matter of looking and being looked at:

Our culture's emphasis on having lean and muscular bodies as representing perfection, and the promotion by the media of such ideals, have had a significant impact on all our patients and ourselves as well. Despite the prevalence in clinical practice of such issues, few studies exist in the literature on the role of looking and being looked at, or about patients' feelings about their own looks or others' looks. (Lieberman, 2000, p. viii)

The focus of Lieberman's writing is her experience and meaning-making related to her clinical work. She offers insights into the development of positive and negative feelings about the body as they arise from "experiences of being looked at by others and by one's own experiences of looking" (Lieberman, 2000, p. 6).

## Feminism and Looking

**Men and women**<sup>9</sup>  
Men act and  
women appear  
men look at women and  
women watch themselves  
being looked at  
It's better to be looked at than overlooked

The found poem above is drawn from literature (Berger, 1972; Blood, 2005) that caught my attention whilst I was writing the proposal for this research and formulating a research question. Each says something very definite about looking, and both appear to take a more critical feminist approach to women's looking and being looked at.

*Ways of Seeing* (Berger, 1972) was one of the books that claimed my attention early in the searching process. Berger was an art critic and a radical. Prior to writing *Ways of Seeing*, he had been interested in Marxist theory and ideas about exploitation (by men/of women) in art can be read in his writing. Central to the book is the idea that "seeing comes before words. The child looks and recognizes before it can speak" (Berger, 1972, p. 7). In art, according to Berger (1972), we perceive men's power as inherent in their body's ability to 'do' something. This is their presence or "promise of presence" (p. 45). The sense of a man's presence depends on "what he is capable of doing to you or for you" (p. 46). The power, or potential power, Berger is alluding to might be "moral, physical, temperamental, economic, social, sexual" (p. 46), but is always exterior to the man himself. Berger's point is that since those making the art were male, typically the art reflected and reinforced societal values of the time, in this case women's social (and perhaps physical/mental) inferiority. In contrast to how men are (re)presented throughout art history, Berger explained:

a woman's presence expresses her own attitude to herself, and defines what can and cannot be done to her. Her presence is manifest in her gestures, voice, opinions, expressions, clothes, chosen surroundings taste - indeed there is nothing she can do which does not contribute to her presence. (p. 46)

### Spectator-Owner/Object

For Berger, and many critical feminist thinkers to follow, such as Laura Mulvey (1975), ideas about men's presence and women's presence and what is conveyed through looking are important because who looks and who is looked at is about power. Despite its age, and despite its being specific to the world of fine art, Berger's ideas resonated with me. Statements

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<sup>9</sup> Found poem drawn from Berger (1972) and Blood (2005)

such as “presence for a woman is so intrinsic to her person that men tend to think of it as an almost physical emanation, a kind of heat or smell or aura” (Berger, 1972, p. 46) prompt me to ask, which men, John? Heterosexual men, presumably. But Berger is making the point that in art, throughout history, women are depicted in a very different way from men. He suggested that in any painting featuring a nude female we supplant, in our minds, a nude male and notice “the violence which that transformation does” (Berger, 1972, p. 64). According to Berger (1972), the inequality of this relationship, *spectator-owner/object* is embedded deeply in women’s unconscious and, I would argue, in society’s unconscious, such that “women do to themselves what men do to them” (p. 63); that is, we survey our femininity, monitoring the ways in which we appear or how we look to others.

Berger’s writing is old and has been critiqued (e.g., Ettinger, 1995) and by Berger himself, who would later say it was rushed and crude (Sperling, 2018), but it speaks to my experience of the world. It speaks to something of what I ‘learned’ about my world, growing up on display. It helps me understand something of my own experience. I grew up learning that how I appeared and looked mattered, because I had an audience, a predominantly male audience. Berger (1972) wrote that women have been born into a social position that is effectively a confined and limited space, “into the keeping of men” (p. 46). He argued that a woman’s social position depends on her ability to capitalise on this, and that her social presence (synonymous with power for Berger) “has developed as a result of [her] ingenuity in living under such tutelage within such a limited space” (Berger, 1972, p. 46). His writing speaks to some of my experiences of being looked at by men.

Berger (1972) continued:

She has to survey everything she is and everything she does because how she appears to others, and ultimately how she appears to men, is of crucial importance for what is normally thought of as the success of her life. Her own sense of being in herself is supplanted by a sense of being appreciated as herself by another... Men survey women before treating them. Consequently how a woman appears to a man can determine how she will be treated. To acquire some control over this process, women must contain it and interiorize it. (p. 46)

The idea that men look at women, and that women watch themselves being looked at, is important in terms of *this* research project because it captures something integral to *my* experience of the world. It forms a central prejudice through which my world is filtered; a part of my horizon. According to Berger (1972) this premise underpins most relations between the sexes (speaking *heterosexually*) “but also”, crucially, “the relation of women to themselves” (p. 47), because for Berger the part that watches from inside women is male, she has internalised

an onlooker, either appreciative or critical, and he is male, whereas she is the looked at, the surveyed. Berger wrote, “the surveyor of women in herself is male: the surveyed female. Thus she turns herself into an object - and most particularly an object of vision: as sight” (p. 47). When I discussed this with a friend who is lesbian, we spoke at length about both looking and being looked at. I was curious about her experiences in relation to Berger’s ideas. Was she too subject to this surveillance of herself? I mentioned my not shaving my legs for 18 months, and she nodded vigorously in agreement, “oh, I never shave my legs” she said, “unless I’m going to the beach”. My mind did a cartoon ‘double take’, *wait, what?* When we tried to unpack this statement, all she was able to say was that it related to her concerns about other people looking and what they might think of her unshaved legs. It did not appear to matter who was looking, be they male or female, but the idea that people were looking, and would make judgments about her body hair, was sufficient to prompt her to do something she “never” usually does. It becomes more difficult to dismiss Berger’s writing with ideas about a more critical feminist resistance. One cannot simply write his conclusions off as hetero-centric. Women find ways to resist objectification (see for example, Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997); however, there appear to be ways in which women’s experiences of looking and being looked at defy critical thinking. As potent as my feminism is, I also shave my legs when they are uncovered for summer.

### **Constructing Body Image**

Body image, a term first coined by psychoanalyst Paul Schilder (1950), refers to how a person perceives their own body in terms of its aesthetics or sexual attractiveness and how this relates to what is valued within a particular culture or society. Several fields of study, for example psychiatry, women’s studies, psychology and medicine, use the term body image with some consensus as to an exact definition. Body image is a broad term encompassing how one views one’s own body in the mirror, as well as in one’s mind. It includes our sense of our body over time, both in terms of our physical experience of our body and mentally, such as our memories of or thoughts about our body, and attitudes towards it in terms of shape, looks, weight, height and so on (National Eating Disorders Association, 2018). The concept of body image is important with regard to this research project because it relates to how a person looks at themselves, and how they look at others around them. It seems likely that body image is internalised through looking at those around us (Dittmar & Howard, 2004).

Sylvia Blood’s (2005) feminist work focuses on a critical analysis of the ‘discourse’ around body image disturbance as a phenomenon in experimental psychology. She described a client, Anita, who despite facing significant problems such as possible redundancy, an unwell, elderly

mother and a difficult teenage son, spends her session agonising over her body, which she hates and is deeply ashamed of. Losing 14lbs (approximately 6kgs) would, she tells Blood, make her feel better. Anita focuses on something that she believes she has (more) control over, her body, rather than facing the other issues in her life. Perhaps this sort of belief gains momentum from the Western ideal of working hard to wrestle the body under control as an important element of life-work. “Thinner bodies are defined as morally, medically, aesthetically, and sexually desirable” (Saguy & Ward, 2011, p. 54). There is a comforting synonymy at work whereby control over body equals control over life. It may be that this is not only a felt sense in those striving, but also something which can then be ‘seen’ by the outside world and can then affirm one’s success. The shadow side can be seen playing out in the vilification of fat people (Saguy & Ward, 2011).

Blood (2005) argued we have accepted this “disturbing vocabulary and narrative” which is presented to us as “the truth about women’s body image” (p. 1). Blood’s analysis centres on the assumption that the ‘problem’ with women is not that they have ‘faulty’ body image, but that much experimental psychology research assumes a split between society and the individual. Women’s ‘vulnerable minds’ are influenced by ‘society’, some women being more vulnerable than others. Thus, the body image (disturbance) discourse means women are in a double-bind. They are blamed by a society that assumes they are not strong enough to resist and “accept their bodies as they really are” (p. 2). However, they also blame themselves. Women, says Blood, end up with an understanding of their painful feelings about their bodies as either a perceptual problem (they are unable to see their bodies accurately) or a thinking problem (they have unrealistic expectations about their bodies, or their beliefs about their bodies are distorted). This ‘effect’ is produced, in part, by practices of objectification within the discourse around body image and body image disturbance. Through discourse analysis Blood offers an alternative view. She considered women and their experiences of embodiment whilst recognising that she offers *a* truth, and that this in turn will be critiqued. Dissatisfied with current explanations and understandings of body image, Blood highlighted how language can define but also constitute an issue, determining the way we see and understand that issue. Blood references experience, but her analysis is not phenomenological. She is interested in a critical analysis of the dominant discourses around body image, particularly the idea of body image disturbance. Like Berger’s writing, Blood’s work drew me in. These two pieces of writing were my first encounter with a beginning understanding of why I might feel the way I did about my body, both in terms of looking at myself and being looked at. There is something inherently comforting about a theory on which to hang one’s experiences, but it does not describe experience *per se*.

## The Politics of Looking

Critical feminist film theory, such as Laura Mulvey's (1975) work, articulated the cinematic 'male gaze'. Like Berger, she was highlighting something about power—about who looks, who acts, and who is passive, merely looked at. Mulvey used Freud's idea of scopophilia to describe how the camera (cinematic looking) represents men's looking and the objectification of women. She suggested women as image and men as bearer of the look. The active male takes pleasure in looking and women more passively have pleasure in being looked at. She wrote, "women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote to-be-looked-at-ness" (Mulvey, 1975, p. 9). Using *Schaulust*, rather than scopophilia, there is a sense of women's image as there to be consumed, greedily devoured. Like Berger's (1972) comment about the surveyor-owner/object, so often directors and writers (particularly at the time of Mulvey's writing) are male. This remains an issue today. For Mulvey, women appear for male pleasure and when women look, it is with this male gaze that they have internalised.

Feminist theory has evolved considerably since the 1970s. For example, we might now argue that there is no longer a unifying feminist theory/critique that speaks on behalf of all women (Thornham, 1999); but I found myself returning to Berger's and Blood's writing in the initial stages of this project. They distil *something* of an experience of looking and being looked at that is reflective of my own personal experience (Berger) and my clinical experience (Blood). At the same time, these are ideas that continue to permeate more current literature on body image, objectification, gendered differences around expectations in terms of appearance and so on (e.g., Anixiadis et al., 2019; Betz et al., 2019; Nagar & Virk, 2017).

French feminist filmmaker Agnès Varda said that "to look *as* a woman is an embodied political act" (Ince, 2013, p. 613). She also said:

the first feminist act is to say, right, OK, I'm being looked at, but I'm looking too...  
it is the act of deciding to look, and that the world is defined by how I look and not  
how I'm looked at. (Ince, 2013 p. 613)

Ince concluded that Varda consistently privileged "looking and embodiment, and living her woman's body as 'the agent and agency of intentionality'" (Sobchack, 1992, p. 73, cited in Ince, 2013, p. 613). I enjoy Varda's boldness. It appeals to a cognitive attempt at understanding the issue, offering one potential (political and radical) rebuttal to the experience of looking and being looked at; yet, it does not align with my experience and to the phenomenon as a whole. I am reminded of a client who 'knows' she should have a 'better', more body-positive, approach yet hates her body. She feels she should be a better feminist but cannot shake the

feeling that her body's inadequacies are somehow responsible for the current state of her life and low mood. In a way, she is like Blood's client, Anita, who despite her life being in disarray, remains convinced that losing a few pounds would resolve her housing crisis, impending redundancy and aging, unwell mother (Blood, 2005). Gaps appear between what most women know (losing weight will not defer a job loss or ease the pain of losing a parent) and their experience, and behaviour; thus the diet industry continues to thrive. What is experienced in this gap? What is the experience of knowing, as Varda suggested, that a woman can empower herself and still feel insecure? That she might flout being looked at. That she can live her body with agency and with intentionality and yet still be reduced to hating that same body through looking at photoshopped images of other women. This is something of the phenomenon this research attempts to uncover.

### **Embodiment and Women's Bodies**

I read widely in anticipation of and throughout this project, particularly in the early stages of establishing the research question. Since the body is (largely) what is looked at, and the site of looking, it is difficult to get away from the body. Some important writers whose work resonates closely with the phenomenon are perhaps notable in their absence. I would like to acknowledge the important thinking and writing of Christine Battersby, particularly *The Phenomenal Woman* (1998). Also of note are Iris Marion Young's *Throwing Like a Girl* (1980) and Luce Irigaray's *The Invisible of the Flesh* (1993). Embodiment theory proposes that bodily experience is integral to how one understands and relates to one's experience of the world. Indeed, as these writers highlight so well, matters of embodiment may determine one's experience of the world. That is, a woman's bodily experience largely differs from a man's, biologically (and broadly) speaking. The work of Battersby, Young and Irigaray demands a shift of subjectivity from the Cartesian, disembodied mind to an embodied and fleshy female self, capable of menstruation, pregnancy, birth, lactation and so on. This shift is important in terms of a feminist critique of current (often predominantly Westernized) philosophical thought and in particular understandings of subjectivity. It is also important in terms of what are considered valid ways of knowing (Belenky et al, 1986), however, this thesis is not holding a critical feminist lens but rather a hermeneutic phenomenological poetic one. Therefore, other than this mention I have chosen not to explore in detail the work of these exceptional thinkers in the literature review, not because they do not offer an incredibly important reconsideration of subjectivity, not because they do not offer a vital explanation for women's experience, but rather because they do not tell me what that experience is *like*. Incorporating these thinkers would be a different thesis.

Following Denzin (1989), I am mindful that there is a risk that the qualitative researcher has access to understandings that the participant does not have about herself. As I try to stay *experience-near* (Kohut, 2010) I acknowledge I have perhaps sacrificed a more integrated understanding, however, despite my keen interest in the theories offered by the likes of Battersby, Young, Irigaray and the many such writers whom I admire, I found they offered me understandings of *why* women might experience the world in a particular way, rather than understandings of *what that experience is like*. This is perhaps the difference between epistemology and ontology, understanding and being. I trust that my colleagues and peers will see this decision not as one that undermines my position as a feminist scholar, but rather as a methodological commitment to staying experience-near (Kohut, 2010) and to try to convey something of the phenomenon, rather than offer a critical explanation for that phenomenon. Unlike Irigaray I do not see sexual difference as *the* issue in our time, but difference. In not taking up a post-modern, critical feminist lens I am mindful of Susie Orbach's (2016) point that such a fragmented post-modern world needs some nourishing and knitting back together. I trust that elsewhere (for example chapter 1) I have adequately defined my feminism as it relates to my prejudice and subjectivity, both of which Gadamer helps with in terms of a consideration of my situatedness. In this regard I have also tried to identify my sense of a feminist research ethic (chapter 1), which has guided this research.

### **Chapter Summary**

In this chapter I have provided the rationale for a hermeneutic phenomenological re-viewing of the literature, describing the context of the study that situates me, as researcher and my understandings, as a psychotherapist and feminist. In order to stimulate thinking I have touched on a range of viewpoints from which the topic of looking and being looked at might be considered, offering developmental, historical, cultural, mythic and feminist perspectives. The next chapter provides a re-viewing which explores examples from the literature and other media sources that pertain more specifically to women's experiences of looking and being looked at.

### 3. RE-VIEWING WOMEN'S EXPERIENCE

In this chapter I present a more in-depth exploration of literature that relates to women's experiences of looking and being looked at. Whereas the previous literature review chapter provided a broad overview of looking, this chapter draws on a range of literary sources such as fiction, film, podcasts and popular media articles, as well as academic literature to reveal possible aspects of women's experiences of looking (at self and others) and being looked at.

#### **First Impressions Count**

This adage suggests that looks are important. There is plentiful evidence from the field of social psychology supporting the idea that first impressions count. Research findings suggest that humans make judgments based on appearance (Aronson et al., 2007; Bar et al., 2006), that we make these decisions very rapidly (Aronson et al., 2007; Bar et al., 2006; Naumann et al., 2009), and that we are reasonably accurate depending on what we are asked to assess (Bar et al., 2006; Biesanz et al., 2011; Hall et al., 2008). Biesanz and colleagues' (2011) research focused on accuracy of impressions as formed over 3 minutes of interaction with the other person. However, there is some research suggesting that we can make accurate decisions or assessments (or judgments) in as little as 39 milliseconds when the information we are being asked to judge is about an emotional state that might be perceived as a threat (e.g., anger) (Bar et al., 2006). When similar assessments were sought around personality traits, such as intelligence, the first impressions were found to be less accurate. This is important because it gives credence to the idea that human beings look at each other, and that the thoughts we form in response to the sense impressions from our looking impacts our behaviour, perhaps even how we treat other human beings. It follows then that how we present ourselves (and how we might be looked at) has a potentially important impact on others' judgment, and possibly their treatment of us.

#### **Women Have to Care About Their Looks**

Marcia Reynold's (2011) blog, *Wander woman: Guidance for the goal driven woman*, is featured on the Psychology Today website ([www.psychologytoday.com](http://www.psychologytoday.com)). Her post '*Why women have to care about their looks*', has the subtitle, '*Appearance is critical to happiness and success*'. I found myself agreeing with Reynolds' observation, despite the fact that her article appears more as advice on 'how-to-play-the-game' than critical reflection on the status quo. Reynolds offers some of her own experiences, in terms of looking at herself and how she wants to be perceived or looked at. She also comments on societal expectations of how

women *should* look if they want to “realize a comfortable level of success and self-sufficiency” (n.p.).

She reflected that women are “under too much pressure to look like the images of perfect women the media bombards us with every day” (n.p.); then adds, “[b]ut I don't agree with the philosophy that I should love what I see in the mirror especially when I am a bit on the heavy side and the skin around my eyes is computer-screen dry” (n.p.). Reynolds suggests any woman who wants to achieve a certain level of success should care about how she looks.

Reynolds said the “visual impact” she has is part of her brand. She describes how she worked with a perception consultant:

After cleaning out my closet and redoing my hair, make-up and wardrobe, I realized who I thought I was out in the world – a global leadership expert – was not represented in how I looked...before working with [the perception consultant] people [would] tell me they were surprised how wise I was... Why were they surprised? When I look at my past videos and pictures, I realized I wasn't looking wise and successful in my appearance... I changed my hairstyle, my clothes and my make-up. Then after seeing myself in the mirror, the pride I felt changed my posture and my stride. (Reynolds, 2011, n.p.)

Reynolds felt her looks did not match the impression she wanted others to have. Changing her look, with the help of a perception consultant, appears to have helped her achieve greater congruence between the impression she wanted to make and how others were likely to perceive her. These changes also impacted how she felt about herself, altering her sense of her posture and stride.

### **Looking to Survive**

Reynolds presents an interesting tension. She thinks women are under too much pressure to look ‘perfect’. She does not believe plastic surgery or extreme diets are advisable; nor does she advocate for loving or accepting yourself as you are. Instead, she highlights certain gendered expectations around appearance for women. Reynolds quotes US Newsweek columnist Jessica Bennett, “[i]n this economy looking good isn't just vanity, it's economic survival”. Perhaps Reynolds intends this to apply to men as well, but her writing is targeted at women. I found Reynolds' writing paradoxical. “When you look good on the outside, you feel good on the inside” (n.p.). She advocates for women caring about what they look like in order to feel good, but also in order to gain social standing and be taken seriously. Do not alter your appearance so your friends do not recognise you, she suggests, but overhauling your

wardrobe, hair and make-up is OK, and Botox is your choice. Whilst Reynolds would like these standards to change, she is not hopeful:

I'd love to wave a magic wand and make wrinkles a sign of special beauty and a little layer of fat a sign of abundance. I don't see that happening in the world I work in during my lifetime. We live and work in a world where people judge your value in seconds or less. (Reynolds, 2011, n.p.)

Reynolds' writing highlights her experiences of looking and being looked at, and of navigating a world where how one looks is so important. Westernized women can perhaps relate to the paradox Reynolds' presents. Like the client who tells me she knows she should not worry about how her body looks because "every body is beautiful", then adds that she knows "that's just positive psychology bullshit". Women are subject to a bombardment of "the supersized, digitally enhanced images of airbrushed and Photoshopped individuals which penetrate our public and private spaces" (Orbach, 2016, p. 136). At the same time, women are urged to embrace and accept themselves as they are in order to cultivate emotional and psychological wellbeing.

### **Looking in the Mirror**

How Reynolds sees herself in the mirror changes dramatically and in positive ways. Yet, looking in the mirror is not always free of difficulty. Berger (1972) wrote:

You painted a naked woman because you enjoyed looking at her, put a mirror in her hand and you called the painting "Vanity," thus morally condemning the woman whose nakedness you had depicted for your own pleasure. (p. 51)

The (male) artist can look at a woman, enjoy and paint her, but a more negative judgment is cast on the woman's looking at herself. Berger is drawing attention to how we read the language of images revealing thinking that is hermeneutic. We do not simply 'look' but are influenced by the meanings we make about what we are looking at. Berger is exposing a bind, like the one to which Reynolds' alluded. Women must care about their appearance but must take equal care not to be seen to be vain.

The mirror in art history, according to Berger (1972), was often used "as a symbol of the vanity of woman" (p. 51). She is caught in the act of looking at herself. This reminded me of the following passage by Susan Brownmiller (1984):

At what age does a girl child begin to review her assets and count her deficient parts? When does she close the bedroom door and begin to gaze privately into the mirror at contortionist angles to get a view from the rear, the left profile, the

right... making a mental note of what needs to be worked on... When is she allowed to forget that her anatomy is being monitored by others? (p. 25)

I wonder how many women are told they are vain for looking in the mirror. Does there come a point when women stop enjoying looking at their bodies becoming more critical instead? At what age or stage does one develop the self-consciousness which moves looking from a sense of joy and curiosity to a more critical, judgmental viewing?

### **Reflecting on the Reflection**

I imagine there is a special moment when infants first discover their reflection (see for example Lacan's early exposition of the Mirror Stage, 1953). This discovery—both a wonder and a delight—of a magical companion, our reflection, who appears before us, whom we see with no critique but can just marvel at and behold. The idea that I almost certainly at some point viewed my body with wonder, awe and delight is utterly foreign to me. That is something I find gravely saddening. I was reminded of the pervasiveness amongst women of such experiences when, in the midst of writing this chapter, a potential new client told me over the phone that her eating disorder began with her standing in front of the mirror making a mental note of how her body needed to be changed. More than three decades separates Brownmiller's (1984) 'mirror girl' and this client's phone call; yet, the similarities are undeniable. The client says she tells herself she is "stronger than this". She tells me she reminds herself, "you're better than this, you love your body". She feels she *should* be more accepting of herself, and she would, if only she was thinner/prettier/younger/slimmer and so on. Becker and colleagues' (2002; 2006) research described the impact of the arrival of television to Fiji. Within just 3 years of the introduction of television to the island community nearly 12% of teenage girls had adopted bulimic behaviours such as purging in order to change their bodies to become more reflective of the images they were now seeing. This research says something about the power of what we look at and how it shapes us, how we then want to appear. This makes me wonder about the forces at work here. What drives women to want to make such radical changes in how they look (appear) based on what is looked at?

### **Mirror, Mirror**

Wells (2009) asked '*Body image: What's the first thing you see when you look in the mirror?*' The article is a collection of comments collated by Wells. Ten women share what they love and struggle with as they look at themselves in the mirror. Two of the commentators appear to be 'regular' women, most seem to be from those involved in the fitness, health, or beauty industries, including a body image blogger, the global ambassador for a well-known beauty

brand's 'Self-Esteem Fund', and the first female winner of the 2008 US reality weight loss television show, *The Biggest Loser*. I wrote the following poem after dwelling with the collated comments:

**The first thing I see is**

My belly, I still have this little belly  
my smile, put your smile on first  
pants on last, advice my mum gave me  
wrinkles starting to peek through  
my clear skin  
too big thighs  
my butt  
a woman  
my shoulders, kind of broad, but strong  
a razor-sharp jaw and uneven skin tone  
my new grey hairs  
my eyes...then my collarbone.  
The first bone I saw when I lost weight  
a woman who is never quite pretty or good enough  
I cringe at the flab on my arms  
I was obsessed  
this is just how my body is made  
my inner thighs touch  
the twinkle in my eye  
my husband thinks the grey is sexy  
I try not to let the bad overshadow the good  
the stretch marks behind my knees  
I take time now to notice the small changes  
I'll never have a six pack  
unless I starve myself  
I like what I see in the mirror  
I respect my body  
I feel beautiful  
I have a little belly. So what?  
I'm beginning to accept myself,  
imperfect, curvy, beautiful woman  
I see the years of perseverance and drive  
I see a sexy, sacred, self-loving woman on a journey  
I cringe at the flab on my arms.

What surprised me in writing this poem was the way the women's voices 'blended' together. It is an almost seamless narrative, a multi-voiced chorus of 'I'. Is this because the women who participated were given a particular brief, answering the same question(s) similarly? Or because most are involved in fitness, health and beauty? Is it because they are involved in writing about topics such as self-esteem and body image? Or because they share a similar outlook and approach to their bodies? Perhaps these women appear to share an outlook because they share certain experiences as they struggle to balance the positive with the negative as they look at themselves in the mirror. The contradictions within the poem seem to share a commonality with Reynolds' (2011) writing.

## Managing Impressions

The punishment for transgressing gendered expectations relating to appearance can be harsh. Jessica Bennett's previous comment about economic survival may seem hyperbole but is actually reflected in the research. Rosanna Guadagno and Robert Cialdini (2007) suggested that some of the 'glass ceiling' effect (e.g., where women find it difficult to progress in a company beyond a certain level) can be attributed to impression management tactics. In sociology, impression management describes the conscious and unconscious processes by which people attempt to influence others' perceptions through regulating and controlling information as part of a social interaction (Goffman, 1959). Such tactics involve the ways in which we put ourselves forward to the world and the impression we project; for example, wearing a new suit to a job interview. The theory of impression management, often used interchangeably with self-presentation theory, suggests that people have the desire to control the impressions that others form of them (Goffman, 1959). Research suggests that this extends into the digital realm (Belk, 2013). Men and women use different, socially conditioned, impression management tactics in accordance with social and gender roles (Eagly, 1987).

Transgression of these tactics by women, through self-promotion or aggressive, even assertive, behaviour towards colleagues is regarded negatively. However, the expression of these behaviours by men is socially acceptable and, therefore, positively correlated with advancement and success in the workplace (Guadagno & Cialdini, 2007). If we extend the idea of impression management from behaviour to appearance then it is not too much of a leap to imagine that women are expected to look or appear a certain way, as well as to behave in certain ways. In a recent study looking at the use of open plan office space Rachel Morrison and Roy Smollan (2020) found that there was a gendered difference in terms of experiences of feeling observed. Female employees reported feeling observed more than their male colleagues did. Alison Hirst and Christina Schwabenland (2018) noted similar observations: When working in an open-plan office environment some women felt uncomfortable with the "constant male gaze" (p. 170). A respondent in their study commented, "there isn't anywhere that you don't feel watched" (Hirst & Schwabenland, 2018, p. 170). Other women interviewed said that they had felt pressure to change their wardrobe, some spending a lot of money on clothing, perhaps responding to the pressure Reynolds (2011) described. One of the researchers (Hirst) observed "...men watching women walk through the long, uninterrupted spaces of the building, sometimes appearing to struggle between their wish not to appear rude and their wish to watch the woman" (p. 171). Perhaps Hirst is noticing the male gaze that

Mulvey defined (1975) but she also noticed a conflict in the men who are looking. She notices both their wish to watch and their not wanting to appear rude.

Despite it not being their main focus, the work of Hirst and Schwabenland (2018) and Morrison and Smollan (2020) shows something of women's experiences of being looked at. Certainly, they seem to be describing, in line with Berger's (1972) comments, the ways in which women 'survey' (responding by dressing or appearing accordingly) and are surveyed (feelings of being watched). These two studies both show how women might experience their looked at-ness, and how this could link to "the success of her own life" (Berger, 1972, p. 46). Reynolds' (2011) account suggests something similar. Women need to manage how they look (how they appear) in order to be successful and be taken seriously.

### **On Not Looking as we Should**

In her one-woman show, *Nanette*, Hannah Gadsby provides a harrowing, personal account of being brutally assaulted by a man. As a queer woman she did not look/appear sufficiently like a woman, and her attacker saw this as reason enough to physically attack her (Gadsby, 2018). Gadsby (2018) is clear, this was not a homophobic attack but a gendered attack, "if I'd have been feminine that would not have happened... being different is dangerous" she concludes. Her moving description shows something of the way in which "how a woman appears to a man can determine how she will be treated" (Berger, 1972, p. 46). Similarly, Guadagno and Cialdini's (2007) research points to the link between 'appearance', how one appears, looks and acts, and how one is treated. There are particular consequences for women transgressing these gendered social norms. What is less clear from Guadagno and Cialdini's research is whether it is an awareness of *being looked at by men* that compels women to conform to these 'norms' (spend money on a new wardrobe, behave less assertively with colleagues), or whether there might also be pressure from other women, something that Reynolds' (2011) writing seems to indicate.

My research explores these nuances in more detail. In what ways are women aware of the impact of these expectations? How is that felt? If there is pressure where do women feel it coming from? What is it like to meet and/or fail to meet societal expectations? Guadagno and Cialdini (2007) argued that there are consequences for violating gendered expectations around behavioural norms. I suspect that transgression of appearance expectations is also discouraged and can provoke potentially serious consequences. Hannah Gadsby's account suggests this is not overstatement.

## Looking to Fiction

Gendered expectations about appearance feature in Margaret Atwood's (2010) dystopian novel, *The Handmaid's Tale*. In the republic of Gilead where "modesty is invisibility" (p. 38) and "to be seen is to be penetrated" (Atwood, 2010, p. 39) women must observe strict codes of dress and behaviour according to their position in society. The fertile 'handmaids' wear clothing that covers them head to toe. They must keep their eyes down. They must not look up or be seen. Societal rules are enforced by the powerful *Eyes*, a Stazi-like police force. Barren 'wives' live comparatively privileged but still constricted lives whilst the 'marthas' cook, clean and manage the household. The men of Gilead generally enjoy more freedom. Although the unmarried men are liable to heavy penalties for transgressing rules pertaining to sexual activity with women, they do not have to adhere to rules around physical appearance and dress. The handmaids are *looked at* as dangerous and their looks are dangerous. To counter this they must wear deep, wide collars, "to keep [the handmaid] from seeing, but also from being seen" (Atwood, 2010, p. 18). The wide brims of their hats cover their faces in case men are 'tempted' through looking at them. This is reminiscent of Eve and man's fall into original sin. In Atwood's world women are punished for attracting male attention.

The story is told through the eyes of Offred, a 'handmaid'. On encountering a group of tourists visiting their closed republic Offred describes the women she sees, particularly noting their "Westernized" dress (Atwood, 2010, p. 38). She narrates:

...I can't help staring... The skirts reach just below the knee and the legs come out from beneath them, nearly naked in their thin stockings, blatant... The women teeter on their spiked feet... Their heads are uncovered and their hair too in all its darkness and sexuality. They wear lipstick, red, outlining the damp cavities of their mouths... [we] cannot take [our] eyes off these women. We are fascinated, but also repelled. They seem undressed. (p. 38)

Offred's observations, and her reflection that she too used to dress like that, suggest that societal values impact women's sense of what is an appropriate way to appear or to dress. The description of the handmaids' clothing reminds me of the burka. I find myself wondering whether women who wear the burka might look at me in such a way, fascinated but repelled by my bare legs, exposed hair and lipstick. Just thinking about being looked at and judged in this way makes me want to cover up and appear more modest.

There is a link between Atwood's narrative and the ways in which society and the media (like *The Eyes*) might police women's attire and behaviour. This is reflected in an article by Dublin City councillor, Kate O'Connell (2015) in which she described the beginning of her political

career. “There isn’t a day goes by that someone doesn’t comment upon my appearance... when the [election] posters went up, a leading feminist took to Facebook to slag me off – for in her eyes I was letting the side down by wearing pink”.

O’Connell (2015) continued:

Various commenters said the picture supported the idea that women were not to be taken seriously in politics, that I was trading on my femininity (what on earth?) and that my image reinforced the stereotype that women are “somewhat frivolous”. I don’t think any of the commenters, or the feminist, have ever met me – though if they do bump into me in the future and I’m wearing a trouser suit with a crew cut haircut, I’ll probably be wrong then too. (n.p.)

Such writing is a sad indictment on how women’s appearance is policed or managed in the media, on social platforms, and in life. Like Atwood’s novel, *The Eyes* are not just male. Women ‘police’ too. Both examples speak to Berger’s and Mulvey’s observations about how women are trained in their looking.

Looking and being looked at as surveillance is very much present as a theme in George Orwell’s (1949) *1984*. The technology for monitoring people, *Big Brother*, is essential to the totalitarian government’s control. Constant surveillance through the all-seeing *telescreen* ensures that the people of Oceania behave in accordance with the law or suffer severe reprisals. The narrator in Orwell’s novel is male and Orwell’s treatment of women in *1984* reflects a sense of the societal limitations imposed on women at the time of writing. Portrayed with considerable misogyny and painted as inferior and one-dimensional, the women in *1984* reflect something of Orwell’s horizon. The main character, Winston, describes how he hates a particular woman, Julia, because she is “young and pretty and sexless, because he wanted to go to bed with her and would never do so” (Orwell, 1949, p. 17). Julia is a member of the ‘Junior Anti-Sex League’. She is unavailable for a sexual relationship and Winston hates her for this. Perhaps he hates the power she has over him. Perhaps he hates that he wants her and cannot have her. Perhaps the hatred is connected with the forces that drove Hannah Gadsby’s attacker. Julia is transgressing a social expectation in being young, nubile and *not* sexually available.

In modern Western culture there are other ways in which appearance and behaviour are surveilled, scrutinised, and punished. Consider Swedish model, Arvida Byström, who appeared in an advertising campaign for Adidas with visibly unshaved legs. Interviewed in the Guardian newspaper she recounts her distress at receiving a barrage of derogatory and hostile

comments online including threats of rape (Siddique, 2017). Harnaam Kaur, model and motivational speaker, lives with polycystic ovary syndrome (PCOS). As a result, she developed hirsutism. Today Kaur retains an impressive beard. As a woman transgressing appearance norms she receives daily death threats and is subject to bullying both online and in person (Stephenson, 2018). Clearly how women present themselves, both in public and on social media, matters and transgression of societal expectations can result in severe repercussions.

### **Fatness and Looking**

Rachel Colls' (2004; 2006) research explores the emotional experiences of women in larger bodies, particularly in relation to the experience of shopping for clothes. Although not centred on the topic of looking and being looked at, her work does touch on the edges of it. She tells the story of Star as she navigates buying clothes for her 'outsize' or "outside" body (Colls, 2006, p. 537). Star avoids shops that she knows do not cater for her body. In the shops where she knows the clothing will fit her she makes selections of what will work for her body (what will "fit her figure" [Colls, 2006, p. 537]) based on "past experiences of dressing her body and looking at other women of a similar body size that are wearing 'unsuitable clothes'" (Colls, 2006, p. 537). Although Colls' research does include quotes from participants, hers is not a phenomenological exploration but rather a more critical feminist analysis. Colls' interest lies in the discourse(s) around bodies and particularly 'bignesses'; so whilst her research does reference participant experience, its focus is not richly descriptive of human experience. This is typical of much of the academic literature where the focus tends towards theory and explanation; that is, telling rather than showing.

In a serendipitous hermeneutic detour, I found myself reading more details on the first female winner of *The Biggest Loser* television programme. This is a kind of televised 'fat camp' where people in (very) large bodies are sent away to live with personal trainers and dieticians to undergo a radically extended fitness bootcamp with *extreme* weight loss as the goal. Images of the first female winner, Ali Vincent, appeared at the top of the search. I noticed myself thinking, 'wow, she looks amazing'! Yet, this is the same woman who commented in Wells' article:

Sure, I notice the way my inner thighs touch and the stretch marks behind my knees, on the backs of my arms and my abdomen. Or the slightly looser skin that you can't really see when I stand but you know is there the minute I lie down. (Ali Vincent cited in Wells, 2009, n.p.)

I found myself scouring the pictures, looking for evidence of stretch marks or loose skin. My eyes move to another search result, *Ali Vincent of The Biggest Loser gains back weight* (Pellet,

2019). *Ah, I think to myself, typical media score-keeping as to which celebrities have lost or gained weight.* The all too familiar obsession with weight loss and control over the body as if it bears direct relation to a person's inherent value. I wonder about women's experience of gaining and losing weight as part of their experiences of looking and being looked at in general. Vincent revealed how ashamed, embarrassed and sad she felt about regaining the weight she had lost, stating that she had effectively gone into hiding, unable to participate in online social media life or real life. It seems likely that she was aware, much like the girl Susan Brownmiller (1984) described, of the degree to which "her anatomy is being monitored by others" (p. 25). Indeed, it seems likely that today this is truer than ever given the nature of online life in Western society. Lindy West (2016) has documented her own struggles to come to terms with her body and her fatness, she wrote:

As a woman, my body is scrutinized, policed, and treated as a public commodity.  
As a fat woman, my body is also lampooned, openly reviled, and associated with moral and intellectual failure. (n.p.)

With my background in working with disordered eating I wondered how weight loss, or gain, would feature in my conversations with women about their experiences. It was not something I had planned to ask about directly, but seems to be such a large part of the narrative in social and popular media. In my practice as a therapist it does not seem to matter what a woman presents to therapy for, inevitably, at some point, our conversation will turn to her body and which bits are problematic. I reflect as to whether this inevitability in the therapy room is because of a prejudice of mine from my experience in working with disordered eating; that is, do I expect women to have these issues? It could also be the case that these issues impact a majority of women and thus are commonly reported.

A large US study (9,000 adult participants were surveyed) found that obesity was associated with "an increased lifetime diagnosis of depression related problems" (Ogden & Clementi, 2010, p. 1). Slightly over half the respondents were women. With this finding in mind, and given my clinical experience with women who experience body image issues and disordered eating, it seems likely that weight and shape will be part of women's experiences of looking at themselves, and potentially, in terms of being looked at by others, that having an experience of being overweight could impact mood and wellbeing.

Research in the area of fat studies reveals some insights into experiences of being obese or overweight. The studies I found did not exclusively focus on women's experiences, although some did comment on gender differences. Dissatisfaction with body image was higher in obese women (Grilo et al., 1994), and obese women were perceived and judged more

negatively than obese men (Tiggemann & Rothblum, 1988). Thomas and colleagues (2008) found that women (83% of their participants were female) were particularly aware of their weight as they reached adolescence and most of the women had started their dieting in their early teens (compared to the men interviewed who started in their early 20s). Almost all the participants (72/76) in Thomas and colleagues' study reported having experienced stigma and discrimination, and half had felt humiliated by or had received derogatory comments from health professionals. Although many participants could recall positive interactions with health professionals, almost half the participants attributed their poor mental and emotional health issues to obesity, including issues such as eating disorders, low self-esteem, depression and social isolation. The authors summarised thus, "[t]here is no single 'lived experience' of obesity... there were many recurring themes, related to discrimination, constant unsuccessful weight loss attempts, social isolation and feelings of being misunderstood by health professionals" (Thomas et al., 2008, p. 328).

Jane Ogden and Cecilia Clementi (2010) explored obesity and the consequences of stigma. In-depth interviews with 46 participants (34 of whom were women) suggested that obesity impacts on self-identity, as well as mood and perception of self. This research is of interest in the context of this study because it highlights something of the experience of looking at self and being looked at in a larger/fat body. Drawing on the comments from women, two poems emerged from my reading. They are a (re)presentation, or perhaps a (re)interpretation, of Ogden and Clementi's "illustrative quotes" (p. 3). The form of the first poem, *Being this size*, plays with shape, inspired by the material and the use of words like "great big blob", "freak", and "my belly hangs".

The poem becomes a representation of the "vicious circle" of "how I see myself" and "how others see me". The difficulty in reading the poem below might evoke the difficulty looking at the fat body described, and the difficulty reflected in the description of looking at self. It draws on material from 5 of Ogden and Clementi's participants.

**Being this size**  
 so much hard work  
 being this size  
 this great big **blob**  
 it's **hell** self-hate  
 a viscous circle  
 how I see myself I'm **ugly**  
 how others see me I'm a **freak**  
 when I take my clothes off I won't let anyone see  
 me and my **boobs** **fat on my back**  
 I don't like looking at my body  
 I feel **sick** when I look  
 my legs rub **my belly hangs**  
 this body doesn't belong to me  
 everything is **alien**  
*it's not my body*  
*they switched it*

The second poem, *Now I'm well*, reflects on the experience of looking at self in the context of weight loss and draws on material from only one participant.

**Now I'm well**  
 I was petrified  
 of losing  
 my career  
 my life  
 everything  
*now I'm well*  
 I've got self-esteem  
 confidence  
 the more weight I lose  
 the better I feel  
 confident  
     happy  
         proud  
 taking more care  
 making more effort

The statement "now I'm well" becomes the title for this poem because it seemed to me to be such a striking reference to the ways in which she considered herself, or perhaps experienced herself as, 'unwell' when she was in a larger body. The fact that there was far less material reflective of positive experiences in a larger body is perhaps indicative of Ogden and Clementi's research question about experiences of obesity and stigma. Their research focus, and methodological frame, more epistemological, likely shaped their questions and results.

Their conclusions point to the difficulties inherent in significant weight loss, both in achieving it and in maintaining it.

Davis-Coelho and colleagues (2000) explored perceptions of fatness in relation to psychotherapy and whether therapists might treat larger clients differently. Using images of the same 'client' with or without 'fat make up and padding' their research aimed to explore therapists' biases. Interestingly, the authors assume such a bias exists. Their abstract opens with the question, "Are the psychotherapeutic experiences of fat clients negatively affected by the *cultural bias against fat people*?" (Davis-Coelho et al., 2000, p. 682; emphasis mine). They pose the following questions; "When a new client who is 'overweight' walks into your office, what thoughts run through your mind? Do your expectations of the client or your goals for therapy change?" (Davis-Coelho et al., 2000, p. 682). The authors suggest that in a Western cultural context psychotherapy is practiced in "a culture in which bias and discrimination against fat people are the norm" (Davis-Coelho et al., 2000, p. 682). They then define the term fat oppression as "the fear and hatred of fat people, *particularly women*, and the concomitant presence of oppressive and discriminatory practices aimed toward fat people" (Brown, 1989, p. 19 cited in Davis-Coelho et al., 2000, p. 682; emphasis mine). It was interesting in the context of my own research to come across a definition which states so clearly that fat oppression, or fat hatred, is particularly directed toward women. Davis-Coelho and colleagues' also found that female psychologists predicted a significantly poorer prognosis for the fat client which perhaps suggests something about the ways in which women look at, and think about/relate to each other. The authors also noted that "improved body image" was significantly more likely to be cited by respondents as a treatment goal for the fat clients, again suggesting that the psychologists who participated assumed the fat clients would have poor body image.

### **Looking at Genitalia**

Sex educator Emily Nagoski (2015) noted that women often ask her what their vulva are supposed to look like. She explained that women do not get to see a wide range of vulva represented. Gone are the consciousness-raising groups of the 70s where women were encouraged to explore their vulva with a hand-held mirror. Typically available images depict "the vulvas of young, thin, white, completely shaved women" (Nagoski, 2015, p. 33). Nagoski explained that for her classes she has to "search carefully to find great sex-positive images of the vulvas of older women, women of size, women of colour, and women who've got all their pubic hair" (p. 33). She related a conversation with a colleague. They are discussing the

extremely limited images of vulva available; porn or graphic medical pictures. Nagoski's colleague comments:

[n]ow think, if you were a young woman trying to see what a normal vulva looks like. If you're white, you're all set, Tumblr is full of those. But if you're Black or Asian or Latina, what is there? Porn and medical pictures. What does that tell you?...the images we see-or don't see-matter. (Nagoski, 2015, p. 33)

I agree with Nagoski's colleague's comment. The images we see, or do not see, do matter. I have outlined in Chapter 1 my own experience of looking at images and the profound impact on my sense of self, as well as my body image. Perhaps, if in our looking we find ourselves represented, there is a sense of acceptability, of relief, an internal sigh of "I'm OK, there are others like me". Conversely, if we look and do not find ourselves represented, what possible conclusions are we to draw? It seems clear to me that what we look at, and how we are looked at, matters a great deal.

### **Skin Deep**

Katerina Steventon and Fiona Cowdell (2013) offer another example of literature that gives an insight into a particular aspect of women's being looked at. Their study explored the psychological impact of acne on adult women. The authors noted the considerable impact on women's self-esteem attributing this to the high value placed on physical appearance in Western society. Citing Papadopoulous and colleagues (2000), who make links between good looks and good character (and the converse), Steventon and Cowdell explored the effects of acne on women's self-confidence. They stated that it causes frustration, anger, depression, and at times suicidal thoughts, clearly impacting affected women's social and emotional functioning. Coping strategies included avoiding mirrors suggesting that these women preferred not to look at themselves. The women interviewed perceived themselves as less than or undeserving, noting they experienced feeling stared at when out in public, often receiving unwelcome comments, "women felt the acne destroyed the success of any efforts to look good" (Steventon & Cowdell, 2013, p. 151). Interestingly, the impact felt was not correlated to clinical severity; rather, to the individual's perception of her skin. This study highlights the ways in which appearance and the interplay of how women look at themselves and perceive themselves to be looked at, can affect self-esteem, self-confidence and mood.

### **Looking at bodies in Aotearoa**

In New Zealand there seems to be comparatively little literature relating to New Zealand Māori populations and looking/being looked at. Moewaka Barnes and Borrell's (2002) research suggested that young Māori women associated thinner bodies with happiness, confidence and

being more popular, whilst larger bodies were associated with low self-esteem and low mood. Exploring differences between Māori and European women, Talwar et al (2012) suggested that satisfaction with body image varied across ethnicities. Whilst historically some non-Western ethnic groups have associated larger body size with prosperity this is shifting (Talwar et al, 2012). “Non-Western ethnic groups, in tune with Western media and culture, are beginning to shift their ideals about their own bodies towards Western ideals” (p. 69). Their research highlights the power of the image, the role of appearance for women “in determining one’s own value and role in society, and that a pivotal determinant of attractiveness is ‘thinness’” (p. 69). In their reviewing of literature they conclude that women’s ideal bodies tend to be thinner than the ideal bodies that men choose. However women also believe that men prefer a thinner body (Talwar et al, 2012). Their research suggested that for Māori women “strength of ethnic identity” (p. 70) might be protective against an overvaluing of thinness; however, in their research both Māori and European women wanted to be smaller than they currently were. Interestingly, the European women perceived that “Māori women had a larger ideal body size” (p. 73). The Māori women chose a body size that was smaller than what they had identified as the ideal body size for a “typical Māori woman” (Talwar et al, 2012, p. 73). Even though a strong cultural identity may be protective as Talwar et al suggested, their research still showed significant valuing of thinness, regardless of ethnicity.

### **The Looked At Body**

Jan Brace-Govan’s (2002) research explored women’s experience of appearance whilst being physically active in either ballet dancing, weightlifting, or body-building. Brace-Govan is interested in what happens when the “subject-at-work” becomes the “subject-in-discourse” (p. 403); so whilst she is not explicitly exploring women’s experiences of looking or being looked at, her work touches *aspects* of particular women’s experiences of looking and being looked at. Brace-Govan pointed out that in much of the research into body image there are assumptions about the interplay of body image, subjectivity and cultural representations in the “creation of an ideal social subject” (p. 403). These assumptions, she suggested, do not address “the influence of images of bodies” (Brace-Govan, 2002, p. 403). I am not entirely sure I agree. A significant aspect of how Western culture is ‘conveyed’ and ‘consumed’ is via imagery, through film, television, advertising, media and so on. Consider also the work of Naomi Wolf (1991); Susie Orbach (2016) and Susan Bordo (1997; 2004). I interpret each of these writers as paying particular attention to “the influence of images of bodies”. More recent research looks specifically at the impact of social media on women’s bodies and body image (e.g., Fardouly et al., 2015; Perloff, 2014; Siebel-Newsom, 2011; Tiggeman & Slater, 2013).

Brace-Govan (2002) suggested cultural representations (or at least Westernised ones) are typified by the slender, nubile and youthful, often white, fashion model. Images such as these are “readily available and very visible” and women are evaluated on “potential heterosexual desirability” (Brace-Govan, 2002, p. 403) rather than other measures. Brace-Govan’s research is interesting because she is exploring bodywork, the creation of a specific kind of physicality. This can include particular styles of hair, piercing or other body modification, including training the body in particular ways such as bodybuilding or dance. I was drawn to her work because she is exploring an edge of something about women’s looking, and how women themselves wish to look (be looked at), or how they wish to appear. Referencing both Berger (1972) and Mulvey (1975) she argued that deferring to another for approval of how one looks can be disempowering, decreasing the potential sense of self that would come from mastering a physical activity. She attributed this to the loss of power that women then experience in determining or defining what is “acceptable and appropriate femininity” (Brace-Govan, 2002, p. 404). She summed this up by saying, “[a]pppearance and (re)presentations of women’s bodies are *key determinants* of feminine identity and cultural acceptability” (Brace-Govan, 2002, p. 404; emphasis mine). Again, there appears to be a link, particularly, but perhaps not exclusively, for women, between what we look at and how we then look at ourselves, at our own bodies.

Freysteinson and colleagues (2012) explored a very particular aspect of looking at self. They interviewed women about their experiences of looking at themselves in the mirror after a mastectomy. On reading the comments made by participants I was inspired to write the following tanka<sup>10</sup>.

**Seeing myself in the mirror**  
feeling deformed  
I can hardly face myself  
mutilated, gross  
like a burn victim, the shock  
how did this happen to me?

There is a shock transmitted in the poem, the shock of looking at oneself after such a radical surgery. Perhaps this speaks to Nagoski’s point that women tend to be exposed to a limited range of images, perhaps with a certain homogeneity. A search on Google, however, for images of ‘mastectomy’ reveals a range of women in terms of age, body shape, and ethnicity.

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<sup>10</sup> A tanka is a traditional Japanese poem consisting of five lines each with a specific number of syllables (5,7,5,7,7)

Some images reveal scar tissue, some show partial and some full mastectomies before reconstruction. Some are bilateral, some single. So perhaps the shock for these women is less to do with not having seen the results of a mastectomy, but instead in looking at what has happened to their own bodies. They are reconciling dramatic changes to their own bodies and having to adapt to what they now look like in the mirror. They may also be considering what others will think about how they look.

Research suggests women are likely to have difficulty reconciling this new version of themselves (Hill & White, 2008; Montebanocci et al., 2007). Perhaps those breasts have nursed children. Perhaps they are/were intimately tied up with that woman's sense of her sexuality, her femininity, her sense of self. As Millsted and Frith (2003) suggested, "women's breasts are invested with social, cultural and political meanings which shape the ways in which we make sense of and experience our embodied selves" (p. 455). What does this mean then for women who no longer have their breasts? Such a question points to a way in which how women look is associated with a very particular set of societal assumptions and expectations. Women facing life post-mastectomy are encountering these assumptions in a way they did not whilst they were 'breasted'.

### **The Public Eye**

When we talk about being in the public eye, we are often referring to what is focused on in the media. The idea of the public eye makes it seem as if the media were a living entity.

Reminiscent of Atwood's (2010) *Eyes in The Handmaid's Tale* or Orwell's (1949) *Big Brother in 1984*; this 'public eye' scrutinizes those who would appear in public. This is particularly so in the Western cult of celebrity and increasingly in the cult of reality television. The way women are looked at and the way they appear is an important factor in economic success and other areas of life. We might consider the way female politicians, including New Zealand's current Prime Minister, Jacinda Ardern, are treated in the media (Holden, 2017). Comments are frequently made about Ardern's physical appearance, clothing choice, age and manner. Her treatment by the media is radically unlike that of her male counterparts.

At the height of the Brexit debate the UK's Daily Mail frontpage featured an article (with large photograph) presenting the relative merits of Teresa May's and Nicola Sturgeon's legs (Vine, 2017). Politicians such as Hilary Clinton are regularly lambasted in the media for their clothing choices. As recently as the early 1990s there was an unofficial rule that women on the US Senate floor were not to wear trousers (North, 2018). Rarely are men in the public eye subjected to such rules or such scrutiny. When footage of Donald Trump wearing a navy

business suit paired with bright red *Make America Great* baseball cap appeared on the news I could not help but wonder what the reaction would be to Jacinda Ardern or Hilary Clinton in similar clothing. UK charity *Girlguiding*<sup>11</sup> noted that the way female politicians were objectified by the media side-lined young women from the political conversation and discouraged them from engaging in politics, including through voting (Girlguiding, 2017). They called for the UK press to stop reporting on female politicians' looks altogether.

### **Chapter Summary**

In this chapter I have explored a range of relevant literature that throws light upon several different and diverse aspects of women's experiences of looking, at self and other, and being looked at. It may be the case, as Jan Brace-Govan (2002) suggested, that "[a]pppearance and (re)presentations of women's bodies are key determinants of feminine identity and cultural acceptability" (p. 404). If so, this suggests that women's looking, specifically looking at self, looking at others (in person or via (re)presentations in media), and being looked at, are woven together in complex, nuanced ways that influence and impact women's sense of self, identity, self-esteem, cultural acceptability (Brace-Govan, 2002) and belonging. This chapter, together with the previous one, provides context, backgrounding the study through a consideration of a range of literary sources including academic literature, media articles, fiction, social media posts and blogs, and through the creation of poetry.

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<sup>11</sup> A leading UK charity for girls and young women that provides financial assistance to encourage participation in development opportunities, including leadership.

## 4. METHODOLOGY

**Hermeneutic way of being in the world**<sup>12</sup>  
making meaning of our lives  
understanding existence as embodied  
shared lives with others  
understanding always starts with experiencing  
otherwise, there would be nothing to understand  
openness to otherness  
invitation to togetherness  
reciprocity  
I risk myself  
and my taken-for-granted understandings

**A way of seeing the world**<sup>13</sup>  
A framework is strong  
but rigid  
poetry flexes  
outside and around

Methodology denotes the study of the methods, principles and philosophy that guide research practice. In this chapter I set out the principles and philosophy I have drawn on throughout my research in exploring the question of women's experiences of looking and being looked at. The first found poem above shows the ways in which hermeneutics and phenomenology work together, perhaps in a sort of symbiosis to illuminate the phenomenon under investigation. Drawn from Maria Schuster's (2013) work, Gadamer's importance of the other and the inescapability of our shared world is highlighted in the poem. The second found poem, from an interview with poet Jen Bervin (2018) reveals how the flexing of poetry provides a way of seeing the world that might take us outside of that which we already know.

### **Gathering the Threads**

On a recent outing I look up to see a bird's nest in the crook of a tree branch. The small tree is in a large car park in a sprawling commercial area of Auckland. Abandoned, perhaps temporarily, because nesting birds have rethought their chosen location. I scramble up the bank for a closer look. Enterprising and creative builders have made a home, a solid looking home in this tree, albeit in an unlikely location. The nest appears comprised of mud-like earth which has dried to form walls. Woven into these walls are moss, feathers, fibres of various

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<sup>12</sup> Found poem from Maria Schuster's (2013) article, *Hermeneutics as embodied existence*

<sup>13</sup> Found poem from an interview with Jen Bervin (2018)

fabrics and fine twigs. Long white strands of plastic, also incorporated, are blown about by the breeze. The nest is beautiful yet functional. It is a home. It made me reflect on what I am attempting to do in this chapter. There is a way in which I am attempting to make a home for myself, amongst other writers and researchers, amidst the other writing that is already in existence, and within this field. The nest is a synthesis of materials fit for purpose. This chapter is a synthesis of the philosophical threads that form my methodological home. These ideas also form a home inside my thinking. Perhaps they even provide a kind of safe haven in which I can grow and develop, and from which I can eventually venture forth. Methodology might be likened to the branch that is chosen, providing the base or platform from which one proceeds. The walls of this research home are formed by a hermeneutic phenomenological approach. Poetic inquiry and a feminist research ethic are the strands that weave in and out, strengthening and supporting those walls.

I am indebted to the thinking of many who precede me. I mention some here because they offered me foundational ideas for my research home-building endeavour. The ideas and work of Hans-George Gadamer [1900-2002], Robert Romanyshyn, Elizabeth Kinsella, and Maria Schuster have shaped my thinking about hermeneutics and, in turn, how I think about knowing, understanding and thinking. Scholars and practitioners such as Max van Manen, Robert Stolorow, George Atwood and Donna Orange have shaped my thinking in terms of phenomenology and its links to my practice as a psychotherapist. Writers and academics such as Linda Alcoff and Lorraine Code, as well as Susie Orbach, Sandra Bartky, Eloise Buker, Shulamit Reinhart and Joey Sprague have influenced my thinking and understandings as a feminist, as well as the design of this study. In terms of poetic inquiry, poetry and writing as a way of knowing, I am indebted to writers and poet-researchers such as Laurel Richardson, Monica Prendergast, Ivan Brady, Carl Leggo, Lynn Butler-Kisber, Sandra Faulkner, Kathleen Galvin and Les Todres. The combination of these strands in combination with my training and practice as a psychotherapist has shaped the research question and the research itself. They have also shaped and how I think about, and am in relationship with, those women who so generously shared their thinking and stories with me.

### **Hermeneutic Phenomenology**

Hermeneutic phenomenology is a qualitative research methodology that developed from phenomenological philosophy. Phenomenology as a philosophy traces back to the early beginnings of philosophy as a discipline. It was catalysed by the work of Edmund Husserl [1859-1938]. Husserl (1913/1999) suggested that we are *always, already* in the world and that our experience of the world is the only thing about which we can be certain. Husserl urged us

to begin with experiences, expressed in his oft-quoted insistence on returning to the things themselves, rather than relying on abstractions or theories to explain those things.

Other philosophers, notably Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty, Sartre, and Levinas challenged and expanded Husserl's ideas. In the mid-1950s an eclectic group of educators, doctors, psychologists and psychiatrists in the Netherlands adopted phenomenology as a research methodology. Rather than phenomenology as a philosophical approach they were interested in phenomenology as a way to understand human experience. The thinking of Robert Stolorow and George Atwood (2019) has helped me integrate a phenomenological approach into my clinical practice as a psychotherapist.

Hermeneutic phenomenology begins from the premise that our most basic experience of the world is already full of meaning. We are enmeshed in that world and we experience it as meaningful *because* that world comes before any of our attempts to understand, explain or account for it. In research terms, the purpose of hermeneutic phenomenology can be thought about as bringing to light the meaning of that lived experience, allowing us to reflect on it. It attempts to describe phenomena before theory, before abstraction, and that attempt is always tentative, never complete.

### **Being of Interest to Each Other**

Elizabeth Alexander (2005) posed the following question at the conclusion of the poem she would later read at Barak Obama's inauguration; "are we not of interest to each other"? This encapsulates something essential about my approach to the world. It is because I believe we are indeed of interest to each other that I became a psychotherapist. It is because I believe we are of interest to each other that I am pursuing hermeneutic phenomenological research. My own experiences (Chapter 1), along with those of my psychotherapy clients, drove my original research questions; *if I have these experiences of looking and being looked at, do other women share these experiences? How do other women experience looking and being looked at?*

Alexander's question resounds and reverberates, driving me toward this other who is of interest to me and who I am seeking to understand. It is Gadamer who urges me to rigorously examine the understandings I already hold (my prejudices), to question and to stay open.

Arriving at a sound methodological home has not been a straightforward process. Some of my beginning difficulties in establishing such a base from which to proceed are expressed in the poem below.

**vox processus<sup>14</sup>**

My partner, the scientist  
finds the whole notion  
of beginning with a poem  
outrageous.  
I note,  
not without irritation  
his PhD does not feature a methodology chapter.  
The scientist does not have to account for how he knows  
what he knows.  
His is the iron-clad, money-back-guarantee of  
positivism, empiricism.  
And thank goodness,  
because sometimes it is hard  
with all this postmodernism  
to know where one stands  
on the matter of epistemology.  
A word that does not feature  
in the scientist's PhD.  
A supervisor once suggested I might be confusing  
epistemology and ontology.

For quite a long time I lived with  
the dictionary definition of each on  
yellow post-it notes on  
the white pantry door.

Epistemology, the sticky square declared,  
is the theory of knowledge, especially with regard  
to its methods, validity and scope.

Ontology, on the other note, is the  
branch of metaphysics concerned with the  
nature of being.

The post-it notes did not help me see  
how I had mixed these things up.  
The scientist could not help me  
although he found the yellow notes made  
for an interesting talking point at dinner parties.

For quite a long time I lived with  
the idea that I was not a very good PhD student.  
Surely, I should be clear about what constitutes  
epistemology and ontology.

For quite a long time I thought  
I was a critical feminist in a  
radical paradigm, eager to take things apart  
shake the world up, see how it all worked  
and how things had gotten this way,  
but I kept thinking about Susie Orbach saying

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<sup>14</sup> *vox processus* references Monica Prendergast's (2009) research into the different poetic *vox* (voices) she identified across a wide range of academic literature

*in a postmodern world  
maybe we are all in need of some knitting back together*<sup>15</sup>

For quite a long time I lost sight  
of what made me most excited  
about research in the first place.  
Gathering up stories  
listening, opening, dwelling with,  
seeing what comes,  
what emerges,  
wondering where we will travel,  
who we will be when we arrive.

And then, rather suddenly,  
I wasn't lost anymore.

### **Understanding as Community and Praxis of Life**

With the ontological turn Heidegger [1889-1976] shifted the concept of understanding away from conceptualisation and explanation to a new place, as constituting the fundamental structure of *Dasein* (there/being) (1962/2008). Heidegger's work concerned a hermeneutics of facticity (1962/2008). This is the hermeneutical situation in which we find ourselves, "the concrete, pre-given world in which and by which we are formed, with all of its difficulties and impasses" (Caputo, 2000, p. 42). The world now recognises this ontological turn and the inextricability of being from context. Following Heidegger, Gadamer's work shifted the Heideggerian focus on being, toward a focus on language and the other, with whom we find ourselves in conversation or dialogue. This other is not merely an object for the subject, but "someone to whom we are bound in the reciprocations of language and life (Gadamer cited in Grondin, 1994, p. xi). For Gadamer "understanding is no method but rather a form of community among those who understand each other" (cited in Grondin, 1994, p. xi). Gadamer conceived of this as a new dimension, not merely another field of inquiry, but as constituting the "praxis of life itself" (cited in Grondin, 1994, p. xi). He stressed the importance of listening to one another, giving the example of the "listening and belonging with [Zuhören] someone who knows how to tell a story" (cited in Grondin, 1994, p. xi). This is reminiscent of Orbach's (2016) knitting back together, requiring the binding of language and life. In this way hermeneutics clearly stands out as ontology, rather than epistemology. The following short poem distils my interpretation of Gadamer's thoughts on this.

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<sup>15</sup> "Postmodern theory is insufficient to cope with the demands of the post-industrial body. It celebrates fragmentation, a fragmentation that in fact requires understanding, deconstructing, nourishing and then knitting together" (Orbach, 2016, p. 74)

### **Considering the other**

In the reciprocations  
of language and life  
we are bound  
to each other<sup>16</sup>

Much of the focus of Gadamer's work was uncovering the nature of human understanding. He defined understanding as the mode of being of humankind. Gadamer stressed the unavoidability of the fact that each of us is embedded within a culture and time period in history which inevitably shapes our understanding in that it determines *where* we attempt to *come to* an understanding *from*.

The word understanding comes from the Old English (OE) *understandan*, comprised of *standan* (OE, to 'stand in the midst of', where under is not 'beneath' but carries the OE *\*nter* meaning 'between/among') and Proto-Indo European (PIE) *'enter'* meaning inside (Harper, 2020). There is also a Sanskrit root, *'antar'*, meaning among/between and the Latin *'inter'*, also meaning among/between. Quite wonderfully, the Greek, *'entera'* means intestines. There is then a visceral sense of understanding as meaning to 'between stand' or, literally to enter something and stand inside. There is an effort 'to be close to' that resonates with the concept of empathy. This picture of standing inside, or being close to, describes something essential about the aims of hermeneutic phenomenological research.

The etymology builds the picture and throughout this thesis I make use of the history and development of a word over time to reveal meaning. In the matter of understanding, one engages in the task of entering into and standing inside. This changes the place from which one sees, knows, and understands. For Gadamer, our own understandings (the prejudices that form our horizon, literally our point of view) are changed as we open to the other. We do not simply understand but rather we *come to* an understanding. This sense necessitates the other and implies movement, from somewhere to somewhere else. It gives a picture of dwelling inside or being close to that which we are trying to understand.

### **The Role of Hermes**

In coming to an understanding there is a back and forth movement between parts and whole. For Gadamer this requires a care-full listening to what the other is saying. This is the task of Hermes from whom the name hermeneutics derives. Hermes is the Greek god of trade and

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<sup>16</sup> *Considering the other* is a found poem. In this case drawn from Gadamer's opening comments to Jean Grondin's (1994) *Introduction to Philosophical Hermeneutics*

thieves, but also of border crossings. He is the god of gaps and liminal spaces. Fleet of foot, he is the one who can pass between this world and the next, bringing messages from the Gods to humans ([GreekMythology.com](http://GreekMythology.com)). Interpreter and intermediary, perhaps more than anyone else, Hermes personifies the work of coming to an understanding, in terms of its betweenness, its standing in the midst of. Before we understand we can only repeat the words, but this is mimicry, not understanding. To understand is also to make something one's own, to bring it into our self-understandings, even as it changes us (Gadamer, 1975/2013). A translator needs sufficient understanding of not only the languages she moves between but the subtleties and nuances of each culture too. Literal translation will only get us so far, as anyone who has travelled to foreign lands with a phrase book can attest. Once we understand, once we stand in the midst of, we have greater freedom to (re)present that which we can now conceptualise for ourselves because it lives in us more fleshed out. Thus, it is more alive for us, not just an abstract idea but an embodied knowing-understanding. There may be things that are lost in translation, things that are difficult for us to reach agreement over, or even find a shared language for, but hopefully we do our best to reach towards understanding; because we are of interest to each other. This describes my approach to the other in my research and in my clinical work as a psychotherapist. It demonstrates something of Gadamer's sense that understanding is connected with community; this is "the praxis of life itself" (cited in Grondin, 1994, p. xi) through which we are bound to each other.

My listening, my attending and my coming to an understanding, does not occur in a vacuum. I bring my own fore-understandings (my own language, culture, beliefs, history, traditions, context, experiences and so on). These are what Gadamer calls prejudices. I must apply myself to the task of reaching an understanding with this other (person, text, transcript) who now stands before me. I cannot simply let my subjectivity roam. There is something to be learned from the other, if I am open to listening and potentially to being changed by what I hear/learn from the other. Such learning/changing/understanding is reciprocal. Gadamer called this a fusion of horizons.

The reader and author (or transcript/text and so on) exist in an historical tradition, "a stream in which we move and participate, in every act of understanding" (Palmer, 1969, p. 65). Author/text/speaker each has their horizon, just as the reader/interpreter/listener has theirs. Each of these horizons requires language to be expressed. In a way both *belong* to, or are made possible through, language. This is Gadamer's sense of our embeddedness in language. Without language there could be no understanding. For Gadamer (1975/2013), there would be no world without language. The world *is* world *because* it comes into language. Language,

he said, “has its real being only in the fact that the world is presented in it” (Gadamer, 1975/2013, p. 459). The two, language and world, are inextricably bound together in a hermeneutic circle. Gadamer went on to say that our “being-in-the-world is primordially linguistic” (p. 459) which makes me think of language as creative, such as the biblical pronouncement, ‘*let there be light*’, that brings forth the world. This is the idea that we are called forth into existence by language. Language convokes. “What the word evokes is there” (Gadamer, 1986, p. 113).

### **Circles and Spirals of Understanding**

For Gadamer (1975/2013), all understanding is dialogic. We enter a dialogue with the other (the text, the author, the artwork, the research question, the transcripts and so on). Fully entering into the spirit of that exchange means we must be open to the possibility that this ‘other’ holds a truth. In this way, my prior understandings (which form part of my self) are ‘at risk’ or ‘in play’. I must be prepared to be changed by an encounter with this other whom I seek to understand. In preparing to be transformed by the other I must cultivate an attitude of openness.

I am addressed by the other, whether it is through the text, the artwork, the transcript or the conversation. In responding, in turning my attention to that which is placed before me, I place ‘my self’ at risk, *ins Spiel/aufs Spiel* into play/at risk (Gadamer, 1975/2013). I like the musicality, the play between *ins* and *aufs*, which to my own ear, unschooled in the German language, resembles ‘in’ and ‘out’. In and out of play or dance which is historically what *Spiel* means. I place my *self* at risk because this self is made up of how I see the world, my understandings, my fore-understandings, my prejudices, my memories and the meanings I have made, everything from which I am constituted. Embracing a hermeneutic way of being means being willing to risk our understandings which ultimately constitute the self.

As I approach that which I am trying to understand I am changed by it. It holds something that changes me (if I am open), transforming my prior understandings and then this ‘new’ me returns to question that which I am trying to understand, and so on. This is the hermeneutic circle of understanding. “This genesis of meaning can be described as a turning from the phenomenon that presents itself to understanding that phenomenon, *a turn that is always returning to itself* in the work of interpretation” (Romanyshyn, 2013, p. 221; emphasis mine). Romanyshyn (2013) brings the notion of alchemical hermeneutics forwards. Rather than a circle of understanding there is a hermeneutic spiral, with the unconscious of the researcher (that which is beneath the surface) deepening the process. We are then “making a place for

those other subtle unconscious connections between a researcher and his or her work expressed in dreams, intuitions, feelings, symptoms, and synchronicities” (Romanyshyn, 2013, p. 222).

### **Orienting Towards One Another**

The placing of Romanyshyn’s work alongside Gadamer’s helps me integrate my own understandings and prejudices, as a psychotherapist, with how I come to hermeneutics and how I attend to my research question. In my work as a psychotherapist I am faced with *other* and tasked with trying to *understand other* in every clinical interaction. This is not limited to my work life. In my private life, with my significant other, with my children, with friends, with colleagues, I remind myself to stay open, to listen, to reach into the *other’s* experience, into their world, seeking understanding. There is a resonance here with Gadamer’s suggestion that understanding is the way of being human, not just an intellectual task. My understanding is always limited, never complete. As I try to understand, I am inevitably interpreting since I cannot escape my context. For me, these are Gadamer’s most important ideas.

Maria Schuster’s (2013) sense is that Gadamerian hermeneutics provides for a way of being in the world that is concerned with making meaning, of “trying to understand one’s self and others in a common world” (p. 12). That the question is of *how we orient ourselves toward one another* as we attempt to come to an understanding. Whilst we may share a common world it is also true that we see the world *we* see (and experience the world *we* experience) because of how we are shaped by our world. Schuster’s question of how we orient ourselves toward one another resonates with my practice as a psychotherapist. This places a demand on the hermeneutic researcher, and the psychotherapist, to examine their own understandings, in order that we might gain insight into how we orient toward one another.

### **Understanding as Reaching Each Other**

In entering a dialogue with the other there is a reaching, or speaking, across the space between. The word dialogue is related to the Greek *dialegethai*, meaning to converse with. *Dia* means across, between, or through; and *legein* means speak (Harper, 2020). Elizabeth Alexander said, “we are each unto ourselves, inside of our heads. We need language to reach across the void, to reach another human being” (Tippett, 2011, n.p.). In receiving the stories that were shared with me in the data gathering process, I enter into a communion with the other in which I cannot remain unchanged (Gadamer, 1975/2013). My prejudices concerning looking and being looked at as a woman meet the thoughts and experiences of the women who shared their stories with me. As these ideas are put into language we reach towards each

other across the void, toward understanding. There is the potential for a meeting of horizons. In between is the liminal space that Hermes guides us through if we can wait and be with the not-knowing. The liminal space is where transformation occurs. It is where understanding develops. What was unknowable and not able to be understood, becomes possible to be known, felt and understood in some way, more so than before it was ushered into language. As a psychotherapist I find myself listening for what is unsaid, for what lies between in the gaps, for what might slip away unspoken. I listen for what is felt between us and what is evoked in me. This is where the added dimension of Romanyshyn's (2013) alchemical hermeneutics is helpful. All these potential meanings mingle together. As Romanyshyn (2013) suggested, we must loiter "in the vicinity of the work" (p. 223). In lingering with it, we are transformed. The hermeneutic task is never finished or complete. Our understanding is never finished or final. The voice(s) of this research stretch out across the void, across the liminal space, making understanding, and perhaps transformation, possible.

### **The Reflective Glance**

A phenomenologist asks, 'what is this experience like?' (Lavery, 2003). In answering that question, Husserlian (1913/1999) phenomenology asked the researcher to bracket their assumptions (prejudices) and presuppositions (what is already known, or felt to be known) about the experience. This supposedly ensures validity of the data or some degree of objectivity about the phenomenon, since a major criticism from the world of natural sciences, toward the human sciences, is lack of objectivity. Gadamer, like his teacher and mentor, Heidegger, was grappling with the slippery nature of objectivity. He highlighted the absolute inextricability of interpretation and understanding, which is, for Gadamer (1975/2013), "the original character of the being of human life itself" (p. 230).

When I approach a text, artwork, poem, transcript (or rather am addressed by it), I immediately want to begin to make sense of it. To do this, I must summon my own thoughts in response to the material. The thoughts and ideas evoked by the text now mingle with my own pre-existing ideas and a meaning-making process has begun. This is the process of *coming to an understanding*. It is inextricably connected with interpretation, and language. Gadamer (1975/2013) wrote that "everything experienced [*Erlebte*] is experienced through oneself [*selbsterlebtes*]" (p. 60). This in part constitutes its meaning. What is experienced "belongs to the unity of *this* self and thereby contains a distinctive and irreplaceable relation to the whole of this one life" (Gadamer, 1975/2013, p. 60; emphasis mine). The translation of *Erlebte* from the German is 'experienced', the past tense of the verb, and *selbsterlebtes* translates as personal experience. In other words, my experiences are not meaningful simply

because I lived through them and experienced them, instead that which is experienced as meaningful is made so by the “reflective glance” (Schutz, 1972 p. 71). It is this reflective glance that constitutes meaning. The reflective glance is comprised of the pre-understandings which constitute this “oneself”. This idea is particularly interesting given the focus of this thesis. The idea that it is the reflective glance, the looking, or looking back that makes an experience meaningful. Perhaps reflective glances might have different timbres, or tones, and might imbue an experience with particular qualities. Hermeneutically and phenomenologically speaking how I experience something, how I make meaning of an event is determined by my history, my prejudices, my socio-cultural milieu. How we look at an event shapes the meaning we make, and how we look is shaped by our context. A hermeneutic circle or spiral. Nowhere can this be seen more clearly than in the psychotherapy room where, as we reflect, as we process our pasts, we can begin to look back with fresh eyes, gathering new understandings. As we come to understand that which has happened to us with the benefit of a broader context, we widen our horizon and our view of self changes, thus the ‘me’ that constitutes this ‘oneself’ is changed.

Our prejudices shape *how* we look. They determine the quality of that reflective glance, perhaps even what we look at. What does this mean in terms of my research question? We are unavoidably steeped in our particular traditions, culture and contexts (all carried by language); affecting, and possibly determining, what we see, how we see it, what we constitute as meaningful and in what ways. This suggests that women’s experiences of looking and being looked at will be particular to each woman, rather than there being a unifying universal experience. Hermeneutic phenomenology attempts to bring light to and reflect on the meanings of these experiences. In the particular experience lies the potential for something more universal to be distilled. This is the phenomenological nod (van Manen, 1997).

For Gadamer, the researcher must keep asking the question, laying open and taking nothing for granted. The meaning of my experience is constituted; that is, it is *what I make of what I live* through. It emerges, as Robert Burch (1990) stated, “from explicit retrospection where meaning is recovered and reenacted, for example, in remembrance, narration, meditation, or more systematically, through phenomenological interpretation and ‘inscription’” (p. 134). Without language we cannot think, nor remember or narrate, nor can we interpret, understand or make meaning of our world. Burch continued, “as I bring the content of lived experience meaningfully to be and make it my own, in the very same act *I also bring myself to be*, defining myself essentially and *establishing my own self-identity* in relation to this

constituted context” (p. 136; emphasis mine). Burch’s specialism is philosophy. He writes about phenomenology, but his description above could apply to a psychotherapy session, and this highlights the nexus between psychotherapy, phenomenology and hermeneutics. It also hints at the ways in which inviting women to participate in a study such as this might ‘stir up’ a range of feelings as women engage in a process of bringing themselves to be and establishing their ‘self-identity’ in relation to how they look and are looked at.

### **Poetry as the Human Voice**

In thinking about Burch’s comment, that we essentially define ourselves or bring ourselves to be through the processes of *remembrance, narration and inscription, recovering and re-enacting*, I again find myself thinking of the poet Elizabeth Alexander and the idea of reaching each other across the void. The full last line of *Ars Poetica #100: I Believe* (Alexander, 2005) reads, *Poetry (here I hear myself loudest)/ is the human voice,/and are we not of interest to each other?* This is the end of the poem and Alexander’s voice rises to an impassioned crescendo as she reads. The poem itself and her thoughts on how we are “each unto ourselves” (Tippett, 2011, n.p.) without language evokes a sense of how language mediates, and makes possible, understanding. It is language that does the work of reaching across the void. We would be isolated, unable to understand, without it. This echoes Gadamer’s sense of our embeddedness in language, how dependent we are on language for our being-in-the-world and the ways in which we are bound together in understanding as community because of this. For Gadamer, these possibilities are intensified in the poetic word. Gadamer’s consideration of poetry provides a bridge between hermeneutic phenomenology and poetic inquiry. I have tried to capture Gadamer’s thinking in the following poem as I move to consider the power of language to disclose meaning, and how poetry can reveal that which might otherwise remain obscured.

### Unsaid and to be said<sup>17</sup>

*In words we are at home.*

realisation of meaning

finite possibilities of the word

oriented toward the infinite

expressing what is unsaid and is to be said

all this is found

*intensified*

in the poetic word

an event

wide ocean of beautiful utterance

expressing its own relationship to being

disclosing

infinity of unspoken meaning

### Language as Disclosing

**dis'kləʊz**<sup>18</sup>

verb

To disclose,

or

to be

in the process of

disclosing,

is to make secret

or new information

known,

to allow something hidden

to be seen

When Gadamer described language as disclosing, the synonyms of 'disclose' help in understanding his meaning more fully. Disclose means to uncover; expose to view; allow to be seen; reveal; show; lay bare; bring to light. From the Old French, *desclore*, meaning to break open, unlock or reveal (Harper, 2020). The poem or poetical thinking (Freeman, 2017), reveals something that prose might obscure. As Gadamer (1989) suggested, the event of the poetic word discloses an "infinity of unspoken meaning" (p. 427).

Gadamer says the world presents itself through language, and that the power of language is in how it calls forth things from their concealment (Tate, 2016). This was especially evident for Gadamer in the poetic word (Tate, 2016). Language discloses, revealing that which would otherwise be obscure to us. Imagine if we did not have words to make sense of and cohere our world. We would be as perpetual infants, in wonderment perhaps, but unable to grasp

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<sup>17</sup> A found poem drawing on Gadamer's (1975/2013) discussion of the poetic word (pp. 485-486); and from an earlier (1989) translation of the same text (cited in Davy, 2013, p. 93)

<sup>18</sup> Found poem from Google search for "disclose" (Feb 2019)

reality. For Gadamer, language discloses reality, revealing it as it summons it (Gadamer, 1986). Poetry represents a particular aspect of language. One might be relatively unaware of how everyday language functions to disclose reality but, for Gadamer, it is in poetry that we see language at work “in the process of disclosing” (Vessey, 2010, p. 170). This is why Gadamer (1986) says that “poetry language stands out as the highest fulfilment of that revealing which is the achievement of speech” (p. 112). Gadamer (1986) explained that the poetic word speaks for itself, unable to be captured in prose. The poem’s meaning is its own. The poem creates something in our imagination. We do not seek verification as to whether a poem is true. For each of us the picture summoned will be different but no less real or true. Thus, poetic language is not fulfilled by anything beyond itself, it is “self-fulfilling... in that it bears witness to itself” (Gadamer, 1986, p. 110). The poem allows us to experience “nearness” (Gadamer, 1986, p. 114). For Gadamer (1986), the “truth of poetry consists in creating a hold upon nearness” (p. 113). I take this to mean that poetry reveals and discloses the world, allowing us to experience its nearness. As Tate (2016), interpreting Gadamer, has suggested, “it is through language that we have a world in which we feel at home, it is in poetry that we experience its abiding nearness” (p. 182). Poetry, poetic language, and poetical thinking then have a special place with regard to hermeneutic phenomenology, especially when I think about the idea of nearness and reaching across the void. The poetic word potentially brings the world, and thereby the other, closer.

### Thinking Poetically

**Language can do all this<sup>19</sup>**  
The poem awakens  
a secret life  
in words  
that had seemed  
to be used up  
and worn out,  
and tells us of ourselves.  
In language the world  
presents itself.

Melissa Freeman (2017) has suggested that poetical thinking, which has its origins in phenomenology, aims to “reveal experience as it is experienced, not as it is thought” (p. 75). Poetical thinking then is well-matched with hermeneutic phenomenological inquiry. This kind of thinking “reaches beyond a search for knowledge or meaning into the sensual, afferent and

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<sup>19</sup> Found poem from Gadamer (1975/2013, p. 466)

efferent, difficult-to-grasp, or to put into words, experiential world” (Freeman, 2017, p. 73). Thinking poetically can potentially provide new ways of seeing and knowing that are particularly useful in the uncovering of lived experience.

Language that is to reveal or bring light to the meanings of lived experience must be a language that resounds with a phenomenological sensibility (Henricksson & Saevi, 2009). Henricksson and Saevi (2009) suggested that hermeneutic phenomenology “needs an expressive language to ‘write the lived experience’ rather than to simply write ‘about’ the lived experience” (p. 35; emphasis in original). For Henricksson and Saevi, this represents “an event in sound” (p. 35).

### **Poetry as Inquiry**

Gadamer makes a special case for the language of poetry because there is a way in which everyday language conceals itself. For Gadamer the poem presents us with access to a secret life, renewing words which had seemed worn out. Something we do without thinking, language reveals and discloses and is, at the same time, self-concealing or perhaps self-forgetting (Gadamer, 1975/2013). That is, we are often unaware of how language calls the world into being, it is a process not often in our conscious minds.

For Gadamer, what is brought forth through the language of the poem stands before us in the “openness of its unconcealment” (Tate, 2016, p. 157). This idea of unconcealment comes to us from *Alatheia*, Greek goddess of the spirit of truth. In Greek philosophy, the word ‘aletheia’ represents truth or disclosure. Gadamer’s use of aletheia has been translated as “openness” (Nicholas Walker’s translation in *Relevance of the Beautiful*, 1986, p. 108) and “disclosure” (Joel Weinsheimer’s translation in *Truth and Method*, 1975/2013, p. 494). Drawing on Heidegger’s notion of ‘unconcealedness’ Gadamer (1986) brings our attention to the relationship between truth and shining. Since shining means “to make that which the light falls upon appear”, shining requires something to shine upon (Gadamer, 1975/2013, p. 498). This speaks to something essential at the heart of hermeneutic phenomenology. There is an intention to tentatively dwell with the things we are trying to shine light upon that we might reveal them, even as they are concealed from us in their everydayness.

Poetical thinking keeps “understanding in flow”, expanding and challenging the imagination, “creating what is not yet thought possible” (Freeman, 2017, p. 86). Linking poetry to the hermeneutic circle or spiral, Richardson (1997) suggested “a poem is a whole that makes sense of its parts; and a poem is parts that anticipate, shadow, undergird the whole” (p. 143).

Poetry has this special ability to both condense meaning, to distil something essential; at the same time as it leaves a spaciousness for thinking and feeling. There is a truth in the poetic word (Gadamer, 1986) in that it is self-fulfilling. Gadamer gave the example of directing someone to look out of the window at a house. Most can follow the instruction and determine for themselves whether there was indeed a house there or not. But the poet who summons a house for us calls into being a house for each of us. The image of the house is real and alive in our imagination, unique to the imaginer. We do not question the 'truth' of the poem, or the poet's purpose (Gadamer, 1986). In this way the poem's meaning is its own.

I am reminded of a comment by poet Rita Dove (1994), who described poetry as "the art of making the interior life of one individual available to others" (p. 25). This not only illuminates something essential about the capaciousness of poetry, but also the way in which poetic inquiry fits beautifully with the aims of hermeneutic phenomenology and psychotherapy.

### **Poetry as (Re)Presentation**

Laurel Richardson (1997) commented that "[l]ived experience is lived in a body, and poetic representation can touch us where we live, in our bodies" (p. 143). What better way then to bring forth phenomenological experience, to make it come alive so that it might be shared and understood? As I sat with the transcripts, the stories shared with me, I considered how I might 'honour' the stories so generously shared, and how I might make the material come alive for the reader. These considerations are part of the feminist research values that guide my approach as a researcher (in Chapter 1) and also part of my striving for a hermeneutic phenomenological sensibility (Henricksson & Saevi, 2009). In this way, creating poetry from the data (transcript material) becomes both the process of data analysis and a way to (re)present data.

Rather than ask 'is this a good poem?' we might ask instead 'what is this poem good for?' (Vincent, 2018). Fernández-Giménez and colleagues (2019) highlighted the idea that good poetic inquiry and good poetry are not necessarily the same thing. The authors suggested that good poetic inquiry is evocative and provocative. It disrupts hierarchies and humanises research by centring participants' lived experience. It amplifies participant voice and evokes emotion. It fosters researcher flexibility and encourages collaborative research. The last point is of particular interest given the feminist research ethic I wanted to bring to the research.

Poetry evokes a felt response as we read or hear. As well as the layers of meaning evoked, there are the layers of meaning we bring (our fore-understandings or prejudices), these mingle with what the poem summons in us. As Freeman (2017) suggested, because poetical thinking expands and challenges the imagination, perhaps new understandings can unfold as we allow the poetical to work on and in us, meaning that poetic inquiry holds possibilities for researcher, participants and readers. Thus, poetical thinking and writing can open up a phenomenon in new and revealing ways making it a suitable medium through which to develop a hermeneutic phenomenological sensibility that aims to bring lived experience closer. Holding that language is both disclosive and speculative, poetical thinking or poetic inquiry provides a way into the phenomenon under investigation: looking and being looked at. Poetical thinking becomes a way to express the coming together of hermeneutic and phenomenological strands in this research.

### **Chapter Summary**

In this chapter, I have outlined the thinking that underpins this research project. I have provided an overview of the ways in which hermeneutic phenomenology is an appropriate choice of methodology to research women's experiences of looking and being looked at. I have also made links between hermeneutic phenomenology and my practice as a psychotherapist. In addition, I have explored Gadamer's thoughts on language and our embeddedness in language. I have provided an overview of poetical thinking and poetic inquiry, and its fit with hermeneutic phenomenology. I have shown that this represents a way toward the hermeneutic phenomenological sensibility essential for the success of this type of research (Henricksson & Saevi, 2009). The next chapter sets out the method and provides detailed examples.

## 5. METHOD

**An evocative text<sup>20</sup>**  
shining in itself  
simultaneously,  
it shines upon  
the phenomenon  
it evokes;  
bringing the phenomenon  
out of concealment.

This chapter shows the unfolding of the research process, from gathering the data through to analysing and (re)presenting the data; highlighting the use of poetic inquiry and revealing how the data was crafted into found poems that then became another layer of data to be worked with. Working with the data as found poems stimulated thinking and creativity, leading to further types of poem being created; *insight poems* and *choral poems*. Poetry and poetic inquiry offered a way in to the work, extending thinking, offering insights about the phenomena as well as providing ways to explore meanings and to (re)present findings. The chapter offers a section on rigour, trustworthiness, and credibility in hermeneutic phenomenological research. A section on vigour speaks to the use of poetic inquiry in research. The chapter shows how dwelling and reverie are part of the method and congruent with my context as a psychotherapist. In setting out the method it is important to hold in mind a picture of the back and forth of the hermeneutic spiralling of understanding such that these stages are not necessarily neat, easily delineated or separate. They do not unfold in a sequential manner; rather, merge and overlap; flowing into one another.

### Preparing the Ground

In my dissertation (Green, 2016) I outlined a hermeneutic process of reviewing literature that involved the tasks of searching, gathering and reading, writing, organising and thinking. Whilst these tasks have formed fundamental components of the method in this study, making a shift to a more hermeneutic-phenomenological-poetic sensibility and working with transcript material has led to my developing this earlier method. Those refinements and enhancements are described here.

My interest in women's experiences of looking and being looked at stemmed from personal experiences (in Chapter 1) and so, in some ways, the ground is chosen for me, as Romanyshyn

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<sup>20</sup> Found poem drawn from Henriksson and Saevi (2009, p. 41)

(2013) suggested. The study's focus on lived experience arises from my work as a psychotherapist. A hermeneutic phenomenological approach underpins the research since this is fitting in order to study often unexamined and/or poorly understood lived experience, and also because it acknowledges the interaction of cultural, societal and historical factors on the individual, the researcher, and on meaning-making.

The study gained approval from the Auckland University of Technology Ethics Committee (AUTEC) on 9<sup>th</sup> April 2018 (AUTEC reference 18/79; see Appendix H). In total, 14 women, ranging in age from 23 to 58 years, took part in the research. The majority of the women are cis-gendered, with one identifying as trans-gender. A range of cultural backgrounds are represented including New Zealand Pākehā/European; Māori; New Zealand/Rarotongan; Jewish/American; European; and Indian. The women interviewed had a wide range of life experiences. This is worth mentioning because some are particularly pertinent to the research topic of looking and being looked at, including being a migrant and/or living overseas; experiences of obesity including undergoing bariatric surgery; historical sexual abuse; recovery from eating disorders; mastectomy and treatment for cancer; adjusting to being in a wheelchair; and facing stigma around gender identity. Interviews were conducted between April 2018 and February 2019.

Potential participants had seen a poster advertising the project (see Appendices A & B) or heard about the research through word of mouth. Posters were displayed in various locations including a GP surgery, osteopath premises and health food store. The poster was emailed via the Auckland University of Technology to students in the faculty of Health and Environmental Sciences, and via the New Zealand Association of Psychotherapists Auckland Regional Branch database. Those who expressed interest were sent the Participant Information Sheet and Consent Form (see Appendices C, D & E) with an invitation to ask any questions for further clarification. Once participants agreed to participate and consent forms had been signed, a time was set to meet for an interview.

### **A Note about Participants**

Whilst it is relatively common practice in qualitative research to offer the reader a summary of participants in terms of gender, ethnicity, age and so on I have refrained from doing so in detail. This is in part because Aotearoa New Zealand is a small community and avoiding so clearly summarising participant details affords some degree of anonymity, however, some participants opted to use their real names and so it must be said that anonymity is not the only

consideration. There is also the matter of bringing to bear the reader's attention on the phenomenon of looking and being looked at. When we know that "A Participant" is 24, cis-gendered, single, a student and of Māori and New Zealand European descent a number of assumptions, or prejudices (Gadamer, 1975/2013), as to what 'we know' (or think we might know) about this particular participant come to the fore. It is interesting, and perhaps frustrating, to have to manage the lack of anywhere to 'hang' these assumptions whilst reading the findings chapters. Whilst I offer no apology for this lack of consideration for the reader I do hope that the reader finds that the phenomenon is brought front and centre, rather than the details of any particular participant.

### **Gathering and Honouring**

I met with each woman for an unstructured interview that lasted approximately 1 to 1¼ hours. The majority of interviews were conducted in person and one via Skype due to that participant residing overseas. Interviews were voice recorded and transcribed.

Consideration as to how a feminist research ethic might guide the research informed the initial set-up of the research as well as ongoing aspects such as data analysis; for example, wanting the women's voices to resonate in and through the findings. Although this is not a feminist analysis, my situating myself as a feminist (Chapter 1) is an important factor in this research project influencing ethical considerations, data collection, and analysis. In applying a feminist research ethic (as opposed to conducting a critical feminist analysis) it felt important to make the process as transparent as possible and to invite feedback and/or collaboration where practicable. This is consistent with a hermeneutic phenomenological methodology wherein the research can be seen as inviting participants into an "ongoing conversation" (Laverty, 2003, p. 30).

Participants were invited to receive a copy of their transcript prior to the data analysis stage. All participants asked to see their transcript and 3 women asked for minor details to be altered or omitted. On the consent form women were asked to indicate if they preferred to use a pseudonym or their first name for the write up, and whether they would like to receive a copy of the findings. Some women opted to change the pseudonym that was allocated to them. These details are congruent with my desire to honour the women who had so generously participated in the research, and form part of the ethic of care and relationship that I see as underpinning my approach to carrying out the research.

After the initial analysis process (including reading, thinking, and writing) it became clear that each transcript would have its own 'suite' of poems. I contacted each participant again (mid 2019) asking if they would like to receive copies of the poems from their transcript, explaining that any comments or feedback would be welcomed. All participants expressed an interest in receiving the poems from their transcript. In an example of co-constructing the data with participants (Lavery, 2003), one woman spontaneously re-wrote an alternative version of one of the poems. We entered into an email dialogue together about her poem, my poem and her relationship to the topic. Some participants responded with commentary suggesting how the poems had impacted them and what it was like to see their words shaped this way, or reflected back in the transcript. Sometimes affirming, sometimes confronting. Throughout this process it has been interesting, and important, to ask "whose data is this?" Whilst this did not happen, I have considered what it would mean to have a participant withdraw their participation, perhaps at a late stage. There is a valuing of openness and a trusting of the process, as well as an honouring of what has been 'given' in the form of the stories shared. These values are part of a feminist research ethic and also speak to rigour.

### **Participant Checking**

It is interesting to reflect on my asking participants to check their transcripts, and my invitation to each participant to read and comment on the poems that came from their transcript. In part this relates to the notion of participant validation, often referred to as member checking (Birt et al, 2016). The researcher asks participants to check the data or results for "accuracy and resonance with their experiences" (Birt et al, 2016, p. 1802). This goes some way towards addressing something of trustworthiness and rigour in qualitative research since there are many potential avenues for one's own biases to impact the data analysis process, commitment to hermeneutic openness notwithstanding. However, in my research the invitation for participants to check their transcript, opt to omit particular details, comment on their poetry and so on also extends to care and relationship as part of a feminist research ethic (described in chapter 1).

Early on in this project I contacted a much-admired researcher to ask about how her participants felt about the poetic work she had created from the interview process. She replied simply that she hadn't ever asked because in her experience people forget what they have said. Her comment reveals something of the tension around this issue, and whether as a researcher I could, or should, trust women to recall what they had spoken to me about, in some cases months ago. Ultimately it was important for me to honour and attend to those relationships with the women who participated. An aspect of that was opening myself up to

“the dilemma of anticipating and assimilating the disconfirming voices” as well as the tension of “deciding who has ultimate responsibility for the overall interpretation” (Birt et al, 2016, p. 1802). Perhaps it is my training as a psychotherapist but I was interested in hearing those disconfirming voices, should they arise. I was also trying to be sensitive to the interdependent context of a shared meaning-making, where possible, whilst being aware that the final responsibility for what was written fell to me.

Asking participants to check transcript details allows for the opportunity to delete details which no longer feel accurate or representative or which might feel too revealing. How does this impact the research – and the researcher? This process prompted me to ask who the data belongs to? Is it ever mine? Does data always belong to the participant? Is there ever a point at which it becomes mine? Some participants expressed discomfort at seeing their words written down. “Did I really say that?” or “I wouldn’t want my mother to know that I had said that” and “very confronting” are examples of some of the feedback. In this way there is an intimate relationship between researcher and participant underpinned by a feminist research ethic of care and relationship, such that if a woman felt strongly that something be omitted, I would want to honour that. Managing this tension is not necessarily as straightforward as the notion of participant checking would suggest. Being in relationship, as embodied knowers, researcher and participants navigate a dynamic web of thoughts and feelings, about self, each other, the topic and the data, that shift over time. Whilst participant checking might be used to point to rigour I believe that what happens and what is made explicit in qualitative research are not always the same thing. What might be presented as a tick-box exercise is actually much more nuanced and difficult to articulate. Unwittingly, tacit understandings are likely often omitted or obscured because of the abtruse nature of the process.

Asking participants to check my interpretations (poems) potentially becomes burdensome. Whilst writing poems in the first place was in part born out of a desire to honour what the women had said, minimizing my voice, raising up and amplifying participant voice, not everyone has the time, or the inclination, to read poetry. When a participant offered her own poetry in response this became part of an ongoing dialogue, an intrinsic part of my caring for our relationship to one another – and did not necessarily change the final version of the poem presented in this thesis. It did mean an engagement in a conversation, and it did send me back to ‘my’ poem and the particular transcript to ‘check’ meanings. In consultation with the participant we decided together that both her version and my version would be included.

When one participant wanted to use two of ‘her’ poems for an anthology of poetry that was being collected we were able to engage in a conversation which resolved in our agreement of ‘her words, my arrangement’. She wanted to remain anonymous whereas I felt it important at that time to acknowledge my work in relation to this thesis. All these decisions and conversations feel relational and meaningful, and difficult to prescribe or to have anticipated. Gadamer has helped me accept that as soon as I try to understand I am interpreting, and so in this regard I cannot escape from the fact of my interpreting. No matter how strong my intention to honour participant voices I still chose every word and constructed every line of each poem.

It is my sense that what is described above, these elements that appear as participant validation, are more revealing of the care and relationship inherent in a feminist research ethic. I have perhaps relied more on the phenomenological nod from participants and other readers to establish rigour and this is explored in more detail below.

### **A Road Not Yet Taken**

I had also sought, and been granted, ethics approval to conduct focus groups; however, I felt, in consultation with my supervisors, that I had plenty of data from the interviews. I then considered inviting participants to take part in a facilitated group process to read and share poetry from the study but realised that the poems might be provocative for some and that women might prefer to read ‘their poems’ (and comment on them if they chose) in a more private way—a notion that was borne out in the feedback I received from some women about the poetry from their transcripts. A further consideration was that some might find it difficult to speak or share in a group setting. A sensitively facilitated group process, in which the poetry and findings could be discussed and responded to, perhaps with participants creating their own poetry in response, would be a worthwhile follow up, extending the hermeneutic spiral of understanding. As part of the hermeneutic spiral participant commentary, feedback and poems can be considered ‘parts’ in relation to the whole; all becoming grist for the mill, able to be reflected upon and interpreted.

### **Rigour, Trustworthiness, and Credibility**

Hermeneutic phenomenological research is interpretive and this study, therefore, represents this writer’s interpretations. In order to approach rigour, trustworthiness, and credibility, the methodology underpinning the study must “follow from and reflect the philosophy chosen” (Lavery, 2003, p. 28). In this case, the research draws on the understandings of Gadamer

(outlined in Chapter 4), whose work emphasises the concepts of prejudice (our preconceptions or fore-meanings that we bring as part of our linguistic experience); that the world and our experiencing of it happens because of language; and universality (the common human consciousness connecting those who express themselves and those who understand; see for example, Ray, 1994). Prejudice, language, and universality make understanding possible (Gadamer, 1975/2013). Rigour, trustworthiness, and credibility demand researcher reflexivity; for example, through examining prejudice and journaling to track engagement with the hermeneutic spiral; the production of texts that are “credible to the experience and that can be understood by insiders and outsiders” (Laverty, 2003, p. 31); and research conclusions reflecting the complex nature of the phenomenon.

Hermeneutic phenomenological research aims for depth rather than breadth of understanding (Patton, 2002) and “thick description” (Geertz, 1973) rather than generalisable findings. The study has a relatively small number of participants; therefore, it is unlikely that findings are able to be generalised. However, hermeneutic phenomenological research does not strive for objective, scientific rigour; rather, to illuminate lived experience of the phenomenon such that findings have resonance (de Witt & Ploeg, 2006). Participants for this research were recruited based on their having lived experience of the phenomenon and their willingness and capacity to discuss, and reflect on, those experiences in detail. It was important that there was sufficient diversity across participants in order to “enhance possibilities of rich and unique stories” (Laverty, 2003, p. 29; van Manen, 1997).

The hermeneutic spiral fosters a question and answer gesture demanding researcher reflexivity. Each piece of ‘data’ within a transcript has a relationship to the transcript in which it belongs, and likewise each transcript can be seen as belonging to the body of data as a whole. The researcher moves back and forth, across the in-between spaces, as parts are considered in relation to the whole, and as the researcher’s position towards the whole shapes how parts are seen and vice versa. Awareness of one’s own fore-understandings (prejudice), and the lens through which one is interpreting (horizon), as well as a willingness to throw open to the question (openness), ensures rigour in hermeneutic phenomenological research, allowing the text to “present itself in all its otherness and thus assert its own truth against one’s fore-meanings” (Gadamer, 1975/2013 p. 282). Reflexivity is fostered through journaling, which can also serve to track the researcher’s engagement with the hermeneutic spiral and the back and forth between the parts and the whole. Romanyshyn (2010; 2013) called for the researcher to pay careful attention to the unconscious processes at work, bringing these as layers. It is this consideration that extends the circle to the spiral. This fits well with my work

as a psychotherapist and my interest in unconscious process. Attention to the unconscious leads to a “deeper sense of objectivity... because the unconscious ties that all researchers have to their work have been made as conscious as possible” (Romanyshyn, 2010, p. 297). This also speaks to rigour, trustworthiness, and credibility.

Trustworthiness and credibility come through when the essence of the experience “has been adequately described in language” (van Manen, 1997, p. 10). There is a way in which the rich description “reawakens or shows us the lived quality and significance [of the phenomenon] in a fuller or deeper manner” (van Manen, 1997, p. 10). For Beck (1993), credibility is evidenced through how vivid and faithful the description of the lived experience is. I include a comment from one of the participants below. Writing to me after reading her poems, she says:

There is something about the vulnerability I feel when I read the poems. It is the rawness that comes through. The words in the poem give access to the vulnerability that can usually hide somewhat behind the everyday chat.  
(Lucy, February 2020, email correspondence)

This is like the phenomenological ‘nod’ described by van Manen (1997). Lucy is indicating the way that the poem reveals something vulnerable inherent in her experience which might otherwise be obscured “behind the everyday chat”. The “rawness” she articulates speaks to how vivid and faithful the poems are in terms of what they express of the lived experience.

In this study, the found poems crafted from the transcript data were a way to (re)present data. However, they were also a method of analysis (through crafting the poems and working with the poems as parts). Later these found poems become that which is analysed, they become another layer of data, able to be explored in relation to the whole. The poems capture something essential about the phenomenon allowing it to be recognised (the nod) by readers as an experience they have, or could have, had. I have received similar affirming feedback when reading the poems to my supervisors, at doctoral presentations, to colleagues and interested friends and from other participants.

### **Vigour and the Use of Poetry**

Patricia Leavy (2015) argued that vigour is a term that might better replace rigour in the evaluation of credibility in arts-based research projects. Whilst this study is not arts-based per se, the extensive use of poetry and poetic inquiry to explore and expound lived experience does push it somewhat outside of a more traditional hermeneutic phenomenological study where prose (particularly in the form of crafted stories) is a more typical way to represent findings. Poet Jay Parini (2008) highlighted poetry “as a language adequate to out

experience”; suggesting that “poetry allows us to articulate matters of concern in such a way that they become physical, tangible and immediate” (p. 25). This physical, tangible immediacy is articulated in Lucy’s comments to me about rawness and vulnerability (above).

Sandra Faulkner (2017) emphasised that poetic inquirers are “seeking to represent research participants in ways that honor their stories, that create social change and new ways of being while speaking to issues of presentation and research participation (p. 227). She suggested that poetic inquiry be evaluated on “the demonstration of artistic concentration, embodied experience, discovery/surprise, conditionality, narrative truth, and transformation” (Faulkner, 2017, p. 224). She argued that ‘poetic criteria’ fall between those criteria that would typically be used to evaluate scientific and artistic works. Faulkner’s poetic criteria are presented below since I found them most helpful in working with the data and creating the found poems.

### **Artistic Concentration**

Does the poetic inquiry work show careful attention to details such as punctuation, titles, figurative language and word choice? Does the work evoke feeling? How does the poetry used work to “refresh language”? (Parini, 2008, p. 25).

### **Embodied experience**

Does the reader feel with, rather than about, the work? Is the poetry an experience for the reader (rather than reading about an experience)? The imagery used in the poetry transforms, bringing something nebulous into being, into the realm of the expressed (Hirshfield, 1997). Does the poetry succeed in bringing experience to immediacy; that is, as something able to be experienced by the reader?

### **Discovery and Surprise**

Does the poetic inquiry work to show the reader something that might have been familiar in new and surprising ways? Does the poetry inspire and express wonder? How might an experiencing of poetic language in unexpected ways allow for discovery?

### **Conditionality and Narrative Truth**

There is a recognition of the work as partial, as conditional. The work rings true (the phenomenological nod) but is not necessarily ‘the truth’ (or The Truth). Rather it is *a* truth, *a* way in to the work.

## Transformation

Does the poetic inquiry provide new insights? At the end of the poem how am I changed?  
What do I know now that I did not know before?

For Faulkner (2017), these poetic criteria connect with evaluating what poetry can do “as/in/for social research” (p. 208). I found Faulkner’s criteria useful in terms of the questioning and openness that is essential in a hermeneutic phenomenological study. They become useful considerations that can be used to stimulate researcher reflexivity. In addition to Leavy’s (2015) vigour, Faulkner’s criteria lend weight to the use of poetry as against a more scientifically evaluative criteria of rigour, trustworthiness, and credibility.

## Dwelling and Reverie

Much of the analysis process involves dwelling with the data (Smythe & Spence, 2012) where the importance of openness, questioning, and journaling to track the process cannot be overstated. This stage involved careful reading and re-reading of the transcript material, listening to the recordings of the interviews, noticing what associations and thoughts emerged, and an ongoing journaling process that allowed me to track my engagement in the hermeneutic spiral. Journaling, as writing and re-writing, allowed new thoughts to form in relation to the data, and the phenomena. Like the poem *vox processus* (in Chapter 4), this is a process that entails *Gathering up stories/listening, opening, dwelling with,/seeing what comes,/what emerges,/wondering where we will travel,/who we will be when we arrive*. The line, *who we will be when we arrive*, acknowledges the way in which the researcher is changed as awareness and horizons expand through engagement with the hermeneutic spiral. Openness was vitally important during this generative and reflective stage, I worked to cultivate my capacity for Keats’ (1817/1970) negative capability which I have thought about as preparing to become pregnant with possibility (Green, 2016).

Romanyshyn (2013) described a “loitering in the vicinity of the work” (p. 223) where the researcher welcomes what presents itself in the moment. There is a sense in which we must be “[n]ot so impatient to engage the work in any conscious way, not so quick to irritate the work into meaning” (p. 223); instead, we “linger in reverie” (Romanyshyn, 2013, p. 223). How does the phenomenon show itself? In what ways might there be a sense of something of the phenomenon emerging from the data? What is ‘revealed’ in/through/by the data? What is revealed about me, about my thinking, about my prejudices? Staying open, staying questioning, always throwing open to the question what is ‘found’. I acknowledge that ‘what is found’ is in part a reflection of the interpreter, *as well as* something participants are

describing. Sometimes I felt I had a strong sense of what the participant was saying; at other times, I felt less certain. Occasionally, where there was ambiguity that reverie and staying open did not resolve, I contacted the participant to check on their meaning-making. This is consistent with a hermeneutic phenomenological approach where participants are encouraged to be part of an “ongoing conversation” (Lavery, 2003, p. 30) as well as being consistent with a feminist research ethic and the acknowledgment of researcher fallibility. The risk when listening to the ambiguous, more obscure, or harder to relate to, parts is that I ‘project’ that which I am expecting to find onto the data. As Maria Schuster (2013) said, I might “see what I want to see and ignore the possibilities afforded to me by the text” (p. 198). Not staying open would have risked being closed to those experiences which were harder to relate to, which did not resonate.

### **On Not Thinking About the Work**

I carefully read each transcript multiple times, making notes in the margins, and listened to each of the interviews several times, again making note of any associations and thoughts. The phenomenon seems ephemeral, as if it hides the more closely I look. As Heidegger (1962/2008) suggested, the more one grasps at meaning the more it recedes. There were times where I struggled to stay open. As Keats (1817/1970) argued, staying with the not-knowing is immensely difficult since we are ever reaching to find *something* to hold onto.

In dwelling with the work it was crucial to foster spaces for reverie alongside those for questioning and thinking. This felt like a process of letting something come into being, of allowing space and letting something of the phenomenon show itself. It often happened when I was ‘not thinking about the work’, walking at the beach or park and I would find myself jotting down an idea or image. There was a letting go of the work along with a letting come, in making spaces for reverie. As Romanyshyn (2013) suggested it is a case of not irritating the work into meaning but lingering with it instead. This is also congruent with the psychoanalytic attitude, cultivating an evenly suspended attention (Freud, 1923/1971) without memory and desire (Bion, 1967/2014a); a place for unthought thoughts to find a thinker (Bion, 1967/2014a; 1967/2014b).

The origins of the verb *to let* suggest the action of allowing the movement or passage of something (Harper, 2020). Letting go, or letting come, points toward allowing something to move or pass through. This idea suggested I must stop holding on so tightly in order to allow something else. Like waiting in the forest quietly, patiently, for a timid animal to come into the

glade, the more one tries to force ones will, the further it retreats. I have a sense of holding my nerve, of staying open, and not rushing to premature conclusions.

As I dwelled in this thinking and questioning space I noticed I was thinking about the data in terms of three essential parts of the phenomenon. These were looking at others; looking at self; and being looked at. This initial gathering of the data into three piles afforded me some respite and allowed me to continue dwelling. When I first thought about how to write my research question in an open, and phenomenological way I used “looking” and “being looked at”. This original interpretation of the phenomenon as a whole was broadened to include ‘looking at self’. Many nuanced ‘subcategories’ comprise these three essential parts. For example, the experience of being looked at by one’s mother is qualitatively different from the experience of being looked at by a man who is a stranger.

### **On Shining and What Was Actually Done**

Gadamer’s notion of shining is useful for illuminating the initial stage of working with the data that follows on from dwelling, or “loitering in the vicinity” (Romanyshyn, 2013, p. 223).

Shining is related to beauty, radiance, and appearance (the German *scheinen*, meaning shining, also means ‘to appear’). Gadamer (1975/2013) spoke of *das Einleuchtende* (the illuminating) and also *einleuchtend* (what is evident, revealed or “shining in”, p. 501). He reminded us that “[t]o shine’ means to shine on something, and so to make that on which the light falls appear” (Gadamer, 1975/2013, p. 498). By allowing one’s reverie to shine on the text, and through applying one’s attention and thinking to what it says about the phenomenon, the light of the word is focused onto the text’s dark (more obscure) surface. In this process, certain phrases, words and meanings shine from the text, attracting our attention.

Selecting shining language became a way to sort through the data. What is shining is that which allows us a glimpse of the phenomenon, something which shines out from the text, reflecting something back to us, deepening our understanding as we engage in the hermeneutic spiral of deepening understanding. It was also important to pay attention to what was not said, or what is between the lines of what was said (Kvale, 1996). The following example from Kate’s transcript shows how meanings can emerge from between the lines.

### **Crafting a Found Poem**

Here I provide an example of working with the data and crafting a ‘found’ poem (Butler-Kisber, 2002; Richardson, 1993). A found poem refers to the taking of words, phrases, or passages found in a text, in this case an interview transcript, and working them into poetic form through

adding line breaks, changing spacing, and paying attention to rhythm, pauses, and syntax (Butler-Kisber, 2002). Figure 1 (p. 80) shows part of Kate's transcript. This section illuminates something important about the experience of looking at others, in this case via a music video watched at the gym. The highlighted words show what shone out for me as I read, re-read and make notes. I am engaged here in the process of dwelling with the data through the activities of reading, writing and thinking.

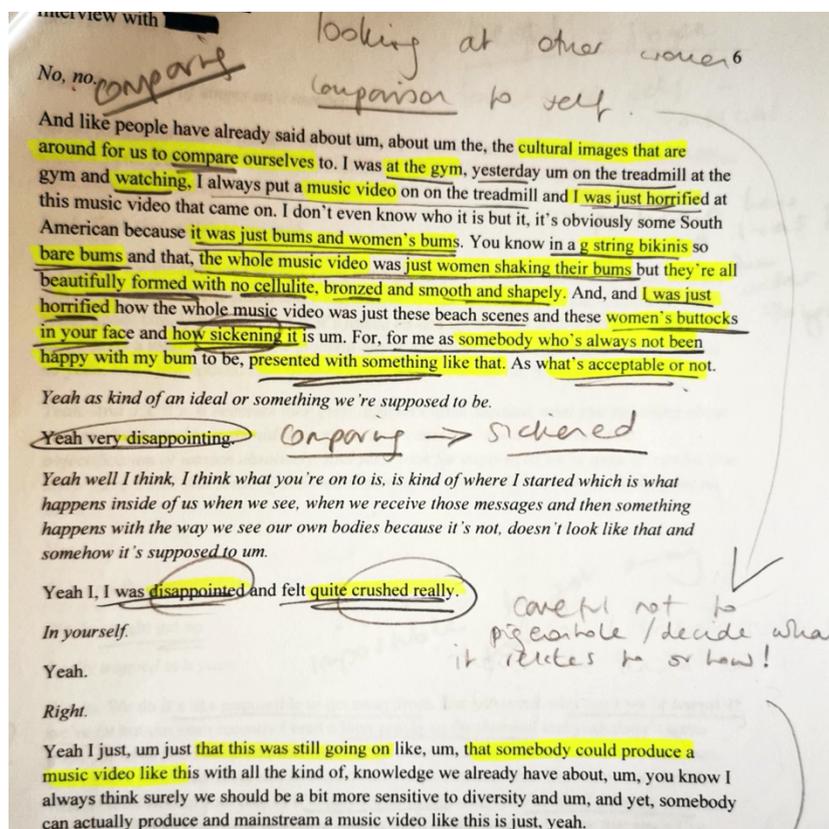


Figure 1. Shining words in the data, making toward being a found poem

I have come to think about these selections as glimpses of subjective experience. The words selected were words that described experience. Often evocative, they carry the emotional tone and highlight something about the participant's experience of the phenomenon that is rarely discussed directly; instead it is alluded to in passing or only mentioned obliquely.

This is an intuitive process, a feeling into what is evoked through reading and re-reading the data. The researcher is working to disclose meaning. Through letting go, letting come, and seeing what emerges, something about the phenomenon is revealed. Careful attention is paid to certain words and phrases that convey the essential meaning often inherent in more colloquial language.

I transferred the words and phrases that shone to a journal because I prefer to handwrite at this stage (shown in Figure 2). Handwriting allows something that typing does not and working

in pencil allowed a greater sense of freedom, a nod to the conditional nature of any conclusions.

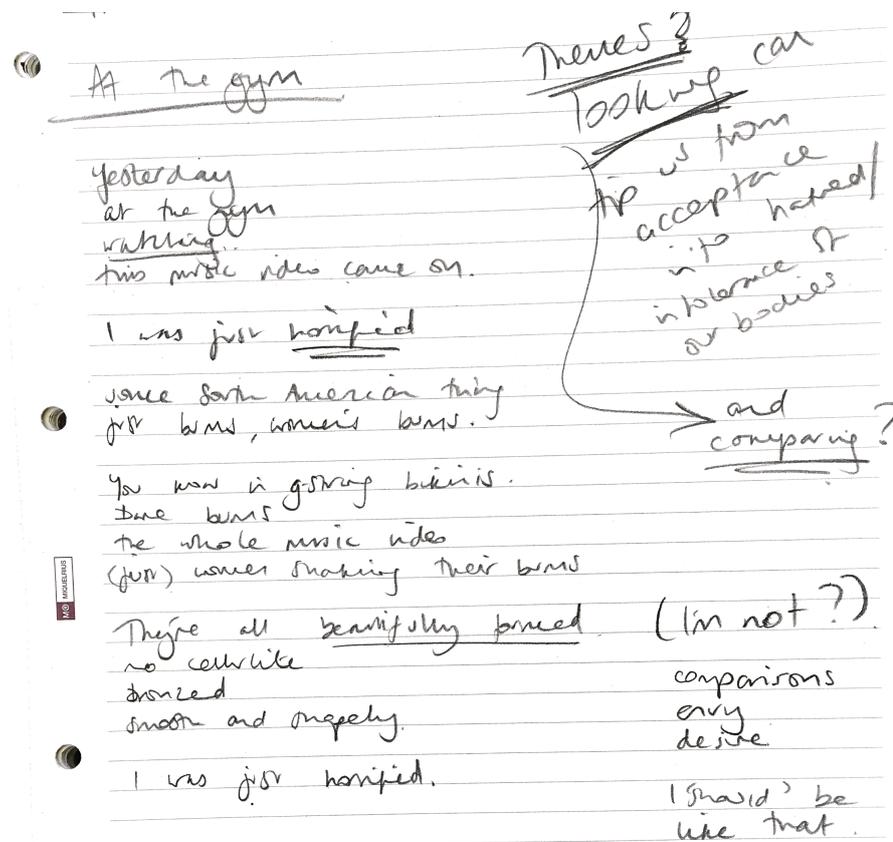


Figure 2. Journaling the process, tracking the hermeneutic spiral of reading, thinking, and writing

On the left of the image are the words taken from the original transcript, beginning to resemble a poem. These are the words that shine light on experience near-ness. On the right are the notes I made as I reflected on the emerging 'poem' (part) and my sense of it as it becomes its own 'whole', something that can be considered on its own merits. These notes reflect my thoughts about how this particular aspect of experience might relate to the phenomenon. This was a way of dwelling with an aspect of the transcript in a much more detailed way. Sometimes a single poem would lead to pages of spontaneous writing, sometimes only a note or few lines. It was the allowing that was important. Even at this early, unpolished stage, the beginning found poem reaches the reader in a different way from the transcript data itself.

The first version of the found poem, *At the gym*, is below. This initial version is the closest to the actual words as they appeared in the transcript. As I played with alternatives I was paying attention to Faulkner's (2017) artistic concentration and to the other criteria she outlines, such as embodied experience. In crafting the poems there is a "moving closer and closer to finding

just the right voice to convey [the] meaning” (Lenz, 1992, p. 598). Working with the poem this way other possible versions presented themselves. These alternative versions follow.

## I

### **At the gym**

Yesterday  
at the gym, watching  
this music video came on  
I was just horrified  
some South American thing.  
Just bums,  
women’s bums.  
You know, in g-string bikinis?  
Bare bums  
the whole music video,  
women shaking their bums.  
They’re all beautifully formed  
bronzed,  
smooth and shapely  
no cellulite.  
I was just horrified  
the whole video  
these beach scenes and  
these women’s buttocks  
in your face,  
sickening  
for me, somebody who’s never been happy with my bum  
to be presented with something like that  
as what’s acceptable  
very disappointing  
I was disappointed,  
crushed really.

In this version “always not been” is changed to “never been” for ease of reading, reflective of how natural speech sometimes has irregularities that show up in the written form. I kept this revision throughout all the versions of this poem, subsequent versions of which follow (numbered II through V). I include them here to allow the reader to get a sense of the process and also to show the different permutations and possibilities offered by each poem. Notice how the sense of meaning derived through each one, the feeling from each poem, is subtly different.

## II

### **Yesterday at the gym**

this music video came on,  
some South American,  
women's bums,  
g-string bikinis, you know?  
Bare bums,  
the whole music video  
women shaking their bums  
bronzed and beautifully formed  
no cellulite  
smooth and shapely

I was just horrified  
the whole music video  
beach scenes  
bare bums  
buttocks in your face  
sickening  
for me, being presented  
with something like that  
I've never been happy with my bum  
So disappointed,  
crushed.

## III

### **Treadmill**

At the gym  
watching  
music video  
bare bums  
women's bums  
beach bums  
g-string-bikini-cellulite-free bums  
bronzed and beautifully formed  
bums  
women shaking their  
smooth and shapely bums  
in your face  
And I'm sickened  
never been happy with my bum  
I'm horrified  
left disappointed,  
crushed

#### IV

##### **Watching**

music video  
of bare bums  
women's bums  
beach bums  
g-string-bikini-clad-cellulite-free bums  
women shaking their  
bronzed and beautifully formed  
smooth and shapely bums  
in your face

not my bum  
disappointed  
disappointing

I find myself drawn to versions III and IV of the poem because they seem to bring forth more of what was between the lines (Kvale, 1996); that is, Kate's sense of disappointment "that someone can actually produce a mainstream music video like this" and perhaps also her disappointment with her own body. I thought about the ways in which, when faced with something that appears 'perfect', or in this case, "bronzed and beautifully formed", one ends up comparing, as Kate points out. Something about this sickens Kate. She uses the word "crushed" to convey a sense of how this experience leaves her feeling. In a hermeneutic detour I checked on the meaning of the word 'crushed'. It can mean to squeeze or force by pressure so that something is altered, or its structure destroyed. It can mean to squeeze something together into one big mass or reduce into particles by pounding or grinding. It can mean to subdue something completely; a rebellion might be crushed for example. Emotionally, crushed refers to being caused overwhelming emotional pain. The word can also indicate some brutal force that overwhelms, oppresses, or burdens. Exploring the meanings, as well as the origins, of a word was something I did regularly throughout the research process. It helped stimulate thinking, often allowing surprising new ways of interpreting the data. Some found poems held a certain resonance. Perhaps connected with the way a participant used language, or a certain turn of phrase or use of a word, these became poems that I spent time with and found myself wanting to develop and work on, in turn deepening my understanding of the phenomenon.

For example, working on Kate's poem with an awareness of the word crushed led to the crafting of the poem below. This is not a found poem but rather a poem generated through dwelling with the data, through careful attention to what the text is saying and through listening for what is said between the lines. I have called these poems insight poems because they allowed a closer engagement with the data and a deepening of understanding.

### **Crushed**

watching you  
perfect,  
a bronze sculpture,  
formed by flame  
cast smooth and hard,  
diminishing me  
your image grinds  
pounds like surf  
until I can't hear myself  
can't see me the same  
uprising defeated,  
your image prevails  
a sickness  
in my psyche  
I cannot unsee.

### **Manifold Layers of Data**

At the end of this part of the process I had nearly 250 found poems. Some of these were crafted more thoroughly into insight poems, as with the example above. The found poems themselves remained very close to the participants' original wording. This allowed a balance between participants' voice (found poems) and my interpretations (more pronounced in the crafted poems). The hermeneutic spiral supports movement between these layers of data. Crafting and working with the poems provided a 'way in' to the phenomenon (Romanyshyn, 2013). Crafting poems allowed the "small quiet part to be illuminated by the larger and louder corpus in which it is embedded" (Smith, 2011, p. 13). In this way, poetic inquiry facilitated the emergence of obscured qualities relating to the experience.

The next phase of analysing the data focused on working with the found poems. I read and re-read the found poems, asking 'how essential is it to the experience?' How well does it disclose the meaning? (Eatough & Smith, 2017).

I printed the found poems, cutting out each one so that I could move them around and play with them as parts and whole, reshaping and reforming the 'whole' as my thinking changed and developed. I made notes on the back of each found poem.

I grouped the found poems loosely according to whether they spoke to the experiences of being looked at, of looking at others, or looking at self. Then I added to my notes a detail or two addressing 'what is being described here'?

I used the notes generated from the found poetry to begin identifying parts that seemed essential to the phenomena; for example, in the group of found poems that related to the

experience of looking at others there was a smaller subsection of poems that described a quality of admiration or appreciation. This quality of admiration, once identified, seemed to enhance the cohesiveness of the found poems that I had set aside as belonging together because they had something to say about admiration or looking as admiring and/or appreciating. This sense of 'rightness', of being a good fit, provided a check in terms of rigour.

### **Working the Data Poetically**

I used poetic inquiry and poetry to *do* different things with the data. As previously described, the found poems were a way to (re)present data, they expressed and promoted participant voice. The found poems then became data to be analysed in another layer of the hermeneutic spiral. Poems such as *Crushed*, from Kate's transcript, developed and extended participant voices in a co-created interplay with the researcher's voice representing a fusion of horizons (Gadamer, 1975/2013). The insight poems facilitated a *seeing into* the work that feels as if it moves beyond the found poems. It is important to note that it is through the activities of reading, thinking and writing (including re-writing) that a deepening understanding of the phenomenon emerges over time. Understanding becomes clearer as one moves back and forth between the parts and whole.

I then wrote about these parts of the experience; looking at others, looking at self, and being looked at, in more detail, drawing on my associations to myth and wider culture, thinking about them in relation to literature and not censoring myself. I allowed myself to free write during this phase (something I have tried to cultivate throughout this study) and to permit all of my associations and wonderings. Writing in this way allowed new thought forms to emerge. I made 'found' poems from my writing, capturing important words and phrases that revealed and evoked experience. The poems created in this part of the process acted as a summary for each of the parts of the phenomenon. These summary poems facilitated a further deepening of my engagement with the hermeneutic spiral.

### **Crafting the Choral Poem**

Making the summary poems gave me an idea. I had been looking for a way to bring forth participant voice in combination with crafting something more poetic. Taking each overarching section of the found poems in turn (looking at others; looking at self; and being looked at) I spread out all the poems comprising each section (something of this is shown in Figure 3 below).





Figure 4. Playing with lines of what would become a 'choral poem', the cut lines allow play, movement and different possibilities

This process allowed me to play with creating different poems until the final choral poem for each data chapter emerged. Each of the data chapters has its own choral poem, called so because they are comprised of multiple voices. The word choral comes to us from the Greek, *choros*, meaning round dance or band of dancers in a play. This association acknowledges that each choral poem is made up of the unique contributions from each participant as they are woven together in a dance that comprises a whole. A chorus is designed for vocal performance, reminding me how much more powerful poetry is spoken aloud than read to oneself. It is hoped that in each choral poem voices sing from the text to enable the reader to feel the resonance of the experience as lived.

### Writing as Fleshing Out

Laurel Richardson (2000) considered the writing process to be a method of inquiry, describing it as “a way of finding out about yourself and your topic” (p. 923). Congruent with hermeneutic analysis, I had a sense of *writing to find out*. Writing, thinking, questioning and rewriting have helped clarify the phenomenon. Engaging in this process helped me to see what I was looking at more clearly and to flesh it out such that it resonates with the reader, providing a felt sense of the lived experience described and leading to appropriately rich, complex descriptions of

the phenomenon. Writing, particularly free writing—that looks to process rather than product—was used to foster spaces for reverie and thinking, opening up new thoughts and new ways of seeing. The use of different kinds of poetry generated from the data (found poems, insight poems, and choral poems) show how writing inspired thinking and further writing, how creating poetry cultivated richer thinking, and so on in the hermeneutic spiral of deepening understanding.

Such writing also happened alongside the creation of poems. Often the process was staggered. Poems would kick-start writing, further poems would seem to fall out from that writing, generating more complex, nuanced writing, helping refine my understandings of the phenomenon. There was a sense of following my nose, doing what seemed to want to come next, that is difficult to articulate. I tried not to edit, censor or overthink; and was often not certain as to how (or if) each ‘part’ fitted with the whole. I was writing to inquire and to reveal. The best metaphor I can offer here is that writing allowed for clarity as a reflected image might come into focus when a body of water is still and peaceful. When the surface is choppy the image is blurred, unfocused. As something settles a clear picture emerges. At the same time there is an acknowledgement that, like the use of pencil in my journal, the writing was always tentative and unfinished. It is making its way towards something. Writing thus became the fertile ground from which understanding of the phenomena could flourish.

### **Chapter Summary**

In this chapter I have described how I engaged in a hermeneutic-phenomenological-poetic method. The chapter has outlined the method used in this research, providing examples of working with the data in order to reveal the experience-near nature of the phenomenon. It has described data collection, analysis and (re)presentation processes, setting out how poetry was used to both condense and disclose essential meaning, offering the reader insight into a hermeneutic phenomenological approach that utilises poetic inquiry. The chapter has also provided reflections on rigour, trustworthiness and credibility in hermeneutic phenomenological research, and vigour in poetic inquiry; alongside a description of how the research method fits with the processes of dwelling and reverie, drawing on understandings from my context as a psychotherapist.

The following three chapters present the research findings weaving prose and poetry throughout.

## 6. LOOKING AT OTHERS

This chapter explores women's experiences of looking at others. The writing captures something of that which is often difficult to pin down. Whilst this chapter focuses on looking at others, questions arise that suggest links with the experiences of looking at self and being looked at. Some of these questions throw up notions of the complexity of the phenomenon and the interwovenness of looking (at others and self) and being looked at. Whilst each of these experiences is considered in its own 'chapter', there is interplay between the data 'chapters' which will be explored more fully in the discussion.

### Introduction

Across all the data, the experience of looking at others had the smallest 'pile' of found poems associated with it. I was interested in this. Do women really not look at others? Certainly, there was data suggesting that we do look. So then, are we not (as) aware of looking at others? Perhaps there is less focus on, or less awareness of, looking at others than compared with say, experiences of being looked at. Are we loathe to admit that we look at others? Maybe there is something about the experience of looking at others that is less conscious than our experiences of being looked at, or looking at ourselves? A sense of shame in our looking at others came through in the data, such that perhaps we want to hide it away or at least take care not to draw attention to it.

The experience of looking at others is nuanced, having different flavours or qualities. Some *looking at* has an appreciative, perhaps even admiring, quality. There is Jackie's appreciation of the client's body before her on the massage table, or her admiration of the boldness and confidence of the larger women dancing in an online video. There is Zahira's noticing of how women hold themselves, whether they are confident, whether they can laugh out loud; Nina's appreciation of a handsome, younger male body; and Kate's appreciation of her son's youth and beauty. Some of the looking at others connects more readily with clothing and how others choose to present themselves rather than an overt consideration of another's body; for example, Lucy's admiration and appreciation of women whose appearance "challenges the boundaries". Some of the looking at others has a comparative, perhaps even envying, quality such as Isabelle's recalling of a girls' weekend away and her awareness of a momentary longing to have the body of a friend, a body that seemed more desirable somehow.

Some of the looking at others has a more judgmental or confrontational feel, like Diane's story about the receptionist whom she liked after hearing her voice on the phone, and then disliked, maybe even felt repulsed by, on meeting her in person and discovering she was considerably overweight. Sometimes the experience of looking at another evokes difficult feelings such as repulsion, horror or disgust, such as Meg's memory of looking at her mother's body.

### **Appreciating, Enjoying, and Admiring**

Appreciating describes the act of estimating the qualities of things, assigning them their 'proper' value but also a clearness of perception, recognition of the aesthetics of a thing. Appreciating and admiring that which is looked at, engendered through looking at others, shines through in Jackie's transcript. The origins of admire are "to regard with wonder, to marvel at". As I sat with Jackie, I could literally *feel* appreciation and a sense of marvel or wonder humming through my own body. How she spoke about her clients' bodies sparked something in me that felt like an appreciation for my own body, as if seeing, or perhaps being seen, through her eyes. If appreciating is to assign the proper value to, then I could feel my valuing of my body increase as I felt with Jackie. In admiring there is a sense of pleasure and awe as we marvel at the object of our admiration.

### **Beautiful machinery**

Someone will come  
and be on the table  
I'll have to move their legs  
for whatever reason.  
They go, *oh god I haven't shaved,*  
I'm like, *I don't care about that.*

I'm thinking about my massage,  
what's going to help,  
which muscles are under the skin,  
what do I need to find and work on?

The skin and the body,  
such a beautiful piece of machinery  
you can't abuse it  
you can't disrespect it.

Bodies are beautiful  
and I'm in awe!

[From Jackie's transcript, 30/11/18, p. 10]

I found myself at this point in the interview wanting to be Jackie's client, wanting to be looked at by her in this way, wanting to be really appreciated, perhaps wanting for myself some of her

capacity to appreciate the body in the way she describes—with awe. This felt like an in-the-moment-experience of how looking and being looked at can be difficult to separate out. As we discuss Jackie’s looking at others I can feel something shift in how I look at myself. Perhaps the same is true for Jackie, as she comes to appreciate others’ bodies through her work as a massage therapist. I wonder if how she looks at herself shifts and whether she comes to appreciate her own body more. A sense of appreciation in looking at others came through in Meg’s interview. The poem below, *In my job*, captures something of Meg’s experience of looking at other women in her role as a midwife and the moment as she notices, whilst talking, how this is so radically different from how she looks at her own body. She describes seeing her clients’ bodies as strong, capable, powerful even, in the “desperately intimate” space of giving birth (Meg, p. 7), and her recognition that this is so different from how she treats (and looks at) her own body is a poignant and painful moment in our discussion, stirring up emotion in Meg as she talks.

**In my job**

I see a lot of women’s bodies  
a body is a body.

I don’t make judgements  
about other women’s bodies,

friends have been very overweight  
I don’t make judgements

their bodies looking a certain way  
doesn’t change how I feel about them

but that’s entirely different to my experience  
of my own body.

I have always judged  
my own body

accepting of other people’s bodies  
but not mine

I celebrate those women’s bodies  
what they’re capable of

what they’ve just done, growing babies  
birthing babies,

just the women  
it’s a very intimate space

that woman is naked and  
I’m drying her body

I'm suturing her body  
in that moment,

the connection  
so desperately intimate.

How much weight is on her body  
the wrinkles on her body

whether she's overweight  
what her breasts look like

the scars on her body,  
they don't mean anything

they don't mean anything  
the woman is the woman.

Her body is not separate to who she is as a person  
*Oh my lord, I did not know that was there*  
*I did not know that was there*  
totally accepting of that woman's body

I see the whole of her  
something shines through.

Her body is just the package  
she is this whole being

her body is only a part  
it's not the entirety.

In my job  
I see the miracle.

[From Meg's transcript, 18/2/18, pp. 1-7]

Meg's reflection on her experience of looking at others prompts her to drop into a different present-moment experience, one where she recognises something in herself that comes to light through her ability to appreciate it in another. Exclaiming, "Oh my lord I did not know that was there", she recognises that whilst she accepts that another woman's body is "not the entirety", and that she would not judge others' bodies. This is "entirely different to [her] experience of [her] own body".

There is an appreciative, almost reverent, quality to the looking Meg describes as she looks so tenderly on a body that has recently given birth. There is a sense of the awe and wonder that this kind of looking engenders. Jackie can also experience awe at the miracle of the body before her. There is a protectiveness in their associations to looking at others, a valuing of the human body, appreciating the power of the body and all that it is capable of. As this looking at

others is reflected upon, it also facilitates a *seeing oneself afresh* as those who look marvel at the miracle of the human body and are filled with awe and then might see themselves differently.

Anna describes an appreciation of youth and beauty that contains elements of admiration, pleasure and enjoyment. The found poem below helps disclose this.

### **Enjoying looking**

I've been doing that quite overtly  
I love looking at women  
I love women!  
Not in a sexual sense  
but just loving women's bodies, enjoying.  
Sometimes feeling a bit ashamed  
I have to hold that back  
I feel a bit self-conscious,  
embarrassed.  
Embarrassed about enjoying looking  
at young women  
*more than boys*  
enjoying looking at girls.  
I look at their bodies  
I imagine sometimes what's underneath their clothes  
I think as women we are more attractive physically  
more delightful  
more interesting to look at  
I feel sad when I see young women  
making themselves pretty in some unnatural way.  
I enjoy the natural beauty of a woman's body  
Just as it is

[From Anna's transcript, 30/5/18, p. 8]

Anna acknowledges her embarrassment and discomfort in admitting her enjoyment of looking at young women's bodies. She alludes to feeling some shame. Anna explains that in her experience looking at others is something that is more widely done. Her sense is that looking in a New Zealand context is different from her European context. She says, "where I come from you walk into a café and people turn. Who's coming in? What's she wearing?" (p. 7). On living in New Zealand, and the decrease in looking and being looked at, she comments, "I'm used to it now, no one turning their head, women don't either. Maybe there isn't that strong aspect of comparison or it is more hidden here" (Anna, p. 7). Perhaps these differences in her experience offer a glimpse into her shame and embarrassment about looking at others. There is a sense that she is doing something that transgresses an unspoken rule of New Zealand society. Findings from my previous research (Green, 2016) suggest that women's desire can

be discouraged in a Western cultural context and I wonder whether this contributes to Anna's shame and embarrassment at finding pleasure in looking.

Lucy described her enjoyment of and appreciation for how others put clothing together in surprising ways.

**What I really enjoy**

I'm really drawn to the way  
other people put themselves together  
what it means for them  
I notice  
the way they put an outfit together  
that says a lot about a person.

I notice clothing more than body shape  
the way they put themselves together  
the way they work with their body.

When I see something that really challenges  
the boundaries  
people who really push that boundary,  
that's what I really enjoy.  
And for me, how I dress  
not in an outrageous way  
but definitely in a way  
that will make people  
look.

[From Lucy's transcript, 5/7/18, p. 1]

Lucy enjoys and appreciates "people who really push that boundary". She takes care in her own appearance, perhaps because this is something she focuses on in others. She describes how she uses her clothing to "make people look", again suggesting that looking at (others and self) entwines with being looked at. A painfully shy, quiet child, Lucy comments that it has been difficult for her to find her voice. Her looking at (or to) others is perhaps part of her figuring out a way to 'say something' about herself that she was unable to find words for; *the way they put an outfit together/that says a lot about a person*. Thus, the way she puts an outfit together (to "make people look") is a way to make a statement or to be heard. Looking at others inspires her to push boundaries with her clothing choices.

The qualities of appreciating, enjoying and admiring in looking at others were evident in other transcripts. In Isabelle's admiring of her growing children's youth and beauty; in Kjel's enjoying commenting on what she appreciated as beautiful in others; in Zahira's obvious delight in looking at women, noticing how much she enjoyed their laughter. These qualities

contain elements of inspiration and delight. It becomes clear that looking at others can impact the way we see and feel about ourselves. When I think about the movement between looking at others and looking at self I find myself asking whether we might enjoy in others the things that we would like to cultivate in ourselves. This idea traces a movement through observing and noticing, to appreciation, admiration and enjoyment through to what might be a more desirous or envying looking, and a rejecting, judgmental looking, both of which also came through in the data. Prior to exploring the latter I want to take a moment to consider the in between space. What happens when we move *just* beyond admiring or appreciating? We might call this being inspired. It is the moment before we tip into an envying (I want that) looking or a judgmental (I don't want that) looking. The origins of the word inspire are "to prompt or induce someone to do something" (Harper, 2020, n.p.). To blow into or breathe upon, to inspire, incite or inflame, from the Latin, *inspirare*. In the data this inspiration, this being prompted, potentially to envy or judgement, felt like a small, quiet part in between louder surrounding elements.

### **Moments of Inspiration**

Zahira notices women and their comfort. Like Lucy, she notices clothing; "how the clothes sit on them" and their body language, "the way they hold themselves". Like Rachel and Meg, her attention can fall on women in larger bodies and she particularly mentions two female friends who are "voluptuous... curvy... just gorgeous [with] this comfort about them" (Zahira, p. 7).

#### **I find myself looking all the time**

I find myself looking at women,  
not so much men.  
I have to stop myself sometimes  
I feel like I'm staring,  
noticing their comfort in their bodies.  
I've got a couple of girlfriends  
I would describe as voluptuous.  
They're curvy and they're gorgeous.  
but they have this comfort about them  
they're happy in what they wear.  
So when I'm looking,  
I'm looking at women  
how the clothes sit on them  
my perception of their comfort levels.  
It's the body language,  
the way they hold themselves,  
chest forward  
shoulders back,

*this is who I am in the world.*

There's no hiding.  
I love it when they laugh.  
I love looking,  
I enjoy it.

[From Zahira's transcript, 11/2/19, p. 7]

There is a sense here of moving between a looking at others and a looking at self. Perhaps this is the process of comparison that Anna describes. There is a clear sense of appreciation for these curvy and gorgeous women who can laugh without hiding. Zahira points out that in Indian culture "women are meant to be demure and quiet and when the respective groom comes around you deliver the tea on the tray and keep your eyes down" (p. 7). I imagine in Zahira's looking at these women, her noticing how they move through the world without hiding, and with such ease and comfort, that she finds inspiration. This is a kind of looking at as a *looking to*. A sort of *they have something I'd like to cultivate*, much like Lucy looks at others' clothing choices and is inspired. Zahira feels like she is staring, soaking up these women's apparent ease and comfort in their bodies. This found poem has similar qualities of appreciation, enjoyment and admiration but also helps disclose something about inspiration, about how we might be moved or inflamed to do something differently. It's as if something is breathed into us from outside, or perhaps we breathe it in. This feels like the edge of something I was pondering with Meg's and Jackie's experiences. It feels close to some of my own experiences (in Chapter 1). Looking at others might evoke changes in how we see ourselves, feel about ourselves, or even how we act in the world.

Zahira describes her comfort in her body as hard won. It has taken her a long time to feel more at ease in her body and some of that might have come from her weight loss which she describes as leaving her feeling "really comfortable... healthy in [her] body for the first time" (p. 4). The women she is looking at seem to move through the world differently from Zahira who, with a history of sexual abuse, was aware that she was hiding, especially her body and anything feminine about herself so as not to attract attention from men.

Anna also seems to look at/to others for inspiration. There is a sense of comparison, a *looking to see what is done here* kind of checking. Noticing the differences between Europe and New Zealand, for example in how women dress, her looking informs her as to, "What's done here? Am I fitting in?" (Anna, p. 8). Again, there is a moving back and forth between self and those who are looked at. Anna relates this to "that question of adaptation" (p. 8), asking herself, "what am I comfortable with?... because it's tiring to try and adapt all the time" (p. 7). The suggestion that she tries to adapt, to figure out *what's done here? Am I fitting in?* reveals the interplay between self and other, the comparing in our looking. Our looking at others can inspire us to want to change or 'do something' in response to what is looked at. There can be a tension between looking at others and looking at self which can move beyond appreciating

and enjoyment, leading to a longing for that which we do not have. Our looking at others alerts our shortcomings, to something that we desire for ourselves.

### **Wishing For, Envy and Coveting**

Looking at as *Appreciating, Enjoying and Admiring* sits at one edge of an experience that is connected with a process of comparison (self with others) and which can lead to a wishing for, envying and/or coveting feelings. Covet is a somewhat archaic term but it contains a sense of eagerly wishing for. Etymologically speaking covet is “to desire or wish for inordinately without regard for the rights of others” (Harper, 2020, n.p.). Some participants used the word envy which has its origins in the Latin, ‘to see into with malice’. Like covet, envy has an element of wanting something without regard for others’ rights. Both envy and covet have an element of a desire to obtain or possess for oneself. It might be more experience-near to think of a longing to have that which is looked at (and appreciated and/or admired) for one’s own and perhaps an edge of wanting to take that thing or wishing the other person did not have what we want.

Meg looks at a larger-bodied woman on the beach and wishes she had her confidence; she looks at a woman with a more “ideal body” and is aware of herself wishing she had a body like that. Meg admires the woman in the larger body for her bravery, but she wants the more slender, “ideal” body. I might say she envies the confidence and freedom of the former and the physical appearance of the latter.

Isabelle uses the words “comparison” and “envy”, a “sort of lining up and comparing” (p. 2) that happens in her noticing of women’s bodies. She is aware that her looking at others tends to focus on the things she is not happy about with her own body.

### **A kind of envy**

I'm sort of ashamed to say that I look at others  
I like to think that I don't do it on a conscious level  
And I don't do it in a kind of like *oh yuck* way.  
I do it in a sort of comparative way  
in an envy kind of a way.

I think I do it much less  
I used to do it and feel bad about myself  
It was the sort of lining up and comparing  
the perfect  
you know, that we all get splashed at us all the time?

I notice myself doing it less much less.  
But I do notice.  
I notice bodies.  
And women's bodies more than men's bodies.

It's about me looking at other people  
more observing than being observed  
But it's things that I'm not happy about  
in my own body that I look at say,  
women's legs...

If I think, *they've got great looking legs*  
I kind of feel envy about that

[From Isabelle's transcript, 5/7/18, pp. 2]

There is a quality of appreciation in Isabelle's words, she can appreciate "great looking legs", but the covetous or envious aspect is sparked by "things I'm not happy about in my own body" (p. 2). This "lining up and comparing/the perfect... that we get splashed at us all the time" (p. 2) reveals a process of comparison that nestles at the heart of this interconnection between looking at others and looking at self. That Isabelle feels shame admitting her envy might relate to a cultural (or religious) sense of envy as sinful or the more psychoanalytic understanding that envy contains within it an anger that the other has something we want and desire, along with our impulse to take it away or spoil it (Bott-Spillius et al., 2011).

### **Freshman year**

I gained a huge amount of weight  
my mother wasn't controlling my food anymore

control was a thing  
she would serve our portions

never enough  
*are you sure you want more?*

Coming home for summer vacation  
looking through fashion magazines

I was fixated on being able to see  
the woman's collarbones

Mine had disappeared  
I remember longing for that definition

the femininity,  
I felt masculine

And this was the 70s  
femininity was not something to be longed for

but having that extra weight  
it felt like I'd lost my desirability

looking at those magazines  
so much about what's desirable

[From Julie's transcript, 18/4/18, p. 24]

Julie's looking at others in magazines discloses the comparison at work and the resulting "longing for that definition". This is a kind of inspiration in the original sense, a way in which we are moved to change something or do something, a way in which we are inflamed. Here, the inspiration, the inflammation that happens with the comparison, left Julie feeling undesirable and wanting to change something.

This sense of needing to change something, of not feeling satisfied with how one is was reflected in several transcripts. Isabelle ends up feeling bad about herself after comparing. When Kjel comments that she appreciates and admires "lovely broad hips" and the "curve of a woman" (p. 4) there is also a longing for the same curves; there is a wished-for-ness. As a transwoman, Kjel's relationship with her body is complex. Like Zahira, her comfort and OK-ness in her body feels hard won.

### **The curve of a woman**

I've thought a lot  
about  
what I see in women,  
what I look at,  
I'm definitely bisexual  
I could go with either sex

but with women  
I focus on the  
    parts  
        of  
    them  
I'm lacking.

I have a bit of a hip fetish,  
lovely broad hips.  
I've hated my genetalia  
for a lot of years...  
    self-harmed, all sorts,  
so that    c  
            u        e  
            r    v  
                    of a woman

I just love that shape  
I love seeing women,  
women's silhouettes.

[From Kjel's transcript, 1/12/18, p. 4]

Looking at others involves a process of comparison with self and can spark feelings of being less than; a sense of inadequacy which can lead to a wishing for or envying.

### **Inspiration and Igniting Wanting**

As well as stirring envy, looking at others potentially provokes other "not-good-feelings" and a "self-criticalness" (Lucy, pp. 11-12) as shown in the following poem below.

### **The photo-shopping**

I forget they do it.  
I'm looking at media,  
*oh, wow, look at her body  
that's amazing.*  
It sparks something in me.  
*I should go to the gym today.*  
I forget that she's been touched up,  
that there might have been  
a few more bumps  
than the image shows.  
It blows my mind.  
I have to remind myself  
it's not fully real.

Why are we doing this?  
What are we achieving?  
Apart from making people think negatively about their own body?  
They're trying to make money  
What are they trying to create in the viewer?  
Desire?  
In me it creates a sense of motivation  
to be healthy, to go to the gym, to be toned.  
But it also creates a sense of impossibility  
It creates a not-good feeling  
a self-criticalness  
which then makes me angry.  
This huge industry  
plastering this unrealistic body  
as the way to be desirable,  
the way to be noticed,  
to be good enough.  
The media, Instagram, those things  
have so much power.  
Those images tap into your insecurities  
and it's not real.  
But you see all those wonderful lives  
and you think  
*I'd like to have that body*  
And you don't know anything about that person  
whether they're happy or sad.  
All you see is this photo-shopped,  
perfect image.  
You don't see inside,  
where they might be hurting.  
You don't see any of that.

Those images can ignite a wanting.  
A wanting to have that lifestyle, that body.  
It ignites a perfectionistic drive.  
It's an envy.

[From Lucy's transcript, 7/5/18, pp. 11-12]

This poem reveals the desire that is created in Lucy, how it can inspire motivation, prompting her to go to the gym, to get toned and healthy. It also creates self-criticalness in her which then generates anger. Lucy acknowledges how her looking “sparks something”, how those images “tap into” insecurities. The phrase “ignite a wanting” links to the original meaning of *inspire*, something becomes inflamed, something is incited and there is an inducement to ‘do something’. This calls to mind how one might blow on an ember or spark to get a fire going. Looking at others can get something going inside of us. Like Meg, there is a sense of “wow, look at her body” and an “I'd like to have that body” but this “creates a not-good feeling... a self-criticalness” (p. 11) leaving Lucy with a sense of less-than-ness. What Lucy identifies in what is sparked can be both positive—“motivation” and negative—“a sense of impossibility”; I



The following note is from my process journal and relates to my thinking about elements of Kate's transcript (above) and this idea of 'inspiration' of what is breathed into us, incited in us, or what we might breathe in:

*The difference between inner and outer? The body/self as a kind of membrane? Between 'looking at others' and 'being looked at' there's this body, this self? What is compared? Do we put ourselves above or below? Are we reaching or rejecting? Desirous or dismissive? Drawn to or repelled by? Kate starts interview saying she doesn't know how much help she'll be because she's not body conscious/isn't aware of other people looking etc. We start the interview, and it's, "I've always been overweight, my mother was overweight". She's kind of feeling OK about her body and then she's watching a music video in the gym, women with big, bronzed, perfectly formed bottoms/tiny bikinis, grinding about on the beach, and then she's talking about how assaulting that is to her sense of her own body. Maybe we're walking around feeling okay in and of ourselves, and then just a little thing gets in and suddenly we're seeing ourselves from the outside in? (Process Journal, Dec. 2018)*

The idea of inspiration as inciting or inflaming alongside this picture of 'blowing into' or 'breathing upon' (from the original Latin, *inspirare*) in the wake of the 2020 bushfires in Australia leaves me with the notion of something smouldering away quietly, say how we might look at ourselves, and then an ember comes along from outside and it sparks a reaction, as Lucy suggests. Strong feelings can be incited within us. For Kate, what is sparked are feelings of being crushed, disappointed and sickened, both by the culture (that this kind of music video is permissible as entertainment) and perhaps also by her own body's flaws, given that she has "never liked" that part of her own body. Looking at others impacts the ways in which one looks at (and feels about) oneself. The politically astute part of Kate questions how representing women in that way can be acceptable "with what we know today". Then there is the part of Kate that has never been happy with how that part of her own body looks, the part that is woken up by her looking at the women in the music video, the part that is just crushed.

Looking at others can evoke disturbing feelings; however, these are not always related to wishing for, envying, or being left with a sense of not good enough. Meg recalls "walking into her [mother's] room as she was changing and seeing that she had fat rolls on her back and looking at her bottom that was big and being a bit disgusted" (p. 5). Here Meg is looking at her mother and feeling disgusted. She is also aware that this was happening "at the same time as I was having negative thoughts about myself being fat" (p. 5).

I ask Meg what she thinks about modern beauty standards for women and what is put forward as the way to look in media and social media. Meg tells me she thinks of this as “pop culture” (p. 7). She knows that these are “unattainable standards of beauty”; however, her feeling is that “on a really subconscious level pretty much everyone buys into it” (p. 7). She continues:

*I can't talk for anybody else, I can only talk for me... I think that my perception of what's beautiful is what's being sold in the media, so I can look at a woman's body, whether it's been airbrushed or not who would know? But it's slender, she doesn't have a lot of fat on her, her breasts are perky, her thighs are slim, and she's tanned. There's a certain kind of ideal. (Meg, p. 7)*

I think about Meg's *knowing* that these are unattainable standards alongside the part of her that “buys into it”. Like Lucy, these images help shape Meg's perception of what is considered beautiful even though both women acknowledge the images are likely to have been altered digitally. Lucy believes she has sufficient awareness of how social media works (knowing that it would trigger critical thoughts in some women, but not her) and still she acknowledges the power of the image, the power of that apparently ‘perfect’ image to “ignite a wanting”.

In this kind of looking at others there is something resembling a *buying into*. There is a level of knowing that what is looked at is not ‘real’ and yet, a little spark gets in, igniting the wanting, the envying, the desire and the not good enough feelings of self-criticalness.

Isabelle noticed the impact of media type images only after their absence. The found poem from Isabelle's transcript discloses her noticing of how impacted she was by media images only after a period of not being exposed to them whilst travelling in Asia and India.

**I didn't see a woman's body anywhere**

this was 25 years ago  
they had no billboards,  
no media, nothing.  
I completely lost sight of my body image  
No concept of what I looked like  
As soon as I got back to London  
BOOM!  
came straight back.

[From Isabelle's transcript, 5/7/18, p. 10]

The BOOM feels like the spark catching the dry brush on fire. It is powerfully explosive in its impact and can be destructive. Isabelle's poem reveals more of the interplay of looking at others and looking at self. When she “didn't see a woman's body anywhere... [she] completely

lost sight of [her] body image” (Isabelle, p. 10) suggesting how entwined these phenomena are, and that what we look at impacts our self-awareness and view of self, even body image. She goes on to add, “I know its super powerful and I know it has a big effect on me, so I’m aware of it, and now I don’t buy magazines, it’s all around and I know that it affects me” (Isabelle, p. 10). Isabelle protects herself from the disturbance, limiting her exposure to the unreal images of fashion magazines because she is aware of how those images impact her, how they might stir up feelings of less-than-ness, self-criticalness and perfectionism.

Zahira also spoke about the power of media images, and “how vulnerable... we are as women” (p. 5). She continues;

*it doesn't matter how accepting we are of ourselves, it doesn't take much for another person, or for media, or for one word or situation, for us to actually stop and question it... yeah, we question it all the time, it doesn't matter how strong I find myself, or if I think, 'I love my body', I can still question it. (Zahira, p. 5)*

For Zahira, looking at others can provoke a questioning, whereby just one word or one image can change how we look at ourselves. As others, such as Kate, suggested, we can be feeling one way and then something we look at changes those feelings dramatically. Lucy and Meg both spoke of consciously knowing about the images, the fact they are not real and yet the effect they can have on the psyche. This idea of inspiring, a breathing in of the sparks that then ignite a disturbance inside, resulting in feeling motivated or inspired, but also crushed, disappointed, sickened, perfectionistic, angry, disgusted, less than or not as good as.

### **Feeling Less Than or More Than**

The experiences of looking at described so far have an element of comparing about them. That which is looked at has a desirable quality inspiring admiration, appreciation, longing for, wishing for, even envy. That which is looked at appeals, perhaps attracts us, inspiring us to move towards or somehow be more like that which is looked at. Simultaneously, our looking at others can inspire a ‘less than’, self-critical feeling in us. In the comparing experience that seems to happen when we look at someone (or something) there is the looked at and the self that looks. I have described what feels like an oscillation between these, a back and forth influence of each over the other.

Lucy describes an experience which speaks to this movement between looking at others and looking at self. Yet Lucy is left with a good feeling, rather than a self-critical feeling.

### **Real models**

I worked in the fashion industry.  
That demands a certain figure.  
Women can look amazing at any size,  
the way they choose to put themselves together,  
but in that high fashion world  
there's a certain demand  
to have a little figure  
to be slender.  
When they brought out the models  
that were real,  
that had fuller figures  
I remember thinking  
*oh how wonderful!*  
finally, we're choosing to really celebrate women.  
Not these tiny figures  
but women who are a bit fuller, a bit curvier.  
And they're beautiful as well.  
When that started happening  
it relaxed something in me.

[From Lucy's transcript, 7/7/18, p. 10]

Lucy's looking reveals her realisation and relief, that she might still be looked at, perhaps appreciated, "even if you're not this one tiny size fits all or the smallest size in the shop" (p. 10). In this case, Lucy's looking at others relaxes something in her. It feels as if she can breathe, loosening up on having a little figure and being slender. I wonder about Zahira's looking at more curvy women and Rachel's and Meg's noticing women in larger bodies; whether it also relaxes something in them? This is different from Kate's looking at the "perfectly formed" music video women which seems to put her into a more agitated, less relaxed state.

If looking at others leaves us with certain feeling about ourselves, this suggests a mechanism of unconscious evaluation where what is looked at is deemed 'less than' or 'more than' the self that is looking. Lucy's looking, however, reveals how she is left with a good feeling. Something is "relaxed" in her when she sees curvier models in the magazines. Rather than inspiring a wishing or longing for (something out there) and a self-criticism (of in here) some looking at others might evoke a relaxation or softening toward self. My own experience in following several 'body-positive' women bloggers is that I can feel more relaxed about my body after looking at a diverse range of bodies, but especially those I perceive as 'larger' than me. There is less of a longing for what is looked at (out there) and more of an appreciative quality directed toward myself. When that which is looked at becomes 'less than' I am left feeling 'more than', that is, better about my body. Others have used this as a strategy for improving

body image and coming to terms with being in a larger body (West, 2016). This feels as if a comparison is made and what is looked at is either deemed 'more than' (evoking appreciation, wishing for or envy) or 'less than' (evoking a softening toward self and perhaps a judging of what is looked at).

### **Judging What is Looked At**

Nina and Diane described a looking at others involving a kind of criticism or judgment that was more outwardly directed.

#### **A little judgment**

I still find myself  
judging in my head  
I do my very best,  
I do,  
I tell myself off  
that's not okay.  
But mostly what happens  
looking at other women is  
I'm thinking  
if I dressed you like this...  
if I dressed you like this  
you could look...

And then I think to myself,  
*why can't she be happy just as she is?*  
*She can dress however she wants.*

So I'm trying to help  
I'm trying to help them  
look the best they can look  
the way that they are  
and then I have to remember  
they might be happy as they are.  
There's still a little judgement  
it's not my intention  
it just kind of comes out.

[From Nina's transcript, 24/11/18, p. 6]

Nina's looking at others has a judging quality; she tells herself off for it but "it just kind of comes out". She does not expressly say this leaves her feeling more relaxed or softer towards herself, but I wonder if this is part of what happens. Part of her feels this is altruistic, that she is "trying to help" and part of her checks herself, "that's not okay". Implicit in the "if I dressed you like this you could look..." (Nina, p. 6) is a judgment or criticism directed towards that which is looked at, in this case the other.

### **Perfectly lovely woman**

When I saw her,  
my mind shifted  
she was a very big woman

I'd spoken to her on the phone  
but when I saw her  
in the office  
*she's huge!*  
my attitude changed.

It made a difference.  
I had a picture of her  
in my head  
stereotypical secretary  
and

suddenly  
*I'm not sure about you*  
a horrible, judgmental feeling.

I'm a big woman myself  
but she didn't fit  
what I was expecting  
I was a bit repulsed.

I lost sleep over that  
it really pissed me off.  
Sort of, *who the hell are you to be judging?*  
It surprised me  
I shouldn't be judging people.

I didn't think that would be me  
but, that's what I caught myself doing.

[From Diane's transcript, 30/11/18, pp. 2-3]

Diane is shocked and disappointed in herself for judging the woman's size. She has made an assessment of the woman from their phone conversation. She is a "perfectly lovely woman" until the point of Diane's looking at her, when she becomes something that repulses.

Nina is "trying to help" and catches herself with, "they might be happy as they are". Diane also catches herself; "I shouldn't be judging people". Diane's feelings toward the secretary, for not looking as Diane expects, surprise her. The repulsion she feels at the woman's size 'pisses her off'. She even loses sleep over it, questioning who she is to be in a position to judge someone in a larger body. This feels confronting, as though Diane is forced to confront the ways in which she is judgmental, and thereby the ways in which she might also be judged as a woman in a larger body.

## Bringing the Meanings Together

In the choral poem, participant voices and meanings are brought together in a chorus, providing a 'way in' to the lived experience of looking at others. Since the word choral has its origins in performance and voice it is suggested that the reader read the choral poem (and perhaps the found poems) aloud. This reading aloud facilitates a slowing down and allows a completely different experience from reading silently to oneself.

### Chorus: Looking at others

Celebrate the woman in a larger body  
notice her confidence  
see the whole of her shining through.  
Her body isn't separate to who she is as a person  
accept others' bodies but not my own  
focus in on the parts I'm lacking

Trained to notice someone's appearance  
I was trained to judge  
it's not my intention  
it just kind of comes out  
*look at that huge lady  
with her tight pants  
showing her rolls  
I shouldn't be judging  
catching myself  
there's a lesson for me*

Let go of trying to attain perfect  
the skin and the body  
such a beautiful piece of machinery  
the real models  
curvy ones, fuller figures  
relax something in me.  
We're celebrating real women.  
Only, I forget it's not real.  
I should go to the gym today.

I forget,  
looking at fashion images,  
plastering this unrealistic body  
tapping insecurities  
perfectionistic drive  
staring out from flawless photos  
that ignite a wanting.

I forget the photoshopping,  
have to remind myself  
she's been touched up.  
Those images aren't real  
the smooth and shapely  
stay young at all costs.  
I should go to the gym today.

I'm ashamed to say I look at others  
I notice bodies  
women's bodies  
things I'm not happy about.  
I'd like to have those legs, that skin,  
the air brushed olive sheen beauty  
her skin where there are no scars  
and women capture my intrigue,  
the way they present themselves  
it's a wishing-I-had-that envy.  
Go to the gym, be healthy, be toned.

The fashion industry demands  
dictating desirable  
the way to be noticed  
the way to  
good enough  
and inspiration is an interesting thing.  
Collarbones  
create a sense of motivation  
spark an I-should-go-to-the-gym-today  
an I'd-like-to-have-that-body.

Looking at fashion images  
there's a not-good feeling  
a self-loathing kind of feeling  
an envy.  
Sense of impossibility,  
stay young at all costs,  
see the woman's collarbones?  
I forget it's not real.  
They're all beautifully formed,  
I forget.

Longing to have the body of a friend  
the friend with the perfect...  
*look at her*  
and I'm in awe.  
Wonder if I hold a gaze too long  
wonder if it's envy.  
She's not a follower of fashion  
she's quirky, confident.  
Notice the way she's put herself together  
around her I'm more aware,  
is my stomach sticking out?  
have I put on weight?

It's not real,  
I forget.

The choral poem discloses the movement between looking at others and looking at self, suggesting the interplay of our looking experiences. In the opening stanza there is movement between the celebration of a woman in a larger body, appreciating her bravery and courage, and a coming back to the self that is looking. This reveals an awareness of lack, of this body

that looks as failing; less than. The choral poem exposes paradox and complexity. There is understanding of judgment of others as morally unacceptable, and then catching oneself engaging in it. There is a looking at the fat woman, judging her rolls and too-tight pants, when moments prior her whole being was shining. There is acceptance of self, a letting go of striving for perfection and an acknowledgement that this 'perfection' is not real—and then the thought; "I should go to the gym today". A remembering that the fashion images saturating Western culture are air-brushed alongside an acknowledgement that they "ignite a wanting", envy and a sense of impossibility. Inspiration drawn from looking at others arouses longings; to have perfect skin, the body of a friend, great legs, visible collarbones. The choral poem exposes contradiction, evoking these contrasts. The way in which looking at others both motivates and stirs up uncomfortable feelings is revealed.

### **Chapter Summary**

In this chapter, found poems have been used to (re)present the data, revealing the phenomenon. Looking at others can evoke appreciation, admiration, envy and/or a more wistful longing or wishing for. Looking at others can inspire, motivate and ignite wanting. Looking at others can provoke disturbing feelings of self-criticalness, feeling less than and not worthy. What is revealed is the complex interrelationship between looking at others and looking at self, such that looking at others 'inspires' certain feelings in the self that is looking. These feelings extend outward, toward that which is looked at; and inward, toward the self that is looking. What is evoked in the person looking impacts the experience of looking. In this chapter I have shown how looking at others can inspire feelings of appreciation and admiration, of wishing or longing for and even envy. Qualities of comparing and judging emerge, revealing feelings of 'less than' and 'more than' in the experience of looking at others. This is important because whether one is inspired to feel 'better' or 'worse' about oneself directly impacts the experience of looking at others in the interplay between looking at others, looking at self and being looked at.

The next chapter explores looking at self in more detail.

## 7. LOOKING AT SELF

This chapter describes another essential part of women's experiences of looking and being looked at. Looking at self in this context means looking at one's physical body. Given the embeddedness of self experience in an intersubjective field (Stolorow & Atwood, 1992), describing the phenomenon of looking at self reveals the interwovenness of *looking at self* with *looking at others* and *being looked at*. This is reflective of the importance afforded by Gadamer (1975/2013) to the other. Found poems from the data are used to (re)present and illuminate participant voice and the chapter's choral poem brings together multiple voices to reveal the experience of looking at self in a movement from parts to whole.

'Looking at self' generated a large number of found poems suggesting its importance. One of the strongest meanings inherent is struggling with looking at self; that is, struggling with looking at the physical body. Looking at self, the body *as is*, particularly in the mirror, often evoked disappointment and feelings of 'not good enough'. The data revealed the ways in which looking at self can be difficult, even painful, since it exposes contradictions between how one thinks one looks, would like to look, or should look, and how one appears in the mirror or in a photograph. The mirror was revealed as a crucial mediator of looking at self experiences. The words "battle" and "struggle" were frequently used in describing looking at self, suggesting the experience is fraught with difficulty that can exhaust energies. More than half of the women interviewed described experiences that have this battling with the mirror quality. Most described a way in which *really* looking at themselves was incredibly difficult; a task to be avoided. For many participants, the difficulties inherent in looking at self appeared to be eased by weight loss.

### Struggling to Face the Reflection

#### In my house

I don't have mirrors  
I can see in  
from down here.  
I think it's quite telling.  
Despite being  
a strong,  
intelligent woman,  
I don't like my body.  
The disability is new  
the body image thing is not.  
I don't want to look at myself.

[From Diane's transcript, 30/11/18, p. 2]

Diane is in a wheelchair following the loss of a leg after an infection. She purposely does not have the mirrors in her house at a height where she can see her reflection. Apart from a small face mirror she does not want to look at her body. She does not want to look at this body she does not like.

**My body is not as it should be**

I've never liked my body.  
I try to avoid looking at it  
I actually try not to look at my body

It depends on how I'm feeling  
in terms of weight and size  
I've always been slightly overweight  
tried various diets  
lost weight on some of them  
felt really good.  
But overall  
there's a feeling that my body  
was not as it should be.

[From Kate's transcript, 18/9/18, pp. 4-5]

The above poem from Kate's transcript reveals a struggling to face the reflection and her usual strategy of avoiding looking at self. *How* she looks at her body and how she experiences looking at self is affected by how she feels in terms of size and weight. There is the sense that weight loss might ease the struggle of looking at self, leading to feeling "really good" rather than "feeling that my body is not as it should be". Nina has also found a way to make looking at self more manageable.

**Seeing parts of me**<sup>21</sup>  
a way of coping  
only ever  
seeing  
parts of me  
I look in the mirror  
look at myself front on  
*that's not too bad*  
*I've got a waist,*  
*I've got hips*  
Then I turn sideways  
and there's this belly,  
this overhang.  
It isn't how I wanted it to be.  
In my head I saw something  
different.

[From Nina's transcript, 24/11/18, pp. 2-3]

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<sup>21</sup> *Seeing parts of me* is a concrete poem (Academy of American Poets, 2004). The shape of the poem yields something for the reader.

Nina manages the struggle by looking at parts of herself. Focusing in on her waist or hips allows her to appreciate her body as “not too bad”. As she turns sideways she is confronted with a different view of herself; “this belly, this overhang”, and suddenly what is looked at is revealed as not how she wanted it to be. In her head she saw something different from what she sees now in the mirror. Often when something wanted is not as expected there is disappointment. This is perhaps what Nina has to cope with through only looking at parts of her body.

When struggling to face the reflection there is a way in which looking is avoided or has to be carefully managed because it is distressing. In the disappointment there is a quality that resembles the wishing and longing for it to be different that is encountered in the experience of looking at others.

### **Battling with the Mirror**

Experiences that disclose more hostility in looking at self evoke the idea of battling, suggesting even greater difficulty. Kjel describes her “battle with the mirror” (p. 12) providing a metaphor for a hostile engagement between the self that is looking and the looked at self. The sense of disappointment and wanting the looked at body to be different reverberate through the found poems in this section.

#### **My battle with the mirror**

Over the long, black period of my life  
I could not stand the mirror  
I couldn't stand my face.

I still can't look in the mirror without  
knickers on.

The  
bit  
of my body  
that fails,  
my eyes get magnetised to it.

I assume that would be  
the same for most women.  
We all have our weakness.

[From Kjel's transcript, 1/12/18, p. 12]

A battle is a fight or hostile engagement between opposing forces (Harper, 2020). The origins of the word battle are in the Latin *battuere*, to beat or to strike and the Old French, *bataille*, as

well as referring to battle also refers to inner turmoil or harsh circumstances (Harper, 2020). I wonder if Kjel's transgender-ness exacerbates her sense of battling; with the mirror and with societal prejudice, both of which might conceivably stir up inner turmoil and harsh circumstances. The "long, black period" brings to mind the wearing of black to signify grieving. I wonder about Kjel's grieving for the body she does not have. Her mourning and the repeated disappointments and losses in the battle that pervades her looking at self. Kjel has not undergone any kind of gender altering surgery. Looking at her genitalia in the mirror without underwear she sees the part of her body she sees as failing. It is something she tries to avoid. During this period she says she "could not stand the mirror". Whereas Diane could manage looking at her face, Kjel "could not stand [it]" and there is a harshness in this rejection, even of her own face. It feels like a rejection of her whole self. The origins of 'stand' in Old English suggest 'to occupy a place' but also a sense of 'encountering something without flinching' (Harper, 2020). As I read Kjel's words, I think about what she has had to try to unflinchingly *withstand* in the hostile engagement of looking at self. Her words illuminate the challenge of (with)standing both the mirror, and the inherent disappointment of a body that does not look like the wished for body. In the past, Kjel's battling with the mirror triggered her to self-harm which feels like a particularly harsh enactment of the battle between the self that looks and the looked at self.

Battling with the mirror reveals a difficulty in looking at self, as is. Perhaps this relates to the notion of longing, or wishing for, revealed in looking at others, such that looking at self might provoke a longing for something different. As Nina described, "in my head I saw something different". Kate said, "my body was not as it should be". The looking at self has an evaluative quality, comparing the looked at self and the self that exists as an image in the mind. In the poem below, Brylee also describes a battle and her body not looking how she wants it to.

**I don't hate my body**

I will probably always battle  
with what I look like  
I'm okay with that.  
I'm okay that it will be a struggle.  
I don't hate my body at all  
It may not look exactly how I want it to  
but I have a strong appreciation  
for what it does for me.

[From Brylee's transcript, 12/11/18, p. 15]

Brylee does not hate her body but acknowledges that she will probably always battle with what she looks like. She can appreciate her body for what it does for her, but there is the sense of the ways in which it might also disappoint. Her poem reveals both the struggle and the battle inherent in looking at self. The struggle is between the looked at self and a self that would “look exactly how I want it to”; whereas the battle describes the fight or hostile engagement between the looked at self and the self that looks.

### **Difference**

Overweight all my life.  
Put on my first diet when I was 9.  
I didn't know I was overweight

When I got to school,  
I found out  
I was different from the other kids.

I'm 68 now.  
All my life it's been a battle.  
As a consequence,  
I don't have any mirrors in my house  
that I can see in  
I don't want to look at myself

[From Diane's transcript, 30/11/18, p. 1]

For Diane, the consequence of this battle is no longer wanting to look at self. It feels as if she has lost her battle with the mirror. But the battle is also with her body and the constant dieting. The battle was also perhaps in the playground and in the painful realisation of being different from the other children.

The poems disclose looking at self and not wanting to see; looking at self and a disappointment at not having the wished-for appearance. This may even tip into self-criticism or self-hatred. The refusal to look at self as a kind of obliterating the body/self that *is* there, a rejection of the body that appears in the mirror. I intuit something of this quality in Diane's wish to not look at her body, her refusal to look. Like the child who covers their eyes to make themselves invisible, there is a kind of refusal to see the self, or to see the self *as it is*. The experience of looking at self is impacted by *how* the body is looked at, the quality of the looking and whether what is looked at meets or misses expectations. When looking at others, this sense of comparison is sparked by an external other or an image. When looking at self it seems that there is a comparison between what is looked at and what is pictured in the mind.

Nina, who describes herself as a woman in a larger body, recounted an experience that happened nearly 30 years ago. She became emotional as she told the story, suggesting how much this impacted on her and how present these issues still are. As part of an 8-day residential self-development course she undertook in her mid-20s, attendees were challenged with looking at themselves in swimwear and, if they chose, naked, before a large mirror on a stage. This was done in small groups, as the rest of the group (60 or 70 participants) became the observing audience.

### **The Mirror Process**

we look at ourselves  
before a very large mirror  
invited  
to remove our bathing suits  
and really look,  
look at ourselves naked

I have no problem with  
other people looking  
doesn't bother me  
but I don't like  
looking at myself  
naked.  
I find myself wanting...

I don't look how I thought I would  
or how I wanted to.  
Standing there, naked  
looking at yourself  
turning around,  
fully confronting.

[From Nina's transcript, 24/11/18, p. 1]

The poem discloses Nina's disappointment in not looking "how I thought I would or how I wanted to". In looking at herself she finds herself wanting but the unfinished sentence leaves the space. Wanting what? I imagine that, like Kjel, there is a similar sense of bearing the looking at self and withstanding all the feelings that are evoked. Removing the last layer of protection, the remaining vestige of clothing with which to hide behind reveals and exposes, but not as Nina imagines, for she has no problem with others' looking. The vulnerability, the revealing, and the exposing are present in her own looking at her body. It is the looking at self, and what is evoked, that she finds so "fully confronting". Nina continues:

*When I look in the mirror, I turn around, it's like what I thought I should look like, I had some kind of glasses on that made me look that way. You don't ever see yourself in the same proportions as everyone else does. I think I always had a distorted view... when you stand in front of a full length mirror...*

*people don't even see you like that... standing straight on, you're always angled or moving. It's quite unrealistic. And I'm going, 'I'm squat, I'm big, I've got these knock knees and these big thighs' or I'll look at one part of me and go 'that looks really good, I look really slim' and then I'll see myself full length in the mirror and think 'oh no, that's not quite right either'. I don't think we ever see, or I didn't want to see what I really looked like. [Nina, p. 2]*

The distorted view reveals another kind of battling; a struggling with seeing what is there. Nina likens it to looking through glasses that make one look a certain way. It feels hard to trust what one is looking at, when it can change through angles or movement. There is a not wanting to see “what I really looked like”, as if the looking at self is too confronting and painful. Battling with the mirror relates to the experience of not seeing what is desired or expected. Nina struggles to (with)stand the feelings of disappointment and failure evoked.

### **Crashing Into Reality**

Julie described her disappointment when looking at self as “crashing into the reality”; evoking the suddenness of the experience as well as its confronting nature. The found poem below reveals Julie’s experience in more detail:

#### **Crashing into reality**

I'm somebody who's in touch with my body  
really on top of my weight.  
I thought I was at my lowest  
expecting to get on that scale

and see a weight 10 or 12 kilos  
lower. I'd noticed  
my body was changing.  
I would say to my husband

*look at how my shape is changing  
it must have to do with  
how my body is ageing  
I looked at my body*

I didn't see myself as fat  
I didn't see myself as carrying more weight  
I felt lighter on my feet.  
It was such a shock

to have not only felt  
but to have looked at myself  
and not seen.  
I had to come to terms

with how  
I had completely lost

connection with my body.  
Looking at myself

thinking I'm thinner than I've ever been  
but *my body's changing*  
*it must be age* and  
crashing into the reality

*okay*  
*that's it*  
*I am taking care of this immediately*  
I went on a very rigid diet.

I dropped it all  
I feel a hell of a lot better and  
my body feels a lot better  
I don't know what that means.

On the one hand, I could say,  
*if I felt okay, why not just stay at this weight?*  
If I look at myself and I think I look okay,  
*what's the problem?* But it was a problem.

It was such a shock  
I don't know how to put  
those two things side by side, and  
what sense to make of them yet.

[From Julie's transcript, 18/4/18, pp. 10-11]

Seeing her weight on the scales engenders a collision between her perception of her body and the 'reality'. The way she looked at her body did not fit with the number on the scale. Julie looks at her body and notices it is changing, something she attributes to ageing yet she is feeling 'light on her feet', 'thinner than ever'. Then comes the shock, this crashing into the reality; the number on the scale. Julie's poem illuminates the difference between the felt or experienced body and the looked at body. Like Nina who says, "it isn't how I wanted it to be" the number on the scale is not what Julie wanted or expected. This propels Julie into "taking care of this immediately". One part of her looks at herself and thinks "I look okay". Another part looks, is shocked and resolves to immediately begin a very rigid diet.

In the internal dialogue there is a marvelling, "look at how my body is changing", which sits alongside a critical rejecting that condemns this new larger body as completely unacceptable. Crashing into the reality shocks, disturbs and propels the looker into action.

## Lining Up and Checking Carefully

Sometimes particular details were focused on in the looking at self. Isabelle described getting ready and leaving the house, disclosing elements of a kind of scrutinising.

### Looking for something in particular

I've always been  
conscious of my body.  
I remember  
struggling to like my becoming rounder,  
my more womanly shape.  
I didn't realise that's what was happening

My brother used it as a weapon against me  
*you're fat*  
that had a big impact on me.

If I see myself in the mirror  
I look at myself,  
I look at my body.

I always look at myself in the mirror  
before I leave the house.  
I notice myself  
in reflections of windows  
and I'm looking for something in particular  
acceptance of some things.  
When I wear certain clothes  
I definitely want them to look...

I can't describe exactly what it is  
It's sort of like the scanner app on your phone  
you line up the piece of paper until it goes

*shrook*

that's the internal experience  
it's like,

*shrook*

okay,  
that's acceptable

It's something to do with my curves  
not showing in particular places or  
a profile  
lines of my body that aren't being seen  
A minimising of certain things.  
It's more like a shape,  
an acceptable shape,  
and it's probably the classic hourglass figure.  
An image of what a woman  
should look like

That *shrook*  
It's a kind of feeling in my body

[From Isabelle's transcript, 7/5/18, p. 1]

The scanner app on a phone does not 'register' or capture the image of what is 'looked at' unless it is at just the right angle and everything is lined up correctly. There is a checking carefully for "something in particular" in Isabelle's looking at self. She looks to minimise certain things, hiding some curves in order to create "an acceptable shape". The fact that she finds it difficult to put into words, using a noise that her camera phone makes, is of interest. It suggests we are encountering something phenomenal where language is unable to adequately describe the experience. There is an internal sense of something needing to 'line up', which is then deemed "acceptable", or not. Isabelle is checking for *the classic hourglass figure./An image of what a woman/should look like*. This looking at self has a scrutinising quality. The origins of the word scrutiny are in the Latin, *scrutinium*, meaning a vote to choose someone who can decide a question. Earlier origins suggest 'to cut; a cutting tool' (*skreu-* is the PIE root; Harper, 2020). The careful checking, the minimising of certain things becomes like a cutting away of what is excessive or not wanted. Isabelle's looked at self either gets the vote, or not, makes the cut or not.

This is looking at self as a kind of inspection but the data reveals a complexity whereby it is not just the 'looking self' doing the inspecting, but also an audience of potential 'looking others'. Unlike Nina's actual audience, this feels like an audience carried inside. This is the phenomenological contextualism suggested by intersubjective systems theory (Stolorow & Atwood, 2019). The myth of the isolated mind is dispelled, revealing how others are constitutive of self. The isolated mind is reunited with its world and context (Stolorow, 2013). This fits with Gadamer's emphasis on experience that is not isolated; rather, linked to the voice of the other. That is, existence means existence *with* others in a communal world, acknowledging "the intersubjectivity of this world" (Gadamer, 1975/2013, p. 249). Looking at self merges with being looked at and looking at others. Isabelle's looking at self involves a comparing (to an image in her mind or to others). Here, looking at self is interwoven with looking at others (allowing recognition of "what a woman should look like") *and* being looked at (such that she checks to see in the mirror what others will see and recalls her brother's comments). The complexity of this experience is further revealed in the found poems below.

## **Skin**

For the longest time,  
I never wore skirts or  
dresses above the knee.  
I didn't like showing my legs  
because of scarring.

I was going out for lunch.  
Standing, looking in the mirror,  
thinking, shape wise, you actually have  
really great looking legs!  
And then I was looking at the scars...

*Christ!*

*They shouldn't be looking at your legs!*

*They should be focussing on*

*talking to you!*

*You're going to be sitting at a table,*

*your legs are going to be under the table!*

The dialogue that went on,

*Just walk out the door,*

*you look great,*

*your legs are great,*

*just go.*

[From Zahira's transcript, 11/2/19, p. 11]

Zahira's looking at self provokes an internal dialogue that reveals her careful checking and an oscillation between self and other. There is a self-consciousness about wearing skirts or dresses that fall above the knee and she usually hides her scarred legs from view. The looking at self seems to coexist with an awareness of being looked at as Zahira imagines the looking of the others she will meet for lunch. Like Kjel, she zeroes in on the "part that fails"; the part that disappoints. Anna's awareness of the back and forth of looking at self and others' looking is revealed in the next poem:

## **Now I'm in my 50s**

I see my wrinkles  
I don't like it  
I imagine others see them  
and don't like them

or see them and have a judgment

I reassure myself it's okay  
but it's not.

I can't say I'm proud of my ageing,  
or that I'm loving it.

I definitely feel more invisible

[From Anna's transcript, 30/5/18, p. 6]

Anna sees her wrinkles and does not like them. She imagines the reactions of others seeing and judging her wrinkles negatively. The poem shows Anna's vulnerability as the wrinkles reveal her ageing and sense of becoming less visible. These poems suggest the impact of a societal valuing of youth and slenderness.

### **Looking Just Like Everyone Else**

In checking carefully there is an aspect of comparing with others. In the poems that follow a desire to look like everyone else is revealed. Here, there is a desire to move toward that which is being compared with.

#### **The thought process of my 15 year old self**

I want to be like my friends  
I don't want to be different  
I want boys to like me  
and not have this big thing  
only having one arm,  
the elephant in the room.

And that wasn't just my thought  
everyone,  
all my friends then,  
all the kids I mentor now.  
All of a sudden they care what they look like  
all of a sudden they want to be  
just like  
everyone else

[From Brylee's transcript, 12/11/18, p. 7]

Brylee's poem reveals a sense of looking at self and checking against other, checking what is acceptable. In Brylee's wishing for her arm, wishing for a normal teenage girl body, there is a profound wanting to be like her peers. Her teenage self scans those around her for a sense of what is "like everyone else". Brylee does not want to have one arm, to be different. She wants to be a normal 15-year-old girl whom boys will like. This wanting to be "just like everyone else" is something she notices in those around her, in her friends at the time and now in the young people she mentors.

**When I first moved back to India**

I grew out my hair.  
I don't look like your typical Indian  
and with my New Zealand accent  
I certainly don't sound like an Indian.  
So I thought, *maybe if I grow my hair*  
*I'll look a bit more Indian,*  
*I'll be a bit more accepted*  
because, you know  
Indian ladies have long hair.  
And I was miserable.  
It wasn't me.  
I went back to cutting my hair.

[From Zahira's transcript, 11/2/19, p. 6]

Zahira's poem reveals her awareness of others, there is a checking as to how to fit in here, a desire, perhaps felt as a pressure, to be "a bit more Indian ...a bit more accepted". Aware she does not look like "your typical Indian", Zahira tries growing her hair to be more like those she sees around her, but this makes her unhappy. Now Zahira has a funky short hairstyle but the poem above reveals a willingness to change how one looks in order to "be a bit more accepted". This acceptance, also alluded to by Isabelle and Brylee, feels as if it is sought from both inside and outside 'audiences'. The poem below further reveals the cost of wanting to fit in.

**When I was younger**

It sounds disturbing now  
I so wanted to fit in  
but when you have your bones showing  
you are standing out,  
disturbingly so.

[From Lucy's transcript, 7/5/18, p. 9]

Realising that changing her appearance to look just like everyone else was making her unhappy, Zahira simply cut her hair. For Lucy, a similar desire to look more like what she saw around her contributed to an eating disorder. Now, fully recovered, she reflects on her younger self and just how strongly she wanted to "fit in". She uses the word "disturbing" more than once. To disturb is to frighten or alarm, to break up the tranquillity of, from the Latin, *disturbare*, "to throw into disorder" (Harper, 2020, n.p.). Lucy's looking at self discloses her looking at others, and her awareness of being looked at. Her looking at her body contributes to the disturbance of that self.

Revealed in the data is the sense of how the voices of others impact looking at self. The poems provoke questions about what it means to try and belong, how one consciously tries to appear in order to feel accepted and how this is monitored through looking at self. What is sought is that internal sense that Isabelle alluded to as the “shrook” that signals “acceptable”. This acceptability might relate to self or other, or both. Checking carefully and wanting to look like everyone else comprises both an inner checking against what one thinks one ‘should look like’, and an outer checking against what is seen in those around us. The data reveals a working hard to modify the looked at self, such that what is presented (in the mirror and to others) is acceptable.

The data discloses traces of inner conversations, the internal back and forth between what one says to oneself as one looks in the mirror, and what one imagine others might say or think. The poems hint at the ways in which others are looked to for guidance about how to appear and for clues as to how to belong. Awareness of others’ looking infiltrates looking at self, as a kind of self-consciousness or heightened self-awareness. This self-consciousness, or self-awareness that rests on an awareness of other, or vice versa, discloses Gadamer’s (1975/2013) dialogue, reflecting a contextual world of intersubjectivity that is constitutive of self.

### **Coming Up Against the Edge**

The internal dialogue, the oscillating back and forth, the checking and comparing inherent in looking at self, all disclose the interweaving of self with other such that it can be difficult to discern looking at self from an experience of being looked at. An element of this complexity shines through in the following poem.



### **In the atmosphere**

I've always felt  
my body was not as it should be  
that has cultural messages  
number one  
and because of my mother,  
number two.

She was always overweight  
more than I ever was  
she was bullied and teased  
I carried that  
It was in the atmosphere at home

[From Kate's transcript, 18/9/18, p. 5]

For Kate, the idea that her body is not as it should be is in the atmosphere. It is in the culture and, like Julie, in Kate's mother's looking. It is easy to imagine that the cultural messages about slenderness are picked up by Kate's and Julie's mothers and transmitted to their daughters like any family value. Coming up against the edge represents an encounter with a value, a judgment as to whether one is acceptable. In looking at self, it is an encounter with not looking as one feels one should, not looking as one needs to look in order to be/feel accepted or acceptable. Encountering the edge feels like a harsh, critical and painful encounter but the edge is also more diffuse. As Kate suggests, it is something "in the atmosphere". The origins of the word *edge* as noun, link to the Old English *ecg* which is a corner, point, or sword. There is *ecghete*, literally 'edge hate', which is a term that was used poetically for battle (Harper, 2020) and which brings forth battling with the mirror.

### **Homing in on the Flaws**

Nina's eye is drawn to toward "the bit that overhangs" as she turns sideways. Meg' focuses on her "saggy, old woman breasts". Kjel's eyes are drawn to the genitalia that fail her. Zahira focuses on her scarred legs. Isabelle scrutinises her curves. Julie is spurred toward a radical diet. Anna condemns her wrinkles. These are all examples of homing in on the flaws. This aspect of the experience of looking at self resonates through struggling to face the reflection, battling with the mirror, crashing into the reality and coming up against the edge. Like the latter, homing in on the flaws reveals a level of hatred (*edge hate*) towards what is looked at.

### **At the age of 17**

I was always conscious of my breasts.

At one point

*probably because I was slightly overweight*

I was a 30FF.

And I hated it. Absolutely hated it.

At the age of 17

I actually talked to a doctor

about getting a breast reduction.

[From Zahira's transcript, 11/2/19, p. 3]

Zahira homes in on an aspect of her body that she hates. Her scrutiny caused her to consider a cutting off or getting rid of this part of her body which does not look as it 'should'. The thread of edge hate is woven through many of these experiences. Homing in on the flaws describes looking at self that has a critical, rejecting quality that is directed toward certain areas of the body or looked at self. The *edge hatred* and cutting scrutiny encountered in the idea of homing in on the flaws were present throughout the vast majority of looking at self experiences described in the data. It resounds through Kjel's not being able to stand looking at self in the mirror, through Diane's refusal to look, and Kate's and Nina's sense of their bodies not being as they should be. It resonates through Julie's shock and hatred of her body as something bad, through Lucy's starving herself and Zahira's acute consciousness of her breasts.

### **A Softening Towards**

Meg's looking in the mirror has been fraught with homing in on the parts of self that need to be fixed, rendered smooth and flawless, or dramatically reduced in size; however, she noticed how this changed after her weight-loss surgery. Perhaps an example of how crashing into the reality and coming up against the edge can provoke action 'against' the looked at body, Meg underwent a gastrectomy<sup>22</sup>. Since the loss of 45 kilos in 18 months she can now look at her body:

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<sup>22</sup> Gastric sleeve procedure or gastrectomy is a surgical procedure that involves reducing the size of the stomach by about 80%. The stomach is removed so that instead of a sac a narrow tube remains. Weight loss occurs due to recipients feeling fuller soon after eating due to the greatly reduced stomach size.

**For the first time**

I'm feeling good

[*and clothing hides a multitude of sins*]

I'm looking at myself,  
before I wouldn't look at all of me.  
I'd take my glasses off to look,  
to put my make up on.  
I couldn't really see myself.  
I certainly never looked at myself  
full length

in the mirror

naked.

But the other day

[*it was quite an empowering experience*]

I came walking in to my en suite,  
the light was on and  
I looked at myself,  
I actually saw myself

[*what's that Ed Sheeran song?*

*I'm in love with the shape of you*]

I sang the line of that song to myself.

It was just...

I really like my body,

it has flaws but I still like it.

[From Meg's transcript, 18/2/18, p. 10]

Meg can now look at her body in the mirror, something she consciously tried to avoid before. She notices how different the experience of looking at her body is since her weight loss. Now it is okay to look and 'actually see herself'. She no longer has to take her glasses off. Meg's looking at self now has a softening quality as she moves toward "feeling good for the first time". Prior to her weight loss, Meg had always felt like she was "the fattest person in the room". Now she enters her *en suite* singing to herself, "I'm in love with the shape of you". There is a softening towards to her body, an accepting rather than a rejecting moving away from it.

Jackie also came to a different kind of looking at self following gastrectomy:

**Taking me in**

I do a double take  
is this mirror correct?  
I stand in front of the mirror  
and take all of me in.  
Before,  
I didn't want to look at all of me.  
I'd be off.  
Before, I'd look at what I was wearing  
the outer stuff,  
whether it matched  
I wouldn't be looking at my body.  
Now it's different,  
it's face-to-face  
and-I-love-you.  
Now I really see myself.

[From Jackie's transcript, 30/11/18, p. 14]

Looking at self has changed for Jackie, *now it's different/its face-to-face/and I love you./Now I really see myself*. Prior to the weight loss, her looking was brief and cursory; she did not want to look at her body. Now the looking feels more pleasurable, as if she can linger with herself, appreciating and even loving the new self that she sees. For Meg and Jackie, the looking at self has lost its battling, 'edge-hate' quality.

This softening is similarly experienced by Kate who describes feeling really good and taking pleasure in her smaller size after losing weight on various diets over the years. There seems to be a line, perhaps like Julie's sense of an edge, between what is acceptable and what is unacceptable in terms of the looked at self, the looked at body. Meg, Jackie, Kate, Rachel, Lucy, Zahira and Julie all described how a smaller body is seen in a new light. They all experienced feeling more accepting and less critical towards their reduced selves. These women also described experiencing a softening of the criticism toward their body as it decreased in size.

This sense of a new found enjoyment and appreciation in looking at self was also voiced by Zahira. After moving overseas, becoming vegetarian and stopping drinking alcohol she noticed and enjoyed how her body changed shape.

### **Enjoying this body**

It feels like I've been brought up  
to think of my body as a tool,  
something that exists  
to function in the world  
not something to be celebrated  
or enjoyed.

When I came back to India  
my lifestyle changed.

The wine in this country is awful  
so I stopped drinking!

I became vegetarian, I lost weight.

Went from being about 66kgs  
down to 50kgs.

It's been a big change

I feel really comfortable,

I feel healthy in my body.

For the first time,

I'm enjoying my body.

[From Zahira's transcript, 11/2/19, pp. 3-4]

There is a sense of being enlivened that accompanies Zahira's lifestyle changes; she feels healthy, able to enjoy her body "for the first time". This body that has been a tool, something functional can now perhaps be celebrated and enjoyed. The poems in this section illuminate a way in which looking at self can be transformed. Experiencing a softening towards, or a more critical homing in on the flaws (spurring a rejecting, moving-away-from quality) seems to depend on how we interpret experiences of looking at self and how that experience of looking at self *feels*. As the physical body is transformed through weight loss and changing shape, so too the experience of looking at self. A softening towards the looked at self that appears related to weight loss and achieving a smaller body is congruent with current feminist literature.

### **Bringing the Meanings Together**

The choral poem below (re)presents a coming together of the voices and meanings. This provides a 'way in' to the lived experience of looking at self, allowing an encounter with different aspects of the phenomenon in a movement from parts to whole.

**Chorus: Looking at self**

I look at myself in the mirror,  
notice my reflection in windows  
do a double take, is this correct?  
I look at myself before I leave the house  
choose clothes with care  
minimise curves  
struggle with the truth of how I look,  
my body is bad.

Full-length mirrors are tricky  
I don't look how I thought I would.  
Won't look at myself full-length, naked;  
distorted view.  
Always feeling my body was excessive,  
this body is not as it should be.

If I don't keep trying,  
diet, deprivation, restriction  
it'll get away on me completely  
all my life, one diet after another  
try to avoid looking  
at this body I've never liked.

Doesn't matter how strong I am  
or if I tell myself I love my body.  
Standing in front of that mirror  
I'm looking for something particular

I see my wrinkles, and I don't like them  
never wear skirts or dresses above the knee.  
Notice my tummy sticking out and  
talk about feeling wonderful at 40  
more comfortable with my shape  
but there's judgment and  
all my saggy skin  
I don't like looking at myself naked.

Grateful for how hard my body works  
but striving for perfection  
battling with the mirror and  
wanting my breasts to look like normal breasts  
not saggy, old woman breasts  
I will probably always battle with what I look like  
I'm a strong, intelligent woman but  
I don't like my body  
and being overweight, the internal dialogue  
the judgments.

Celebrating my body now the weight's not the thing  
looking at myself for the first time.  
Every kilo that comes off,  
feeling emotionally lighter.  
My legs are saggy  
my skin's been stretched  
I can live with that

now it's different, it's face-to-face and  
I love you  
I'm smaller  
I'm excited  
I love all of me  
all of my stretch marks.

All along, an underlying dissatisfaction  
embarrassment about my shape  
I try not to look  
my body is bad  
something to tame  
and shame and  
hatred.

The dialogue that goes on.  
I don't hate my body;  
it may not look exactly how I want...  
My scars  
my wrinkles  
my stretch marks  
it isn't how I wanted it to be.

The choral poem reveals the experiences inherent in the data. Contrasts are evident between looking at the body as something bad, to be tamed, something to hate or be ashamed of; and the body as something to appreciate for all its hard work, something to be embraced and loved, stretch marks and all. There is a celebrating of the body "now that the weight's not the thing" alongside an "underlying dissatisfaction and embarrassment" that has "been there all along". The poem conveys a sense of disappointment and a quiet sadness. This looked at body is not how it was supposed to be; "striving for perfection", fears that the body will "get away on me completely" and disappointment with what is looked at pervaded women's experiences of looking at self.

### **Chapter Summary**

This chapter has described the experience of looking at self through the phenomena of struggling to face the reflection; battling with the mirror; checking carefully; crashing into the reality and homing in on the flaws. Found poems and the choral poem bring light to the complexity of the experiences of looking at self, revealing their interwovenness with experiences of looking at others, and being looked at. Looking at self can provoke certain actions, whether it is avoidance of looking, trying to contain the body through restriction or dieting, changing clothes or dressing in certain ways to minimise curves or hide wrinkles, or more radical action such as surgery.

The next chapter will shine light on another essential part of the phenomenon: that of being looked at.

## 8. BEING LOOKED AT

This chapter focuses on women's experiences of being looked at. The data revealed a being looked at by individual others (both men and women) and also a sense of being looked at by society. The quality of the experiences seemed to depend on who was looking, how the looking was felt or interpreted, as well as the individual's associations with being looked at and being seen. Experiences of feeling negatively judged and not good enough flowed through many of the transcripts as if inherent in women's lived experience of being looked at. At the same time, not being looked at provoked painful feelings of invisibility. As described in the previous two data chapters, a sense of the interwovenness of looking experiences emerges. Here, being looked at discloses its relatedness to looking at others and looking at self. Found poetry is used throughout the chapter to reveal participants' lived experiences. The meanings are then drawn together in the choral poem at the end of the chapter reflecting a movement between parts and whole.

### Feeling Vulnerable

Relating to the experiences of wishing and longing for that emerged in looking at others, and the homing in on the flaws that came through in looking at self, many of the transcripts disclosed ways in which being looked at provoked feelings of vulnerability, exposure and a sense of feeling judged as not good enough.

### The judgements

the judgments were about some sort of failing  
they said

*not as good as*

the weight  
the shame  
the embarrassment  
they said

*failed person  
my fault  
my failing*

being overweight,  
an outward expression.  
I couldn't get a handle on that part of my life  
the judgments  
they said

*out of control  
not good enough  
not strong enough*

there for the world to see  
the judgments  
over and

over  
and over  
and the voice sits loud in my head  
the words I used to myself  
    *useless*  
        *fat*  
            *ugly*  
                *less than*

[From Meg's transcript, 18/2/18, p. 2]

In Meg's poem there is the sense of how her looked at body becomes an outward expression of her lack of control, signalling her 'not good enough' status to the world. There is an internal dialogue, the voice that "sits loud" in her head, revealing a sense of how one's view of self (including self-esteem and body image), is constituted through the interactions of self with world, self with other. Meg goes on to say:

*I assumed they would think about my body what I thought about my body...I don't know that it's the truth, in fact it's probably not. I feel like I have a little more awareness now. How am I to presume what anyone else is thinking? But you're in your own head and you feel that way about yourself. You make an assumption that other people must be feeling that way, or thinking that way, about you too.*  
(p. 3)

Assumptions about what others are thinking feel related to the idea of impression management, of *presenting that which one wishes to present*. For Meg, being unable to present a body that will be looked at as under control, good enough and strong enough, means that she is vulnerable to imagined judgment and criticism. Her vulnerability results in feelings of failure, shame and embarrassment. The exposure of something, perhaps the failing that Meg mentions, feels very present in this poem and contributes to the vulnerability. The Latin origins of *vulnerable* suggest able to be wounded, hurt, or maimed (Harper, 2020). Meg's vulnerability to being wounded through the looking of a critical world, even whilst she cognitively knows this is not the truth, shines forth from the poem.

The next poem reveals how such experiences of being looked at relate to a self-consciousness which is both impacted by, and constituted through, this inner conversation between self and (imagined) other.

### **At my birthday lunch**

At my birthday lunch  
I was aware  
there'd be people there  
who hadn't seen me for a while.

I went looking to buy something to wear.

I didn't have much time  
and ended up not finding anything  
then thinking, *I'm not going to stress about it*  
*I've got this white top that I can wear*

but it had no sleeves  
and my arms  
being bigger than they've ever been  
is something I'm self-conscious of  
and,  
my thought was,  
there'll be people who will think  
*oh my gosh she's put on weight.*

And then another thought,  
*I don't really care.*

[From Isabelle's transcript, 7/5/18, p. 3]

Isabelle's poem reveals a desire to present a particular version of oneself. Perhaps this is a desire to be looked at in a certain way, as someone who has not put weight on, for example. In the interview Isabelle described how she has worked on her feelings about her body in therapy. This seems to allow her the more resilient, "I don't really care", in response to her concerns others' may have about her putting on weight. Nevertheless, she describes being self-conscious, aware that her arms are bigger than ever and an aspect of an inner conversation is revealed. The juxtaposition of this self-consciousness with the voice of the other discloses the intersubjective context within which selfhood is constituted.

The poem below shows the complexity and interwovenness of looking experiences; again revealing an inner dialogue, in the context of Julie's being looked at by her mother.

### **My mother's house**

Every time I would return to  
my mother's house  
as I got closer and closer  
I would start to feel  
*Oh, I'm wearing the wrong thing*  
*Oh, my hair looks...*

This kind of sinking feeling

it wasn't even conscious

My mother would make  
some kind of comment  
about the way I looked, and so  
being with my mother,  
I always felt not good enough

Like I didn't measure up to her

Just the sense of dread  
I couldn't connect with myself  
There's a way in which part of me was annihilated

*I mean this is the whole thing with my mother, you know?*

I could not reach myself  
when I was with my mother  
I could not connect with myself.

I felt like I was annihilated  
what was there instead was something bad  
I still carry my mother's judgment  
There's no doubt  
There are days when I look  
at myself in the mirror and  
I just think I look awful  
ugly  
I can't see myself any other way

*And nothing I try on feels right, you know?*

This kind of sinking feeling

Every time I would return to  
my mother's house

[From Julie's transcript, 18/4/18, pp. 4-5]

Julie's experiences of being looked at by her mother leave her feeling as if she 'cannot reach' or 'connect' with herself. Julie has a "sinking feeling" and a "sense of dread". She uses the word "annihilated" to describe her sense of part of her no longer being there. When she is with her mother "something bad" is there instead. It is as if the experiences of being looked at by her mother wipe out and annihilate Julie's looking at self, replacing it with "mother's judgment". Unable to see herself "any other way", her mother's looking feels like the wounding that happens in the face of this particular vulnerability. Julie experiences a sense of not-rightness. Her hair is not right. She is wearing the wrong thing and nothing she tries on feels 'right'. Nothing she does can alleviate this feeling of wrongness. A feeling of not good enough has somehow been transmitted through her mother's looking.

## **Finding Ways to Protect the Looked At Self**

The need to protect against being looked at makes sense in the context of the experiences of feeling so vulnerable. The poem below, from Zahira's transcript, highlights an experience of being looked at by men against the backdrop of sexual abuse by an uncle whom the family would stay with on their trips back to India. Zahira described how this has coloured her experiences of being looked at by men, and also how it has affected her looking at others (particularly men).

### **Little woman**

India for holidays  
Earliest recollection  
my uncle  
                    age 3 to age 11  
sexually molested me  
Really uncomfortable  
in my body,  
a child  
breasts at 8, period at 9.  
This woman's body  
                    meant to be this girl.  
Being touched and looked at  
                    as a little woman.

So I covered up.  
I hid.  
Jeans, men's shirts, dad's barber,  
hair cut like a boy.  
It wasn't safe  
                    *to be a woman*

I don't look at men much.  
It's a form of protection,  
they might misinterpret  
they might think  
I'm wanting something from them,  
offering something to them.

[From Zahira's transcript 11/2/19, p. 2]

Zahira's words disclose the extreme vulnerability of her younger self and how this has carried through into later life. There is a need to hide, cover up and protect the looked at self from further exploitation and abuse. Covering up and protecting reveals the danger, vulnerability and sense of exposure inherent in the experience of being looked at. She hides her femininity, having Dad's barber cut her hair like a boy and wearing men's shirts. Zahira notices now that she avoids looking at men in case her looking is misinterpreted. She shields herself. By not

looking she can be certain that she is not misinterpreted as “wanting something from them” or “offering something to them”. By not looking at men she also protects from being looked at since any looking others remain outside of her awareness. It is as if she does not want to invite the looking other in. This reminds me of the child’s game of peek-a-boo. A man may be looking at Zahira, may even be looking in a way that could feel desirous or sexual but by “not looking”, Zahira can block out such an intrusion. The next poem also reveals a closed-off-ness that protects from a being looked at that feels invasive.

### **Other people’s looking**

I was protective of myself  
as a young woman  
closed off from being seen

I recall a guy saying,  
*do you realise you’re looked at  
quite a bit?*

I just totally closed myself off from that

Didn’t need that  
didn’t want that,  
other people’s looking  
it seemed like  
an invasion of my space,  
my internal world.  
I needed my own space.  
Not noticing the looking  
helped.

[From Rachel’s transcript, 30/5/18, pp. 2-3]

Rachel’s description is one of other people’s looking feeling like “an invasion” of her private inner space. ‘Closing herself off’ from being seen helps to preserve her “own space”; protecting her “internal world”. These poems disclose the vulnerability inherent in being looked at. Finding ways to protect the vulnerable self, and manage the feelings that are evoked, are revealed as part of the experience.

The poem from Brylee’s transcript highlights a difficulty in bearing being looked at. Brylee lost her arm in a car accident in childhood and describes how she is aware of often being looked at as different. The poem below is drawn from several experiences she described.

### **They're all looking at me**

Maybe these people are staring at me  
because I have one arm  
maybe it's because I don't look right  
sometimes I'm more insecure about my body  
than having one arm  
When you have so many people looking at you  
all the time  
that can become very real in your head.  
It comes in waves  
some days you walk down the street  
and feel great  
some days, not.

Some days I find it easy  
people looking and noticing  
and some days it's really hard  
I don't want you all staring at me  
I'm not a circus show.  
Walking down the street  
everyone staring  
and I'm thinking  
*they're all looking at me and thinking I'm different*  
Kids staring, for miles down the street,  
and not just kids.  
I get shocked how much I get looked at.

Most of the time it doesn't faze me  
it's a genuine reaction  
not people being rude or nasty.  
Where those looks impact me  
depends on my mindset.  
It's totally my reflection  
of what I think other people  
might be thinking.  
Dealing with their reactions can be  
exhausting.

[From Brylee's transcript, 12/11/18, pp. 2-4; 14]

Brylee's words shine a light on a vulnerable self that must withstand the looking of others. The links with self and other are revealed as inner dialogue as Brylee tries to imagine why others are looking and what they think as they look at her. The thoughts and feelings stirred in Brylee come in "waves". Sometimes they are waves that can be withstood, but sometimes they are waves that threaten to overwhelm. She reflects that this depends on her mindset. Depending on her interpretation, she can feel she is being looked at because of her one arm, or because she does not look right, leading to her feeling insecure about her body. On the days it is easier to manage being looked at she seems more buoyed. On the days she finds it harder, there is a sinking under the weight of being looked at. Her comment "I'm not a circus show" reveals that she might resent being looked at, as if she is an exhibit to satisfy the curiosity of others. Being

looked at in this way feels burdensome and invasive, but also exploitative. Perhaps, like Zahira, being looked at can feel like there is a taking of something that is not willingly given, and from which it is difficult to protect oneself. Brylee's use of the word "faze" ("most of the time it doesn't faze me") is interesting since *faze* suggests to frighten, alarm or discomfit; but the word also has a 16<sup>th</sup> C nautical connection, *feaze*, meaning to unravel (Harper, 2020). It is easy to imagine that one would need to protect oneself from unravelling. The next poem from Anna's transcript also reveals the potential dangers inherent in being looked at and how one might protect oneself by shutting out or shutting down.

### **Out of sight**

I couldn't look at guys  
or have them look at me

being looked at  
can be  
dangerous,  
violating

close my eyes  
freeze,  
let it all happen  
a shutting down

                  go away,  
out of sight  
                  out of mind

shutting them out  
instinctual turning off

                  don't be

                  don't see

shutting down all the senses  
especially the looking

and shutting others out  
out of my consciousness  
                  my awareness

                  almost an annihilation

I don't exist  
I'm not allowed  
to exist  
if I can't be seen  
others can't either

[From Anna's transcript, 30/5/18, p. 4]

Anna described her teenage experience of being looked at by boys as dangerous; she felt their looking to be a violation. In shutting them out, or shutting down, she protects herself. The origins of the word *shut* are in the Old English, *scyttan*, literally putting a bolt in place to secure a door or gate (Harper, 2020). The word also suggests the prevention of ingress or egress, which relates to the right to enter and exit a property. In this way, there is a picture of Anna's shutting out and "shutting down all her senses" as protecting her from violation, from someone who might otherwise be able to enter her being with their looking. The word *shut* or *shutting* used to mean "to set (someone) free (from)" (Harper, 2020). This form is now obsolete except for some English dialects that still use the phrase, 'to get shut of someone'. This is familiar to me, with my roots in the north of England and becomes an interesting association in terms of Anna's perhaps being set free from being looked at by 'getting shut of' the one who is looking.

The data reveals how experiences of being looked at can evoke feelings of vulnerability, of being exposed, exploited, invaded and violated. Being looked at can also evoke being frightened, alarmed, or a sense of unravelling thus disclosing how one might have cause to protect against a being looked at that feels so threatening.

### **Pretending the Looking is Okay**

Zahira describes how her experience of being looked at can change, depending on how she is feeling and who is looking. The poem also reveals that how she is feeling can be changed depending on her experience of being looked at. There is a weariness in Zahira's description, as if she is tired of fighting the being looked at. Inherent in her experience is a sense of pretending that she is "fine" with being looked at. The poem also highlights cultural differences that can permeate the meanings of being looked at.

### **Purple suede boots**

Sometimes I'm okay  
with being looked at  
wearing my knee-high,  
purple suede boots.

Other times,  
I feel weary, tired.  
The constant looks  
not making eye contact back  
because that would feel like a challenge

*Why are you looking at me?*

*Look the other way!*

I don't want to get into that  
so I look the other way  
pretend it's fine  
*look all you like*

There's judgment here  
in India  
you can see it with some men,  
*that's not the way a woman should dress*  
*that's not the way I want my daughter to dress*

Sometimes it's because  
I'm in jeans and a t-shirt  
and I'm aware of being looked at  
because I look like a foreigner  
I don't fit in

But the judgment  
comes from the older generation.

[From Zahira's transcript, 11/2/19, pp. 13-14]

Zahira's description discloses the complexity and the varied layers in the experience of being looked at. There are times she feels okay being looked at, and there are times where it makes her feel weary. Sometimes being looked at feels judgmental, critical even, and there is perhaps a hint of misogyny in the looking Zahira describes. She is aware of averting her own looking so as not to make eye contact which she feels would be interpreted as a challenge. She does not want to "get into that" so she avoids eye contact. She pretends that it is fine for the other person to 'look all they like'. Despite this seeming compliance there is a part of Zahira that internally shouts, "Why are you looking at me?", that might demand that they "Look the other way!" Instead, in the pretending, it is Zahira who looks the other way, trying to protect her looked at self.

Cultural differences in the meanings of being looked at are highlighted in Zahira's poem. She experiences judgment coming from "the older generation" in India and particularly from older men. Zahira's knee-high purple suede boots break from a cultural tradition that dictates the appropriate way for an Indian woman to dress. At other times she experiences a being looked at that feels qualitatively different, she is aware that she is looked at as a foreigner, as someone in jeans and t-shirt who does not belong. Clothing and appearance signal belonging and/or show foreignness. Sometimes as "foreigner" Zahira experiences more leniency in being looked at, but at other times she feels judged. When Zahira does not feel judged she seems more likely to interpret being looked at as connected with others' curiosity about her

foreignness. At these times she will “engage, smile and say hello”. The latter is so different from the experience of feeling judged where Zahira has to look away so as not to challenge the being looked at. Within this experience is a sense of fear of reprisal.

The outfit Zahira wears, the bright purple boots, the jeans and t-shirt, do not change, but her experience of being looked at does change, depending on who is looking, and the felt quality of that looking. In a traditional and patriarchal society it is interesting, and perhaps not surprising, that Zahira experiences the most judgment from older Indian men whom it feels difficult to challenge. This leaves her feeling tired and weary, unable to challenge the looking.

### **Needing to Stand Out**

The data also revealed a way in which one might seek out being looked at, even with the inherent vulnerability described above. Present in the poem from Lucy’s transcript below is a sense of the importance of being looked at, even though criticism from others might be imagined.

#### **I caught a girl looking at me**

It’s a fine line  
people look  
and  
I don’t know  
whether they’re looking  
because they’re like, *oh my god*  
*that’s a bit crazy*  
*that’s a bit weird*  
or, *that looks really cool,*  
*I wish I could dress like that*  
I don’t know  
what’s behind the look.

It happened just now,  
in the car-park,  
I caught a girl  
looking at me,  
a half smile  
and I thought, *she thinks I look weird.*  
I tend to go  
more to the insecurity  
than the complimentary.

There’s a risk,  
but I don’t think I would give it up  
even though it comes with those moments.  
The alternative,  
blending in,  
not standing out  
that feels worse.

How I look  
creates a curiosity in other people  
I'm trying to make them think  
*why did she choose that?*  
or, *that looks good,*  
even, *that looks a bit funny.*

You become looked at  
you become noticed,  
you become something.  
Whether that's good or bad  
It's something,  
the opposite of being nothing.

[From Lucy's transcript, 7/5/18, pp. 3-5]

Lucy acknowledges she does not know "what's behind the look". She cannot know what others are thinking when they are looking at her. It might be critical or derogatory (that she "looks weird" or "a bit crazy") or it might be complimentary and admiring (that she "looks cool" or that others wish they could dress like her). Even though Lucy says that she tends toward imagining more derogatory than complimentary in others' looking, she does not think she would "give it up". This feels like a tradeoff, as if somehow *not* being looked at might stir up even greater vulnerability. As Lucy says, the alternative, a blending in and not standing out, feels worse. In Lucy's experience being looked at creates a sense of *becoming something*, she becomes noticed. The Old English origins of the word *become* suggest the change from one state of existence to another that helps disclose possible meanings of Lucy's experience. In being looked at she experiences becoming, changing from the state of no-thing to some-thing. Lucy's use of the word *becoming*, and the movement between something and nothing (literally *no-thing*), links with Anna's use of annihilation (in *Out of sight*, p. 141), as if somehow others' looking confers existence. Thus, the data reveals how *not* looking/*not* being looked at can annihilate, as in shutting out or getting rid of. For Lucy, it feels far better to be looked at than not. The poem from Julie's transcript below discloses a similar importance of needing to be looked at or needing to stand out.

## **Breathe**

I can't stand dressing  
conservatively  
I hate the corporate look  
it's like putting on  
really scratchy clothing  
like I can't be seen  
for who I really am

For many years  
I struggled  
going into a group  
a party situation

Like I had to sit up and command  
be the centre of attention  
have everybody look at me

When I don't feel like I'm being seen  
*as the most special*

I feel like  
I don't exist  
I feel like

I        can't        even  
take        a        breath

it's physical.  
I have to remind myself to breathe.

I don't want to admit wanting that  
wanting not just to be looked at  
but to be seen as the most special  
or I don't exist.

[From Julie's transcript, 18/4/18, pp. 18-19]

Julie's metaphor of "really scratchy clothing" conveys her discomfort at dressing conservatively. Not standing out, not being seen as "the most special", feels suffocating, as if she cannot breathe. In not being looked at there is deprivation, a threat to existence itself, again suggesting that being looked at can confer feelings of existence, a breathing life into. Like Lucy's poem (*I caught a girl looking at me*, p. 144), there is something vital in the experience of being looked at. It becomes a validating experience that can not only confirm specialness but also existence. This is a physical experience that can literally take Julie's breath away. It is the difference between being and non-being.

Lucy described the experience thus:



wanting to be looked at  
wanting to be desired.

Not wanting to acknowledge that,  
there's something wrong  
with wanting to be looked at  
with wanting that attention.

*I'm ashamed of wanting that attention*

[From Julie's transcript, 18/4/18, pp. 6-7]

This poem reveals Julie's conflict of wanting the attention and also feeling ashamed for wanting to be looked at. There is a tension between not wanting to attract "a tonne of attention" and dressing in a way that "screams 'look at me'". In another conflict she tries to appear nonchalant but is simultaneously "laser focused" in noticing being looked at. Julie says she has never felt attractive or pretty, and so perhaps being looked at can also validate and affirm that one is desirable, boosting self-esteem and/or self-confidence. Perhaps courting a being looked at where one then feels desirable can go some way to 'undo' or refute the inner dialogue that suggests one is "not attractive or pretty" or good enough. The poem below reveals how the experience of being looked at by other women holds a particular importance for Julie.

### **I've perfected a formula**

What I focus on most is other women,  
and if I'm really honest,  
looking better than them.

*I hate to admit that, you know?*

*I feel ashamed of myself.*

*Why do I need to feel better than other women?*

It's a love hate thing.

This conversation is bringing that into the light for me.

I can fool myself and think,  
*I don't really care about that anymore,*  
but I've perfected a formula where people look at me.  
People look at me when I'm out in the world

It's all about achieving a certain kind of attention  
It's really hard for me to go out into the world looking ordinary  
It's a wanting to look special  
And pretending that I don't care about being looked at

It's a fundamental thing in me.  
How do I know I've achieved that goal?  
It's a knowing, something lines up,  
matching what's inside of me, I just know.

[From Julie's transcript, 18/4/18, pp. 14-17]

Julie describes the experience of “a knowing” inside of her that is a ‘lining up’, “matching what’s inside” which is like Isabelle’s description of the “shrook” as she looks at herself in the mirror before leaving the house (in *Looking for something in particular*, p. 121). Like the data on looking at others and looking at self it seems as if there is an inside ‘picture’ or expectation that is then compared with and matched to. Julie’s description of “a formula”, a ‘wanting to look better than’, resonates with the feeling of comparing oneself to others that was revealed through the data on looking at others and looking at self. There is a competitiveness in Julie’s wanting to look better than other women, she wants to “look special” and somehow the knowledge that she has achieved this lies within her experience of being looked at. It seems fundamental to her being. Fundamental suggests something that is primary or foundational which in turn discloses the ways in which looking and being looked at are constitutive of self. Julie has “perfected a formula”, dressing in a way that maximises being looked at. At the same time, she can “fool” herself into thinking that she is not really concerned with being looked at, perhaps to help lessen feelings of shame.

The poem below illuminates these both/and complexities, revealing the vulnerability inherent in being looked at, alongside a profound need to be looked at and seen. The complexity of this oscillation discloses ambivalence in the experience of being looked at.

### **Looking through the glass**

I often have an image of me  
trying to hide  
when there were visitors.

The glass door in the kitchen meant  
you could see who was walking past.  
I remember crawling underneath the glass  
so that people wouldn’t see.  
A not wanting to be seen,

but at the same time a huge desire  
and huge need, to be more visible,  
to feel like I was somebody  
because  
I didn’t feel like I was somebody.

Feeling invisible  
and at the same time, too visible.  
This huge desire to be seen  
and a huge fear of being seen.  
This contradiction,

I don’t know how I did it  
but that’s what I remember

trying to hide. And at the same time  
I wanted to get attention.  
But when I had attention it was scary

and it was shameful.  
When I think back  
it's not how I was looked at  
but the way I felt about myself.  
That came from somewhere.

[From Anna's transcript, 30/5/18, pp. 2-3]

Anna's words shine light on what she calls a contradiction. "Not wanting to be seen" is juxtaposed with a "huge desire and huge need to be more visible". Being looked at is attention that is scary but it also helps create the feeling of being "somebody"—that one exists. This sense of contradiction and ambivalence in the experience of being looked at is also evident in the earlier poems from Lucy's and Julie's transcripts. Being looked at evokes vulnerability and seems crucial in terms of experiencing one's self as coherent and constant. In these descriptions of the experience of being looked at, there is an encounter with Winnicott's (1960) sense of 'going-on-being'. From his clinical work psychoanalyst Winnicott theorised the threat of annihilation that is part of the infant's experience, where being (and going-on-being) and annihilation are the two alternatives. This meaning shines through in the descriptions of being looked at as oscillating between experiences of being a 'something' or 'nothing'.

### **Feeling More or Less Visible**

Liz described feeling much less visible in her 50s. The poem below reveals how she contrasts her sense of being "less visible" with her experience of "noticing heads turn to look" at her beautiful, young daughter as they walk down the street.

#### **Being with my daughter**

Thinking about what it's like  
to walk down the street with her  
we look quite similar  
as mother and daughter

Seeing how she's looked at,  
how I'm looked at.  
and thinking about myself,  
the stage of life I'm at  
in my 50s.

Less visible.  
She's very visible.  
Just walking down the street with her.

Noticing heads turning to look.  
She's really striking  
and you really notice her.  
Feeling proud of her,  
but noticing how much less visible I am  
as I've got older.  
That's how it is.  
She's my gorgeous young daughter.

[From Liz's transcript, 27/4/18, pp. 6-7]

Liz's experience of feeling much less visible suggests a time when Liz experienced feeling more visible, perhaps when she was "really striking". Her noticing the heads turn to look at her daughter discloses Liz's feelings of decreased visibility. Whilst Liz experiences pride in her "gorgeous young daughter" there is also a wistfulness evoked through the poem.

Liz explained that when she is in a "really happy, good space" she feels as if she exudes something that makes her feel more noticed and more visible. Contrastingly, she recounted a painful memory of having dinner with friends, where she experienced feeling invisible during the evening. "I felt overlooked... I didn't feel seen, but I think that's because I'm a bit sad at the moment" (Liz, p. 8). Liz's reflection that how she is feeling can impact her experience of being looked at discloses the contextual, shifting nature of one's experience.

Anna also spoke of feeling less visible, particularly in relation to being looked at by men as she ages.

**New Zealand men**  
don't look at me  
in the same way  
European men do,  
as a sexual object.

In Europe,  
straight away,  
I feel the looking.  
Sometimes a whistle,  
approving or disapproving.

It's much more covert here  
maybe men here don't dare to look

I was relieved at first  
not being whistled at,  
doesn't matter how I look

but over time,

I missed it.  
Missed being interesting  
and attractive to men.  
*Maybe because I felt better  
about myself*  
I missed being looked at in that way

Men aren't interested  
in women in their 40s and 50s  
*What do I do with that?*  
It matters.  
The being looked at matters,  
it affects my self-esteem

I'd become invisible  
with ageing  
I'm not crisp  
not fresh.

[From Anna's transcript, 30/5/18, p. 6]

Initially, the experience of less visibility brings relief, Anna feels freer, worrying less about what she will wear. Over time, however, she notices missing "being looked at in that way". As the experience of relief becomes one of feeling invisible, she notices the impact on her self-esteem. She feels "not crisp, not fresh", because men seem disinterested in women her age. Being looked at "in that way" can boost self-esteem such that one feels crisp, fresh and likely desirable. As Anna says, "being looked at matters". It matters both in terms of how the experience impacts one's feelings about oneself, and how one experiences being looked at is affected by how one feels at the time.

### **Loving Looking that Coheres**

Both Liz and Rachel described times when being looked at felt loving. For Liz, these experiences were with her therapist and her husband. She felt seen and "really connected". Unlike Julie's experience of not being able to connect with herself when she was with her mother, Liz describes how her therapist's looking connects her, to herself and to her therapist. In the "moment of looking" she knows that she is loved. Rachel similarly described the significance of being seen "totally for who I am" as an experience that she felt would stay with her forever. The following poems reveal a sense of this loving looking.

### **An explicit being seen**

To be seen totally  
for who I am  
so significant  
fantastic!  
The being looked at,  
being seen,  
I didn't get as a kid.  
It comes from the  
therapist's looking and seeing  
rather than being spoken.

It is an incredible being seen  
an explicit being seen  
I don't think anyone else could do that.

Seeing the deepest wholeness of my  
being.  
How she sat with me,  
no words,  
just her looking.  
Incredibly special,  
wholesome.  
It will stay with me forever.

[From Rachel's transcript, 30/5/18, pp. 12-14]

Rachel's use of the word "explicit" caught my attention since the present day meaning, to describe material as explicit may infer something pornographic; however, this usage only appeared as recently as the 1970s (Harper, 2020). The original Latin, *explicitus*, meaning unobstructed reveals an alternative sense of the word, suggesting to unfold, unravel, or explain (Harper, 2020). At the end of medieval texts the word *explicitus* would be written as a shorthand of *explicitus est liber*, "the book is unrolled" (Harper, 2020, n.p.). There is a sense in Rachel's poem that as she is looked at by her therapist she is able to come into being more fully, connecting with herself. Being looked at by her therapist facilitates Rachel's connecting with the "deepest wholeness of [her] being". This is not related to anything the therapist says; rather, the experience is made possible through the therapist's looking. This seems significant for Rachel, perhaps allowing a deepening of her relationship with, and understanding of, herself.

**A look can be like a hug**

My therapist has looked at me  
with tears in her eyes.  
To be understood  
in a look,  
not spoken.  
An incredible feeling seen.

I'm not used to being taken care of.

Being looked at  
can make me feel.

I don't want to be looked at in my sadness.

Holding something painful  
I don't want to look at,  
don't want to grieve just yet.  
I'm trying hard not to see it myself  
It's hard to be seen in that way.

I can be fine  
and sit down opposite her  
and suddenly feel seen  
in a loving look.  
A powerful connection,  
it transcends language.  
A look can be like a hug,  
holding someone still in the moment.

[From Liz's transcript, 27/4/18, pp. 11-13]

As Liz suggests, "being looked at can make me feel". The therapist's looking feels like a hug. It becomes a way of "holding [her] still in the moment". For someone who is not used to being taken care of, Liz does not always find this loving looking comfortable. She does not want to be looked at in her sadness, something she is trying hard not to see. If the loving look is like being held in an embrace, then not only is it soothing, but it is also provocative, since it enables a deepening connection with feelings that one might rather avoid. There is the sense that this loving looking allows *being* to unfold, enhancing connection with the feeling world. Ideally, one is the recipient of loving looking from parents and caregivers as one matures; however, as many participants described, so often the looking from early years has felt critical, judgmental and/or shaming. The poem below describes a loving looking that Liz has experienced from her husband.

### **My husband**

Sometimes my husband  
will look at me  
and I know that I'm loved  
in that moment of looking.  
He looks at the kids  
and there's something  
in the way he gazes  
that is a loving  
kind of warmth.  
I've been held in that look.

[From Liz's transcript, 27/4/18, p. 14]

The experience of being looked at in a way that holds, like the hug, conveys a "loving kind of warmth" and allows her to know she is loved.

### **Bringing the Meanings Together**

As with the other findings chapters, finishing with a choral poem brings the parts together as a whole, further revealing women's lived experience of being looked at.

#### **Chorus: Being looked at**

It's being looked at as the tall woman,  
fattest person in the room,  
sexual object, foreigner.

Feeling like a lesser person,  
not enough to hold their interest.  
Wanting to be noticed  
and being scrutinized  
but blending in feels worse.  
Need to be seen and  
trying to hide at the same time.

The weight is there  
for all the world to see  
*useless, fat, ugly, less than.*  
It's covering up in the back of the taxi  
in a society where cleavage isn't acceptable  
and what *he* might be thinking  
and if you get wolf whistled at  
*you were asking for it*  
dressing that way  
and being seen as a nice, proper girl.

Wanting to look special, not ordinary  
and protecting myself  
closing myself off from looking  
that invades my inner world,  
the being seen and being objectified.  
It's not being seen for who I am

and being more than just a body.

It's my mother's comments  
*look at your tummy,*  
*do you really want to go out in that?*  
and never feeling good enough.

It's the message I can do anything I want  
as long as I'm small in the world.  
but it's okay for men to carry extra weight.  
It's jumping jacks in the bathroom as a child  
I am 7 years old.

It's the looking at people  
looking at me  
and the way I dress screams  
*look at me!*  
And the shame of wanting that attention.

It's the president of the United States  
looking at women as pieces of meat  
and it's missing being attractive to men.  
Growing up in a society that demands  
a certain figure, and the insecurity.  
Trying to fit in and be noticed,  
wanting women to envy me,  
men to desire me,  
craving a winning without trying  
and trying so hard.

It's ageing and becoming invisible,  
retiring and becoming  
overlooked.

It's a wholesome, loving looking  
that will stay with me forever.  
Unspoken, transcending words,  
a look that cares, penetrates in a different way  
and knowing that,  
in that moment of looking.  
I'm loved.  
I'm seen.  
I exist.

The choral poem discloses the experiences inherent in being looked at. It reveals a tension between the experiences of feeling vulnerable and judged negatively alongside a strong need to be seen that can be met through being looked at. There is tension between 'being something' and 'nothing'; being looked at or overlooked. Being looked at can convey judgment, "look at your tummy", or a feeling of being loved and seen in the "deepest wholeness of [one's] being". Being looked at can be unwelcome, intrusive and/or annihilating. Conversely, it can be cohering, able to confer on the one who is looked at a sense of specialness and even a knowing that one exists and is loved. In this way, being looked at

unfolds being itself. The precariousness of these different aspects of the experience, side by side resonates throughout the chapter.

### **Chapter Summary**

This chapter has described the experience of being looked at through the phenomena of feeling vulnerable; finding ways to protect the looked at self; pretending the looking is okay; needing to stand out; wanting and not wanting the attention; feeling more or less visible; and loving looking that coheres. The found poems and the choral poem bring light to the complex nature of being looked at, revealing interwovenness with looking at others, and looking at self. The chapter reveals the narrow path women tread. On the one hand experiencing acute vulnerability and needing to protect the self against intrusion and/or potential annihilation. On the other experiencing being looked at in ways that might confer a sense of one's acceptability and/or desirability, and that potentially also allow a sense of knowing one exists. It is the existential quality of being looked at that has resonated throughout this chapter.

The next chapter brings the three findings chapters together in a discussion.

## 9. DISCUSSION

This hermeneutic phenomenological poetic inquiry explored women's experiences of looking (at one's self and at others) and being looked at (by others, including society). The findings are brought together in this chapter, disclosing the power of looking and being looked at to shape, and sometimes disturb, the self.

The findings reveal the interwovenness of looking and being looked at and the complex, intersubjective relationship that exists between the experiences of looking at others, looking at self, and being looked at. Women's experiences of looking and being looked at are often confronting and difficult. In looking and being looked at, women often feel both disappointed and disappointing. Their disappointment relates to failing to measure up, in their eyes, to the expectations of others. At the same time they fail to meet their own expectations. It is almost as if they cannot escape a perpetual cycle of comparing, yearning and feeling exposed. The intensity of these feelings varies; yet, they are ever present in some form or another. The struggle inherent in looking and being looked at permeates women's being.

This chapter relates the findings of the study to the substantive literature and philosophical literature. The chapter also offers recommendations for practice, education and further research, as well as suggestions for the potential of poetic inquiry within psychotherapy research and hermeneutic phenomenological research more broadly.

### **Looking/Being Looked At as Yearning**

Women described largely negative experiences of looking at self and being looked at, as well as describing how looking at others stirred feelings of disappointment and a struggle with looking at their own bodies. The feelings disappointed and disappointing sit alongside a wanting to be more like what is looked at, seeming to cause women to want to change their appearance and bodies in order to be more like what they believe is desirable. I have called this yearning. Yearning means "to strive, be eager, desire, seek for, beg, demand" (Harper, 2020, n.p.). In yearning there is a longing for. In yearning there is also wanting. The origins of wanting suggest deficiency, insufficiency, or shortage (Harper, 2020). In this way, we speak of being found wanting; that is, lacking. The usage, then, has a double meaning, wanting that which is looked at, and an awareness of what one lacks.

Looking and being looked at are revealed as disturbing; yet sometimes inspiring, wherein inspiration can be the painful experience of feeling unacceptable. This, too, is the experience

of yearning. It encompasses feeling disappointed (with how one looks) as well as a sense of being disappointing to others. In this way, yearning also means comparing and a sense of measuring up. A Gadamerian dialectic is at play in the back and forth conversation between self and other. One enters into communion and cannot remain the same as one encounters other and our horizons change.

Yearning is related to the word *yen*, meaning to have a sharp desire or hunger. The related Cantonese word, *yan*, means craving, referencing opium smoking. Thus, yearning can be like an addiction. This coheres with the more intense feelings of yearning that some women experienced. A related word that further uncovers the meaning of yearning is *repine*, meaning to be “fretfully discontented” (Harper, 2020, n.p.). To *pine* also suggests to waste away, reminiscent of the demise of Narcissus. Yearning contains an element of loss for that which is not present and the fretful discontent suggests an inability to tolerate what is, with a strong desire to have more of what one wants.

Yearning describes the interface between looking at other and looking at self. In looking at others, women take in what is looked at, comparing what is seen ‘out there’ with what is seen in the mirror, in this case one’s own body and self-image. For some, yearning engendered milder feelings of appreciation and admiration; but for others, yearning ignited intense feelings of want. This reveals striving for in yearning, evoking a sense of working hard to change the self and attain more of what is wanted. At the more intense end of the continuum the strength of these feelings called forth coveting and feeling envy. Women described this envying with a sense of shame. They did not want to admit to such feelings.

Thus, within yearning there is corresponding inspiration and motivation. The origins of the word inspire suggest to excite; the suffix *-cite*, as in excite or incite. From the Old French, *citer*, to summon, and the Latin, *citare*, meaning to call forward or put in motion (Harper, 2020). This is the active element of yearning. One might also say that in feeling motivated and inspired one is paradoxically *found wanting*, both in the sense of wanting as yearning and being found wanting as not measuring up. Sometimes the action inspired is drastic, weight loss surgery for example. At other times, the action is more internal, such as feeling self-hatred whilst yearning for what is looked at.

Yearning seems to exist as a continuum that begins with the more benign *Appreciating, Enjoying and Admiring* (in Chapter 6), moving through to stronger feelings of *Wishing For,*

*Envy and Coveting* (in Chapter 6) as the hunger for that which is looked at sharpens. In *Feeling Less Than or More Than* (in Chapter 6) yearning is either provoked or settled.

### **Looking/Being Looked At as Comparing**

Women described how they moved back and forth between looking at others and looking at self. These looking experiences involved careful checking and measuring. Comparing is inextricably linked to yearning because it happens as one moves between looking at other and looking at self. It is useful to hold in mind the hermeneutic spiral, and the interconnectedness of parts and the whole phenomenon. Human experience is dynamic and relational. Understandings likewise. Comparing includes careful checking and measuring up, of oneself and others. It also comprises scrutinising and means evaluating and judging.

The origins of the word compare suggest “to regard or treat as equal” and “liken, make a comparison, represent as similar” (Harper, 2020, n.p.). *Equal*, as a verb, suggests to match or rival. In comparing, there is the potential for the more intense feelings of envy, competitiveness and/or rivalry. The experience of comparing has a sense of wanting to be equal to, wanting to measure up. One speaks of being equal to the task. In comparing there is a strong presence of other. As such, other may take the form of actual others or images of women. The flawless, digitally enhanced images that bombard women on a daily basis invariably mean that one cannot measure up, feel equal to, or good enough. This speaks to the pressure that women experience. *Needing to Look Like Everyone Else* (in Chapter 7) described wanting to fit in, belong and be accepted. Again, the reciprocal nature of looking/being looked at compounds and amplifies the pressure from within and without.

Inherent in comparing are elements of scrutinising. Women both scrutinise others in their looking and frequently feel scrutinised when being looked at. Scrutinising also permeated women’s experiences of looking at self. In looking and being looked at, women experience checking and being checked, comparing and being compared, scrutinising and being scrutinised. Scrutinising describes the assessing and evaluating that takes place when comparing. Women’s worth hangs in the balance.

### **Looking/Being Looked At as Feeling Exposed**

The experience of looking and being looked at as feeling exposed further reveals the acute vulnerability inherent in women’s experience. Feeling exposed means being without shelter or defence (Harper, 2020). This extends the understanding of *Feeling Vulnerable* (in Chapter 8). Feeling exposed means being left wide open, suggesting the difficulty in bearing being looked

at. But feeling exposed also happened in looking at self, standing before the mirror for example. There is a laying open, from the Latin, *exponere*, which together with the Old French, *exposer*, meaning to speak one's mind or lay open (Harper, 2020), shows the meaning of vulnerability in being looked at. There is a sense of feeling laid wide open to the judgment of others. One is deemed acceptable or not. One measures up or is found wanting. The experience of feeling exposed is one of being naked, even when fully clothed. One's failings are there for all to see. One cannot hide. Again, there is the sense of women's worth being weighed. Thus, feeling exposed intertwines with yearning and comparing.

Furthermore, there is a paradox at the heart of this phenomenon. Despite the inherent difficulties, looking and being looked at must somehow be borne because being in this bind is inextricable from women's experience of being in the world. There is a sense of surrender in the Old English origins of bear, *beran*, meaning "to endure without resistance" (Harper, 2020, n.p.). To bear looking and being looked at describes the inescapable burden that women carry.

### **The Mirror as Metaphor**

The mirror emerged as a significant metaphor that helped my thinking in relation to the findings. Meaning a reflecting glass, to look at, watch or contemplate (Harper, 2020), mirror shares the same root as *admire*. The related Spanish word, *mirador*, has come to signify any architectural feature that affords one a view. Thus, mirror can signify both a reflective surface and a place to look from, a place from which one might survey. This resonates with Gadamer's notion of horizon. That one who seeks to understand does so from somewhere, from their horizon. Extending this horizon, meeting the other and fusing a new horizon with one's own, expands one's view of the world.

### **Envy and the reciprocal mirror**

The mirror is revealed as a powerful site of *Wishing For, Envy and Coveting* (in Chapter 6). It is a two-way, reciprocal mirror; thus one can see one's reflection but one can also be looked at. The work of Hirst and Schwabenland (2018) and Morrison and Smollan (2020) discloses how women survey, scoping out how they are perceived and assessing how to present themselves, *and* are surveyed in being looked at. Their research confirms Berger's (1972) notion that women watch themselves being looked at, and that this is taken in, becoming part of how women then see themselves. Women take part in scrutinising and comparing, are active in yearning for and even envying that which is looked at, whilst they are also scrutinised, compared, desired, and envied.

The mirror has held a special fascination for humans, across cultures and throughout history (von Franz, 1990). Often considered numinous, it is frequently connected with looking; for example, in the myths of Narcissus and Medusa. Narcissus is entranced by his reflection, ultimately resulting in his demise as he pines away. Medusa is also undone by her reflection. Unable to look upon her directly Perseus uses the reflective surface of his shield to see Medusa and kill her. It was Athena's envy that sealed Medusa's fate however. After Medusa's refusal of Poseidon he rapes her in Athena's temple. Athena is envious, turning Medusa from beautiful maiden into hideous gorgon. The meanings of feeling exposed and needing protection are revealed. Looking can lead to violation. Envious rivals are capable of terrible acts.

In folk tales such as *Snow White* an enchanted and powerful mirror reveals the truth, fuelling the Queen's envy. The youth and beauty of her step-daughter presents an unbearable threat and the Queen's envy has murderous rage within. If myth and folk tales are representations from a collective unconscious (von Franz, 1990), then vanity and envy can be understood as something that carry dire consequences. Thus, vanity is to be nobly forsaken and envy warded off (Wharton, 1993).

### **Internalising the mirror**

In Hans Christian Anderson's (1845/2002) tale, *The Snow Queen*, shards of a magical mirror pierce the eye and heart of one of the main characters (a little boy named Kay). The mirror shards distort the way Kay sees the world, suddenly everything appears ugly. For women, looking at others can generate an awareness of an ugliness in themselves that had not been present before. Fresh eyes now look at this body and are disappointed. Careful checking takes place before the mirror and women home in on their 'flaws'. The mirror is the site of struggle wherein battle lines are drawn. Here women crash into the harsh reality of not being the fairest. Societal dictates and desires are also reflected in the mirror. Women take these in as a kind of truth that becomes something to strive for. Like the 'Eyes' in the *Handmaid's Tale* (Atwood, 2010), society acts as a powerful, policing mirror held up to the looking self, determining what is acceptable. The societal mirror and the internalised mirror can pronounce solemn judgment. Reflecting back youth and beauty, in the societal mirror women encounter feeling disappointed and disappointing. They encounter feeling exposed and laid open for judgment. These judgments are internalised, inherent in women's looking experiences. It becomes hard to tell where one's own looking stops and the looking of (critical) others begins.

### **The distorting, disturbing mirror**

*When Looking Disturbs* (in Chapter 6) something that is looked at appears to 'get in'. Once inside the yearning begins and there is fretful discontent. Through looking at others, what one now sees in the mirror is distorted and is revealed as dissatisfying in the comparison. Looking at that which is 'out there' creates a feeling 'in here', in the psyche of the looking self, *Igniting a Wanting* (in Chapter 6). Looking at others can disturb or even crush the looking self.

That looking at others, looking at self, and being looked at are drawn together in the mirror is reflected in Rogers' (1959) suggestion that self-concept is comprised of self-image, self-esteem and the ideal self. Self-image, the view one has of one's self, is intrinsically linked with self-esteem. In turn, self-image is linked with one's perceptions of what others' think. When we feel someone is 'better than us' our sense of self-worth often decreases (Argyle, 2008; Morse & Gergen, 1970). This explains why viewing perfect-seeming, photoshopped images can be so detrimental to one's self-esteem. Conversely, feeling admired, even feeling envied or desired, enhances self-image and self-esteem (Argyle, 2008). The findings support Susan Fiske's (2010) work on how human's 'envy up' and 'scorn down'.

### **The Phenomenon and the Philosophical Literature**

*We don't see things as they are, we see them as we are*

Anaïs Nin

Nin's quote reiterates the Gadamerian view that our horizons are comprised of all our past experiences and our cultural heritage. In looking, women learn what they are supposed to look like. When we see that we do not measure up, there is feeling disappointed and yearning for that which is looked at. There is something inescapable about looking and being looked at which women must bear as part of being female. Despite the risk, it confers being and a sense of belonging. Like the ongoing hermeneutic conversation (Gadamer, 1975/2013), it is through the play and inherent risk, that one reaches new understandings. Through playing, and coming to new understandings, there is the hope of communion and connection with other.

### **The presence of the other**

The findings also exemplify the Gadamerian conversation in other ways. The conversation can be thought of as inner and outer. The inner dialogue occurs between parts of self, the ongoing inner conversation with what Gadamer referred to as "my interlocuter". He explained this as:

...that silent and yet continually responding presence of the other with whom one tries to conduct a conversation, in order to carry on the conversation with oneself that is called thinking. (Gadamer, cited in Grondin, 2003, pp. 279-280)

One's inner conversation moves back and forth between self and other. In psychodynamic thinking, these interlocutors are conceived of as objects, internal representations of significant others with which one has a relationship (Greenberg & Mitchell, 1983). Such objects form parts of one's psyche and are difficult to differentiate from what we think of as self. As Gadamer suggested, one carries on such inner conversations, sometimes with awareness and other times without.

The outer conversation is a dialogue that occurs between women and the cultural milieu. This dialogue forms part of what constitutes the inescapable horizons that shape our prejudices and, therefore, our understandings. Understandings can emerge from any conversation which we fall into (Gadamer, 1975/2013) and yet opportunities for misunderstanding also abound (Orange, 2009). Understandings are dialogic and dynamic. Our horizons are always subject to change. This is Gadamer's (1975/2013) idea of conversation as a communion in which we cannot remain as we were.

Much of Gadamer's writing built from Heideggerian philosophy. Both philosophers recognised the situated nature of human being. Our very sense of being is made possible through *Being-with-others*. *Being* is, therefore, *Being-with (Mitsein)* (Heidegger, 1962/2008). Being looked at, because it presupposes the involvement of others, is thus foundational for being. Heidegger differentiated between the they-self and self-understanding. Others become *they*. Everywhere and nowhere at the same time, others form an ambiguous, all-pervasive *they*. *Being-with others* implies having an awareness of one's status in relation to others. In this way, women's experiences of looking and being looked at are always encounters with *they* in terms of *Being-with-others*. Herein lies the potential for comparing, yearning, and feeling exposed. Thus, Heidegger's *they* are part of that which is inescapable in women's experience of looking and being looked at.

A feminist critique of Heidegger is beyond the scope of this project; however, it is possible that, as a man, Heidegger's experience enabled him to more readily make the distinction between self-understanding and they-self. Feminist research has highlighted the ways in which women are socialised to attend to the needs of others before self (Eichenbaum & Orbach 1983; Gilligan, 1983; Lindsey, 2016), suggesting that the lines between self-understanding and they-self may be more blurred for women.

## **The Phenomenon and the Literature**

The human bias towards eyes reflects the functioning of a “human-specific social learning system” (Gliga & Csibra, 2007, p. 335). It is thought that this system has evolved to transmit “useful cultural knowledge across generations” (Gliga & Csibra, 2007, p. 335). That human infants and children “attend towards the eyes of others” (Gliga & Csibra, 2007, p. 323), more so than other facial features, suggests the importance of looking and being looked at. This is perhaps particularly relevant to human infant development. As constant touch became less practical the eyes and eye contact between mother and infant came to signal care, attention, and protection (Gliga & Csibra, 2007). The eyes are indeed powerful instruments of communication and expression (Wharton, 1993). This thesis supports such conclusions in the literature given the importance women placed on looking and being looked at. The significant impacts of not being looked at, such as feeling invisible or ‘being no-thing’, attest to the power of looking to confer a sense of being. That one can feel annihilated or crushed through looking and being looked at again attests to the power of the phenomenon to impact women’s experience.

The notion that looking at something that is deemed socially or culturally desirable is a powerful influencer of mood, self-esteem and human behaviour is reflected in the academic literature (e.g., Gutwill, 1994) and through myth and folklore. In constructing body image we look at and to those around us (Dittmar & Howard, 2004). The images that we see or do not see matter (Nagoski, 2015). Research attests to the impact of media images on women’s self-esteem (e.g., Bordo, 2004; Orbach, 2016; Wilcox & Laird, 2000) and the gendered expectations around appearance that impact women (e.g., Anixiadis et al., 2019; Betz et al., 2019; Nagar & Virk, 2017). The literature discusses the impact of looking at images and attempts to identify certain at-risk groups and so on. One can say such impacts exist and can be measured, that certain groups might be more vulnerable to the effects, or that looking at images in fashion magazines negatively affects self-esteem (e.g., Clay et al., 2005; Hawkins et al., 2004; Jones & Buckingham, 2005). This thesis extends such research by providing an account of women’s lived experiences. It addresses a gap in the literature by revealing the everyday trauma and difficulty inherent in women’s experiences of looking and being looked at.

Janice Lieberman (2000) identified the paucity of research on how psychotherapy clients feel about looking and being looked at, and the role of their looks in the therapy process. King (2016) addressed this gap somewhat, identifying how client and therapist impact each other with looking in the therapy process. Whilst this thesis has not focused specifically on the

psychotherapy process, it responds to Lieberman's call and extends King's findings because the research was conducted by a psychotherapist. In addition, several participants were either practicing psychotherapists or in training, and/or had undertaken a therapy process. Arising from this thesis, some questions relating to clinical practice are outlined below.

The findings support Berger's (1972) suggestion, so instrumental in my initial thinking, that men look and women watch themselves being looked at. It also supports Berger's and Mulvey's (1975) concerns that how women look at themselves is impacted by their internalisation of an onlooker. However, my research extends this thinking by pointing to the internalisation of multiple onlookers, not necessarily male. This thesis uncovers the pervasive significance and difficulties inherent in women's looking at women. Women look too. It is primarily women's looking that engenders comparing, yearning, and feeling exposed. Whilst men's looking might be experienced as invasive or sexualising, the women in this study illuminated the difficulties inherent both in women's looking at other women and being looked at by other women. Berger's notion that how women appear to men is crucial for women's success is echoed in Reynolds' (2011) writing. Reynolds asserted that women have to care about their appearance. Whilst this thesis supports Berger's and Reynolds' work, it also extends their thinking. The study confirms that how women appear is highly relevant; however, it is not just how women appear to men, but also, and perhaps more importantly, how they appear to other women. Berger's writing identifies the mirror both in relation to eschewing vanity and the scrutinising of appearance. The thesis supports the idea of such a bind for women, revealing the mirror as the site of struggling to face the reflection, but also careful checking and scrutinising.

Impression management theory suggests that one uses one's appearance to signal the inner characteristics or qualities one wishes to display to the world in an attempt to influence others' perceptions of us (Belk, 2013; Goffman, 1959). Others' perceptions of us matter because belonging is important and this thesis supports that notion in that women pay careful attention to others' looking. Indeed, Brené Brown (2010) has described belonging as "an irreducible need of all people" (p. 40). Important information about what constitutes a desirable presentation comes through comparing one's self with others, including on matters of appearance (Argyle, 2008; Fiske, 2010). This thesis supports the idea that this kind of information signals how to belong or be accepted. The literature suggests that human beings make judgements very rapidly and with reasonable accuracy (Aronson et al., 2007; Bar et al., 2006; Naumann et al., 2009). Less evident in the literature is women's experience of such judgment. This thesis reveals that feeling judged, careful checking and scrutiny are important

aspects of women's felt experience of looking and being looked at. These findings support the idea that women are subject to scrutiny, and that women also scrutinise themselves (Berger, 1972; Brownmiller, 1984; Colls, 2006; Reynolds, 2011).

My work further supports the literature that suggests that one's appearance, and how one experiences being looked at, impacts one's self-esteem. An example of this is Katerina Steventon and Fiona Cowdell's (2013) study into the experience of acne. The impact on self-esteem was not correlated with clinical severity of acne but with women's perceptions. This suggests a link between how one looks at oneself and how one experiences being looked at. My thesis extends the premise of such research by revealing women's experience of the inner conversation between self and other, which becomes part of women's experience of looking and being looked at.

The thesis reveals comparing, measuring up, yearning, and feeling exposed as central themes of women's experience of looking and being looked at. Yearning, revealed in this thesis as disappointment in one's own body together with a longing for that which is looked at, extends existing literature by showing women's experiences of looking and being looked at. My findings support the literature that shows that body dissatisfaction is increased in obese women (Grilo et al., 1994); that constant unsuccessful weight loss attempts and striving to be slim form part of obese women's daily lives (Thomas et al., 2008); and that a cultural bias against fat women exists (Colls, 2004, 2006; Davis-Coelho, 2000). The findings reveal what Jan Brace-Govan (2002) has called "the influences of images of bodies" (p. 403). According to Brace-Govan, these images, which tend toward "slender and nubile", are "readily available and very visible" (p. 403). My work reveals how women experience comparing and feel dissatisfied with their bodies, yearning for that which is looked at. That images of slender, nubile, youthful women set women up for yearning is widely supported in the literature (Faroudy et al., 2015; Orbach, 2009; Perlott, 2014; Siebel-Newsom, 2011; Tiggerman & Slater, 2013). This thesis supports the literature; however, it also extends these ideas by revealing that women participate in comparing, judging, and scrutinising of themselves and other women. This aligns with the thinking of writers such as Sandra Bartky (1990) and Susan Bordo (2004). For Berger (1972) "the surveyor of women in herself is male" (p. 47). This aspect of women is an internalised 'male' critic, a symptom of patriarchal oppression and the ensuing objectification of women. Berger (1972) and others (e.g., Bartky, 1990; Bordo, 2004) argue that this comes about because women internalise a critical male onlooker in order "to acquire some control over this process" (p. 46). This may indeed describe and account for the psychological processes at work, however, it does not fully illuminate women's lived experience. The

conversation with my lesbian friend who shaves her legs attests to the ways in which women police themselves outside of the watchful eye of “the constant male gaze” (Hirst & Scwabenland, 2018, p. 170).

Alison Hirst and Christina Schwabenland (2018) revealed how women in open plan offices feel watched. However, implicit in their work is an assumption that it is men who watch. That some of the pressure to look a certain way comes from other women is revealed in my findings. This supports Marcia Reynolds’ (2011) and Kate O’Connell’s (2015) observations that, to some extent, women’s success depends on the way they look and present themselves. These are opinion pieces rather than research; however, both write from their own lived experience which is relevant to this thesis.

Whilst women readily admitted to feeling admiring in their looking, feeling envy seemed to engender shame. This may be because of the association with taking something from the other which might lead to feelings of guilt and badness (Bott-Spillius et al., 2011). Feelings of shame reveal the ways in which we do not feel acceptable or worthy of belonging (Brown, 2007). The potential destructiveness of the envious attack, like Athena’s attack on Medusa, bears witness to the need to protect from the evil eye (Wharton, 1993) and highlights why women are reluctant to admit such intense feelings.

My findings support the idea that human beings are not isolated and static but interconnected and dynamic with different self-states more prominent than others depending on the relational context. A fundamental premise of a more relational psychotherapy (e.g., Bromberg, 1996; Mitchell, 2014), this thesis supports the view that one’s experience unfolds in a relational, contextual matrix. Theories such as intersubjectivity theory (Atwood & Stolorow, 1984; Stolorow et al., 2002); object relations theory (Fairbairn, 1963; Winnicott, 1975); and mentalization theory (Allen et al., 2008) offer insight into how the self is formed in relation to, and through, others. In turn, these theories provide a rationale for what is happening in the between spaces of women’s experiences. For example, when one looks in the mirror, one is not strictly alone since the self is relational. Phenomenologically, this is as an experience of one’s self as always with other.

The thesis supports Winnicott’s (1971) thinking. In asking what the baby sees when they look at the caregiver’s face (Winnicott, 1971), there is an understanding that the quality of looking, and what it conveys to the infant is of vital importance and speaks to *how* the infant sees themselves. One’s perceptions of others’ minds and the impact of these perceptions are

influenced by our relationships with others. These others are actual others, a parent or friend for example or, more anonymously, the person on the street, society, or the fashion industry. In relation to the current study, one might assign a particular quality to someone's looking based on one's previous experiences and the meanings interpreted. This exemplifies Gadamer's (1975/2013) notion of prejudice. Such thoughts contribute to identity and self-concept, self-image and self-esteem because the psychological process of self-reflection is founded on intersubjectivity (Gillespie, 2007). Intersubjectivity theory suggests how one imagines one's self is co-created through that which I present, and that which is stirred in the person looking. Gadamer might argue that how one sees oneself is rooted in an inextricable, and ongoing self-other conversation in which one's horizon is constantly in play. Since one cannot access others' thoughts directly, one must interpret based on how one imagines one is 'looked at', on how one imagines one's appearance is received, and/or by comparing what is stirred in and through one's own looking. This thesis reveals this self-other conversation and shows that looking is inextricably intertwined with being looked at and the meanings one makes about such looking experiences.

That women find ways to protect themselves is consistent with the literature on resisting objectification (e.g., Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997) which suggests that some women actively manage their experiences of being looked at. However, what is gleaned from this thesis is that the threat is also inside the self. Women are active in comparing and scrutinising themselves, and each other, through their looking. This thesis reveals that women's feeling exposed is not just related to men's looking, but can arise from being looked at by women also. The thesis supports recent work, dealing specifically with sexual objectification and framed in a feminist context (Calogero & Tylka, 2014), that suggests women "alter and expand the self-objectified lens" through which they come to see themselves. Rachel Calogero and Tracy Tylka (2014) suggested women must do this "in order to reduce their dependence on the system that constructs and sustains that lens" (p. 764). My research highlights the complexity of the issue since self-image, self-esteem, and identity are formed in relation to others. Certain aspects of self depend on looking and being looked at. If looking confers a sense of belonging, as well as a sense of being, as I am suggesting, how are women to reduce their dependence on such a system? Whilst a temporary reprieve from being looked at might bring relief, participants in this study also described missing being looked at by men and sadness at feelings of invisibility in ageing. More broadly, a deep sense of the precariousness of existence on not feeling seen was described. Added to this complexity is the fact that women are complicit in creating the experiences of comparing, yearning, and feeling exposed, for themselves and for other women.

### **What this Study Offers**

Hermeneutic phenomenological research offers a rich, in-depth understanding of experience as lived in ways that bring attention to both individual uniqueness and the universality of an often overlooked phenomenon. This study provides significant insight into women's lived experiences of looking, at others and self, and being looked at. This is important because there is currently little research that accounts for such experiences. The study reveals the meanings of yearning, comparing, and feeling exposed that are inherent in women's experiences of looking and being looked at.

The use of poetry to focus on women's lived experience of the phenomenon has been able to crystallise the meanings of women's experiences in ways not previously attempted. The findings contribute to the growing body of qualitative research that calls for honouring the primacy of participant voice and recognition that human understandings are always dialectical. Poems provide a powerful way to present deep, nuanced understandings, offering fresh and unexpected ways of thinking about data. The use of poetic inquiry strengthens the thesis both in communicating these understandings to readers and in what it offers back to women from whose words the poems were created.

### **Recommendations for further research**

Further research in this area might include follow up focus group or process group type studies, such as participatory action research, where women participate through creating their own poetry and reflecting on the process. Feminist scholarship suggests that supporting and encouraging people to be involved in this kind of research can be psychoeducational and emancipatory, de-centering researcher assumptions and offering possibilities for the co-construction of meanings (Ardovini, 2015; Sprague, 2005; Wilkinson, 1998).

From a Gadamerian, hermeneutic-phenomenological perspective, one might consider the potential for the horizons of both researcher and participant to be expanded through such a project. Such research would be relevant to the field of psychotherapy because of the focus on (mutual) process, reflexivity, and change. An emphasis on the co-construction of meaning between people could contribute to understandings as to how change occurs and how meanings emerge in, and are impacted by, the group. The group, as opposed to the individual interview, allows for group interaction to become part of the research data (Kitzinger, 1994), such that participants are not isolated from their social context. This is of interest in an Aotearoa/New Zealand perspective where there is a particular place for research which is

inclusive, in terms of social context, and sensitive to the idea of a collective self, for example if working with tangata whenua.

It would be useful to uncover the experiences of women who identify as gay, lesbian, or queer since this is an area I was unable to explore. It would also be of interest to research the experiences of women who live with disabilities. Further research might focus on the experiences of men's looking and being looked at. Although the sample is small, women with a history of sexual abuse by a male perpetrator appeared to be far more impacted by men's looking, compared with the women who did not share that same history and seemed more preoccupied with women's looking. These differences merit further investigation.

### **Considerations for practice**

Psychotherapists, psychologists and counsellors are not immune to experiencing and expressing bias and negatively judgmental attitudes toward those in larger bodies, particularly women (e.g., Davis-Coelho et al., 2000; Yalom, 1989). This research makes an important contribution by encouraging clinicians to deepen their understanding of, and empathy for, women's experiences of looking and being looked at, including in the clinical situation. There is also the importance of the clinician's self-awareness and reflexivity. This study addresses a gap in understanding given that lived experience is easily overlooked. In addition, clinicians are provided with an overview of a hermeneutic-phenomenological-poetic sensibility (Chapter 4) which affords a way to deeply engage with clinical material.

Clinicians working in the helping professions mentioned above, and those who come into contact with women's bodies in the course of their work (e.g., midwives, gynaecologists, physiotherapists, doctors, nurses etc.) would do well to consider the impact of their looking given that this research highlights the difficulties inherent in such encounters for women.

In the interest of provoking thinking, some questions that arise from this study in terms of clinical practice are;

- What would it be like to treat looking as a kind of touch? Or as a proxy for touch? The experience of *Loving Looking that Coheres* (in Chapter 8) suggests that looking can be containing, conferring a sense of being, feelings of acceptance and even communicating love. What would it mean to say that one touches one's clients with one's looking? There is the potential for one's looking to be containing, even loving, in the stead of physical touch which is largely still discouraged in psychodynamic psychotherapy (some forms of psychotherapy are more accepting of physical touch,

see for example Kertay & Reviere, 1993; Phelan, 2009). What of the client for whom looking is not loving? What of the client who yearns or compares, even envies? Or who experiences looking as intrusive or invasive?

- What is the client's experience of looking and being looked at? How is this experienced in the transference and countertransference? What might this tell us about the client's inner world? What is the therapist's experience of looking and being looked at? How do these prejudices co-influence each other and thus the experience in the clinical situation?
- If the client identifies as female, how have her experiences of looking and being looked at shaped her relationship to her body and her sense of self?
- If the therapist/client dyad is cross gender (or cross cultural) what does this mean for the looking that happens in sessions? If past looking experiences have been negative how might this be sensitively attended to in the therapy?
- How might we bring attention to experiences of looking and being looked at, and encourage reflexivity, in the session?
- Given the proliferation of cell-phone use and the number of images and videos used to record children's daily lives in the developed world, what does this mean for the developmental experience of looking and being looked at? What is the child's experience of being the gleam in the cell-phone camera's eye? These questions are of particular relevance for psychotherapists, and researchers, as the meanings, and impacts, of looking and being looked at via the cell-phone camera begin to emerge.
- Given that our looking is shaped by our experiences of being looked at, how might clients experience the therapist's looking (and looking away)? What does this mean for clients who are particularly sensitive to being looked at? Might they experience the therapist who looks away as less attentive, less caring? Or the therapist who looks intently as being intrusive?

Clearly it is not sufficient to say that looking, or mutual gaze, is important in psychotherapy, but that the meanings of looking are important for both therapist and client. There is an opportunity for these meanings to become part of the ongoing conversation for the therapeutic dyad.

### **Implications and recommendations for education**

Hermeneutic phenomenological research seeks to engender an "experience of resonance" (Tasker et al., 2014, p. 5) in the reader, potentially alerting them to their own experience and

perhaps “sensitising them to thoughts and issues not previously considered” (p. 5). This is relevant for psychotherapists, including those in training since reflexivity and self-awareness are vital qualities for the psychotherapist.

The methodology used in this research might prove particularly helpful in terms of the in-depth case study, often a staple of psychotherapy research, where there is a working toward deepening understandings, a desire to effectively communicate these alongside one’s clinical experience, and to accurately (re)present clinical material. The method applied in this study might prove of interest to those studying psychotherapy at Master’s level, particularly as a ‘way in’ to the clinical material, affording opportunities for deeper reflection and engagement with the work.

Poetic inquiry, and the use of poetry in qualitative research, has the ability to afford the researcher new and unexpected ways of seeing and engaging with the data, yielding “new and important insights” (Butler-Kisber, 2002, p. 235). Found poetry, particularly, can be a way of representing something that might otherwise pass unnoticed (Butler-Kisber, 2002). This has implications for the introduction of poetry, poetical thinking, and poetic inquiry to psychotherapy training and research.

Poetic inquiry offers a way into reflection and reflexivity that, in combination with hermeneutic phenomenology, would be of benefit to those studying to become psychotherapists and those wishing to pursue research in the field. There is also the potential application of using poetry in a clinical setting, to facilitate a deepening of the engagement between therapist and client. This might be achieved through using published poetry or through the writing and sharing of poetry in sessions.

A further consideration is that poetic inquiry or poetical thinking penetrates and illuminates “certain otherwise hard-to-reach places” (Grünbein, 2010, p. 90). Describing poetic thinking he offered the following metaphor:

It will make certain places visible for the very first time - individual branches of the otherwise intractable psychic cave system that runs through the bodies of all humans and can be discovered only by a resourceful imagination audaciously pushing forward into still unsecured galleries... expanding the confines of our shared imaginaries. (Grünbein, 2010, pp. 90-91)

The use of poetical thinking and poetic inquiry fits well with the aims of psychotherapy training, and with the ongoing development of psychotherapists more broadly, since it is this

otherwise intractable psychic cave system running through all human beings that is of primary concern to psychotherapy. Psychotherapists are concerned with meaning and lived experience, thus poetical thinking offers an opportunity to not only expand the confines but to “reach beyond a search for knowledge or meaning into the sensual, efferent and afferent, difficult-to-grasp, or put into words, experiential world” (Freeman, 2017, p. 73). It is precisely this sensual, efferent and afferent world that the psychotherapist seeks to grasp, to help the client grasp, and help put words to in the service of the clients’ understanding and wellbeing.

### **Limitations of this Research**

Hermeneutic phenomenological research is interpretive; therefore, ultimately, this study represents something of the researcher’s interpretations. Rather than making any claims toward universality or objectivity this study presents potential meanings arising from the writer’s dwelling with the data. There is recognition that the work is part of an ongoing and dynamic whole and is, thus, never complete. Gadamer (1996) said “it would be a poor hermeneuticist who thought he [sic] could have, or had to have, the last word” (p. 603). As Caputo (1987) suggested, “it can claim here only to end, not to conclude. We do not aim at a conclusion but an opening. We do not seek a closure but an opening up” (p. 294). What is opened up is perhaps a universal resonance since what is described here is a human phenomenon and there appears much that women have in common in terms of their lived experiences of looking and being looked at.

### **Personal Learnings**

As I have journeyed through this research I have been reflecting on the history of my looking and being looked at. Especially resonant for me is the experience of wanting to be seen and the related sense of being a something. Correspondingly, the experience of wanting to hide from looking that feels envying, intrusive or exploitative has left me at times exposed to feelings of being invisible or overlooked. I also relate to the theme of yearning, that sharp hunger and the ensuing wanting to become more like that which is looked at. This research, then, as well as disclosing participants’ meanings, is inevitably revealing of my prejudices, as Gadamer (1975/2013) suggested. However, I was unprepared for the impactful ways in which women look at each other, and the difficulties inherent in such looking and being looked at. Whilst my own prejudices had alerted me to the difficulties in being looked at by men, my own horizon has been broadened by the new understandings of yearning, comparing, and feeling exposed that are predominantly generated through women’s looking at, and by, each other.

The use of poetry and the development of a poetic inquiry have afforded me the opportunity to suspend knowing, and to enter into a different, poetical way of approaching thinking. It is my belief that this develops vital capacities in me as a psychotherapist and a researcher. I include in this the knowing that understandings are always dialectical and that meaning is made in an intersubjective context; that poetical thinking can reach into otherwise inaccessible areas of human experience; and that there are valid forms of knowing, more ontological than epistemological, that offer a wealth of important information and can make a significant contribution to 'knowledge'.

### **Final Reflections**

It seems fitting to finish with a poem that opens up rather than concludes since any reflections at the end of such a project are neither final nor finished, but are, rather, making their way toward a deeper understanding. The poem below draws together meanings and represents my reflection process in the ever-unfolding interrelationship between parts and whole.

#### **Looking**

Mirror,  
look for evidence  
mirror,  
who is the fairest?  
comparing,  
perfectly toned thighs  
longing for smooth and shapely  
and flawless skin  
declares me good enough.

Inspiring,  
breathe in this  
sharp hunger.  
Call it motivation,  
igniting a wanting  
that disturbs,  
in your looking  
who do I become?

Pretending  
is the thing  
surviving your looking  
because I need it to survive.  
My arms hurt with keeping it out  
with the weight of it,  
the weight of all my failings  
stacked up for a panel  
who will rate me out of 10.  
And despite reading  
about body positivity  
and loving myself,  
I'm on that panel too.

Failing,  
this body is  
laid open for all to see  
In my head I saw  
I wished for  
but the shadows of others  
crawl forward  
darkening and  
obscuring the glass  
so that I can't tell  
where my looking  
stops and yours begins.  
Their voices remind me  
how disappointed  
and disappointing I am.

Hiding  
is the thing  
stow myself away  
disguise  
of men's clothes  
collarbones  
cut my hair  
grow my hair,  
chase protruding ribs  
and skip more desserts  
than the hot dinners I also missed  
and yet,  
          not being seen,  
being nothing...

*unbearable*

Appreciating  
this body  
only as it starts to disappear.  
Carve it up,  
suck out  
50 kilos  
then  
we'll talk about love.

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# APPENDICES

## Appendix A: Advertisement



RESEARCH RECRUITMENT

### PARTICIPATION IN DOCTORAL RESEARCH

Research topic: Women's experiences of looking and being looked at

We live in a highly visual culture, surrounded by photoshopped and manipulated images of other bodies. The ways women's bodies are often portrayed can result in women experiencing pressure to look a certain way, impacting the ways in which we see ourselves, and imagine others see us.

If you;

- Are female
- Are over 21 years of age
- Have an interest in exploring how you look at your own body, the bodies of others, and how you experience being looked at
- Do NOT have a current clinical diagnosis of an eating disorder

Then I would like to invite you to be interviewed (45-60 minutes) for this research project. There may also be an opportunity to participate in a series of group discussions (2-3 group sessions lasting approximately 60-90 minutes) exploring these topics.

This research is being carried out by Emma Green at Auckland University of Technology. The primary supervisor is Dr Margot Solomon.

For more information or to express your interest please contact me at [emmajane.green@icloud.com](mailto:emmajane.green@icloud.com)

## Appendix B: Advertisement (for psychotherapist participants)



RESEARCH RECRUITMENT

### PARTICIPATION IN DOCTORAL RESEARCH

Research topic: Women's experiences of looking and being looked at

We live in a highly visual culture, surrounded by photoshopped and manipulated images of other bodies. The ways women's bodies are often portrayed can result in women experiencing pressure to look a certain way, impacting the ways in which we see ourselves, and imagine others see us.

If you;

- Are female
- Are a psychotherapist
- Have an interest in exploring how you look at your own body, the bodies of others, and how you experience being looked at
- Do NOT have a current clinical diagnosis of an eating disorder

Then I would like to invite you be interviewed for this research project (interviews will take approximately 45-60 minutes). You might also be invited to participate in a follow up individual interview, or group discussion with other psychotherapists.

This research is being carried out by Emma Green at Auckland University of Technology. The primary supervisor is Dr Margot Solomon.

For more information or to express your interest please contact me at [emmajane.green@icloud.com](mailto:emmajane.green@icloud.com)

## Appendix C: Participant Information Sheet



### Participant Information Sheet (General)

#### Date information sheet produced

28 February 2018

#### Project title

Women's experiences of looking and being looked at

#### An invitation

This qualitative study will use individual interviews and focus groups to explore women's experiences of looking and being looked at, particularly in relation to their bodies.

This research is for a Doctoral qualification.

Your participation in this research is voluntary. I am inviting women over the age of 21 to participate in an individual interview lasting approximately 45-60 minutes with the possibility of joining a series of 2 to 3 focus group sessions (taking approximately 90 minutes each). Focus group sessions will be videoed. Participants are free to decline further group sessions or interviews, and are free to decline any questions they do not wish to answer. Women with an active eating disorder will not be eligible to participate in this research.

#### What is the purpose of this research?

Analysis of the focus group and interview transcripts will be written up as a thesis towards the completion of a Doctor of Philosophy. It is likely that the findings and methods used in the research will be published in peer-reviewed journals. Presentations of the research findings and methods will also be made at the New Zealand Association of Psychotherapists (NZAP) organization meetings, Auckland University of Technology, and other organizations and agencies that are interested in psychotherapy and this topic of research.

#### Why am I being invited to participate in this research?

You will have either volunteered to participate or have expressed an interest in learning more about what is involved in participating in this research. You may have read about the research in a flyer, seen and responded to an advertisement on the NZAP website, or other public domain.

#### How do I agree to participate in this research?

Your participation in this research is voluntary and whether or not you choose to participate will neither advantage nor disadvantage you. You are able to withdraw from the study at any time. If you choose to withdraw from the study, then you will be offered the choice between having any data that relates to you removed or allowing it to continue to be used. Data will be anonymized to ensure you are not identifiable. Once the findings have been produced, removal of your data may not be possible.

#### What will happen in this research?

If you are interested in this study, we will undertake a brief initial telephone interview that will take around 5-10 minutes. Should you agree to proceed, you will be asked to sign a consent form and invited to take part in an individual interview. The interview will be audio-recorded. You will also be asked if you would be interested in participating further by attending a series of 2 to 3 focus group sessions. If you choose to participate in the focus groups it is important to understand that whilst the content of will be kept

confidential you will know the first names of others participating and they will know yours. Likewise, you will be party to what others share in the group, as well as others being party to what you share or disclose. You are encouraged to share or disclose at a level that feels comfortable and right for you.

The individual interview will take approximately 45-60 minutes and it is estimated that focus group sessions will take approximately 90 minutes each and will be video and audio recorded. Interviews and focus groups will be held at the AUT Akoranga Campus, North Shore.

During the interviews and focus groups I will be asking you to reflect on your feeling towards your body, as well as reflecting on and sharing your thoughts and feelings about your body, as well as your experiences of looking and being looked at.

Interview and focus group sessions will be recorded to allow them to be transcribed. Video-recording of the group sessions is for academic purposes only and is to allow the researcher an opportunity to notice non-verbal communication and interactions between group members, as well as to track who says what more easily. Both audio and video recordings will be stored on a password-protected device and will be destroyed once the final findings are published. A transcript of the individual interview will be provided to you via email for your feedback and any corrections. Your information will be kept confidential and stored securely in a locked filing cabinet. Transcripts will, however, be referenced extensively in the final results and publication of the study. You can also request a transcript of any group sessions you participate in.

Participants will be referred to in the write-up by the use of a pseudonym or you may use your own name should you prefer. You can indicate your preference on the consent form.

Research findings will be available through the AUT library and journal publications. There will be an opportunity to comment on findings and add your 'voice' or interpretations to the findings before the final write up.

#### **What are the discomforts and risks?**

For some women discussions about body image and their relationship with their bodies will be challenging and possibly uncomfortable. With this in mind if you have a current diagnosis of an eating disorder you will not be eligible to participate in the study. You are asked to participate at the level that feels right for you. There will be other group members present and whilst the group is facilitated by a registered psychotherapist it is not a therapy group and you will be responsible for managing your level of contribution to the group process. You are encouraged to bring your awareness of group process and any difficult feelings or discomfort into the group if you feel able.

#### **How will these discomforts and risks be alleviated?**

You can signal your wish to end the interview or leave the focus group at any time and this will be respected. You are able to decline to answer a particular question or to stop the interview process at any time. Should you become aware of feeling overwhelmed or uncomfortable during a focus group or interview you are encouraged to let the researcher know. The researcher is a psychotherapist and will aim to be attentive to your process and any discomfort and may ask you directly how you are experiencing the process and whether you need to stop or take a break.

In the focus group session recording will not be stopped unless there is group agreement to do so, however you will be free to leave at any time. In any individual interview you will have control over audio recording and you can ask for something to be removed from the recorded material. Should you experience any ongoing distress or discomfort after participating in the interview or focus group(s) you are encouraged to contact a therapist or counsellor.

AUT Health Counselling and Wellbeing is able to offer three free sessions of confidential counselling support for adult participants in an AUT research project. These sessions are only available for issues that have arisen directly as a result of participation in the research, and are not for other general counselling needs. To access this service, you will need to:

- drop into our centres at WB219 or AS104 or phone 09 921 9992 City Campus or 09 921 9998 North Shore campus to make an appointment. Appointments for South Campus can be made by calling 09 921 9992

- let the receptionist know that you are a research participant, and provide the title of my research and my name and contact details as given in this Information Sheet

You can find out more information about AUT counsellors and counselling on <http://www.aut.ac.nz/being-a-student/current-postgraduates/your-health-and-wellbeing/counselling>.

There are also several free or low cost counselling services available as follows;

- AUT Psychotherapy Clinic - \$50/session. Phone 09 921 9999 ext. 7333
- AUT Counselling Psychology Clinic - [www.aih.aut.ac.nz/contact](http://www.aih.aut.ac.nz/contact). Phone 09 921 9155
- Lifeline - free telephone counselling available 24/7 throughout New Zealand. Contact 0800 543 354 or [www.lifeline.org.nz](http://www.lifeline.org.nz)
- Antara Natural Health Clinic - free/low-cost therapy and other services in Te Atatu, Auckland. See [www.antara.org.nz](http://www.antara.org.nz)
- Home and Family Counselling - Low cost counseling available by appointment at North Shore & Hibiscus Coast (09 419 9853) and Mount Eden (09 630 8961). See [www.homeandfamily.org.nz](http://www.homeandfamily.org.nz)

**What are the benefits?**

Through the research process you may experience an increased awareness and understanding of the complex issues surrounding how you feel about your body.

The research will assist me in deepening my understandings of this topic and allow me to potentially complete my PhD.

**How will my privacy be protected?**

Your privacy and confidentiality are protected in the writing up of the research and the final report. You will be identified with a pseudonym rather than your real name, if you choose, and any identifying material will be excluded or disguised. There is a Sensitive Data Safety Management Protocol in place to protect video and audio data.

**What are the costs of participating in this research?**

This research should not have any financial cost to you. If required, a \$20 petrol voucher can be obtained towards travel to and from the focus group or individual interview.

**What opportunity do I have to consider this invitation?**

If you have any questions about this research or feel you would like additional information please contact me via email or phone (details below). If you do volunteer to participate in this this research please respond via email within 4 weeks of receiving this invitation.

**How do I agree to participate in this research?**

After your initial email to me to indicate you would like to participate I will send you two copies of the consent form for you to read, sign and send one copy back to me. A self-addressed, stamped envelope will be provided. You are also able to sign a consent form at the time of interview.

**Will I receive feedback on the results of this research?**

As part of the research participants will have the opportunity to reflect on a preliminary summary of findings, these reflections will be used as material for consideration in further focus group sessions and integrated with the findings.

If you indicate on the consent form that you are interested in receiving further information about the research then you will receive an emailed summary of the research findings near the completion date (estimated to be mid-2020).

**What do I do if I have any concerns about this research?**

Any concerns regarding the nature of this project should be notified in the first instance to the Project Supervisor, Margot Solomon, [margot.solomon@aut.ac.nz](mailto:margot.solomon@aut.ac.nz), 09 921 9999 ext. 7191.

Concerns regarding the conduct of this research should be notified to the Executive of ATEC, Kate O'Connor, [ethics@aut.ac.nz](mailto:ethics@aut.ac.nz), 09 921 9999 ext. 6038.

**Who do I contact for further information about this research?**

**Primary Researcher:** Emma Green, [emmajane.green@icloud.com](mailto:emmajane.green@icloud.com), 0220 635 838

**Project Supervisor:** Margot Solomon, [margot.solomon@aut.ac.nz](mailto:margot.solomon@aut.ac.nz), 09 921 9999 ext. 7191.

Approved by the Auckland University of Technology Ethics Committee on *18/4/18*, ATEC Reference number *18/79*.

## Appendix D: Participant Information Sheet (for psychotherapists)



### Participant Information Sheet (for Psychotherapists)

#### Date information sheet produced

28 February 2018

#### Project title

Women's experiences of looking and being looked at

#### An invitation

This qualitative study will use individual interviews and focus groups to explore women's experiences of looking and being looked at, particularly in relation to their bodies.

This research is for a Doctoral qualification.

Your participation in this research is voluntary. I am inviting female psychotherapists to participate in an individual interview lasting approximately 45-60 minutes. You might be invited to participate in a follow up interview (30-40 minutes) and there is the possibility of a group discussion with other psychotherapists. Participants are free to decline further interviews, and are free to decline any questions they do not wish to answer. Women with an active eating disorder will not be eligible to participate in this research.

#### What is the purpose of this research?

Analysis of interview and any group discussion transcripts will be written up as a thesis towards the completion of a Doctor of Philosophy. It is likely that the findings and methods used in the research will be published in peer-reviewed journals. Presentations of the research findings and methods will also be made at the New Zealand Association of Psychotherapists (NZAP) organization meetings, Auckland University of Technology, and other organizations and agencies that are interested in psychotherapy and this topic of research.

#### Why am I being invited to participate in this research?

You will have either volunteered to participate or have expressed an interest in learning more about what is involved in participating in this research. You may have read about the research in a flyer, seen and responded to an advertisement on the NZAP website, or other public domain.

#### How do I agree to participate in this research?

Your participation in this research is voluntary and whether or not you choose to participate will neither advantage nor disadvantage you. You are able to withdraw from the study at any time. If you choose to withdraw from the study, then you will be offered the choice between having any data that relates to you removed or allowing it to continue to be used. Data will be anonymized to ensure you are not identifiable. Once the findings have been produced, removal of your data may not be possible.

#### What will happen in this research?

If you are interested in this study, we will undertake a brief initial telephone interview that will take around 5-10 minutes. Should you agree to proceed, you will be asked to sign a consent form and invited to take part in an individual interview.

The individual interview will take approximately 45-60 minutes.

If there is sufficient interest there may be an opportunity to participate in a group discussion of these issues with other psychotherapists. Interviews and any group discussions will be recorded to allow them to be

transcribed. Video-recording of group sessions is for academic purposes only and is to allow the researcher an opportunity to notice non-verbal communication and interactions between group members, as well as to track who says what more easily. Both audio and video recordings will be stored on a password-protected device and will be destroyed once the final findings are published. If you do not wish to participate in further group discussions you may decline without impacting your ability to be interviewed.

During the interview I will be asking you to reflect on your feeling towards your body, as well as reflecting on and sharing your thoughts and feelings about your body, as well as your experiences of looking and being looked at in your work as a psychotherapist.

Interviews will be recorded using audio-recording equipment. A transcript of the individual interview will be provided to you via email for your feedback and any corrections. Any group discussion will be audio- and video-recorded and a transcript will be sent to you for checking. In the group discussion other group members will know your identity, although you may choose to be identified in the final write-up with a pseudonym. All video and audio recording data will be securely stored on a password protected device. Personal information provided on consent forms will be kept confidential and stored securely in a locked filing cabinet. Transcripts will, however, be referenced extensively in the final results and publication of the study.

Participants will be referred to in the write-up by the use of a pseudonym. You may use your own name should you prefer. You can indicate your preference on the consent form.

Research findings will be available through the AUT library and journal publications. There will be an opportunity to comment on findings and add your 'voice' or interpretations to the findings before the final write up.

#### **What are the discomforts and risks?**

For some women discussions about body image and their relationship with their bodies will be challenging and possibly uncomfortable. With this in mind if you have a current diagnosis of an eating disorder you will not be eligible to participate in the study. You are asked to participate at the level that feels right for you.

#### **How will these discomforts and risks be alleviated?**

You can signal your wish to end the interview at any time and this will be respected. You are able to decline to answer a particular question or to stop the interview process at any time. Should you become aware of feeling overwhelmed or uncomfortable during the interview you are encouraged to let the researcher know.

In any group discussion session recording will not be stopped unless there is group agreement to do so, however you will be free to leave at any time. In any individual interview you will have control over audio recording and you can ask for something to be removed from the recorded material. Should you experience any ongoing distress or discomfort after participating in the interview or group discussion you are encouraged to contact a therapist or counsellor.

AUT Health Counselling and Wellbeing is able to offer three free sessions of confidential counselling support for adult participants in an AUT research project. These sessions are only available for issues that have arisen directly as a result of participation in the research, and are not for other general counselling needs. To access this service, you will need to:

- drop into our centres at WB219 or AS104 or phone 09 921 9992 City Campus or 09 921 9998 North Shore campus to make an appointment. Appointments for South Campus can be made by calling 09 921 9992
- let the receptionist know that you are a research participant, and provide the title of my research and my name and contact details as given in this Information Sheet

You can find out more information about AUT counsellors and counselling on <http://www.aut.ac.nz/being-a-student/current-postgraduates/your-health-and-wellbeing/counselling>.

There are also several free or low cost counselling services available as follows;

- AUT Psychotherapy Clinic - \$50/session. Phone 09 921 9999 ext. 7333
- AUT Counselling Psychology Clinic - [www.aih.aut.ac.nz/contact](http://www.aih.aut.ac.nz/contact). Phone 09 921 9155
- Lifeline - free telephone counselling available 24/7 throughout New Zealand. Contact 0800 543 354 or [www.lifeline.org.nz](http://www.lifeline.org.nz)
- Antara Natural Health Clinic - free/low-cost therapy and other services in Te Atatu, Auckland. See [www.antara.org.nz](http://www.antara.org.nz)
- Home and Family Counselling - Low cost counseling available by appointment at North Shore & Hibiscus Coast (09 419 9853) and Mount Eden (09 630 8961). See [www.homeandfamily.org.nz](http://www.homeandfamily.org.nz)

**What are the benefits?**

Through the research process you may experience an increased awareness and understanding of the complex issues surrounding how you feel about your body.

The research will assist me in deepening my understandings of this topic and allow me to potentially complete my PhD.

**How will my privacy be protected?**

Your privacy and confidentiality are protected in the writing up of the research and the final report. You will be identified with a pseudonym rather than your real name, if you choose, and any identifying material will be excluded or disguised. There is a Sensitive Data Safety Management Protocol in place to protect video and audio data.

**What are the costs of participating in this research?**

This research should not have any financial cost to you. If required, a \$20 petrol voucher can be obtained towards travel to and from the focus group or individual interview.

**What opportunity do I have to consider this invitation?**

If you have any questions about this research or feel you would like additional information please contact me via email or phone (details below). If you do volunteer to participate in this this research please respond via email within 4 weeks of receiving this invitation.

**How do I agree to participate in this research?**

After your initial email to me to indicate you would like to participate I will send you two copies of the consent form for you to read, sign and send one copy back to me. A self-addressed, stamped envelope will be provided. You are also able to sign a consent form at the time of interview.

**Will I receive feedback on the results of this research?**

As part of the research participants will have the opportunity to reflect on a preliminary summary of findings, these reflections will be used as material for consideration in any group discussion and integrated with the findings.

If you indicate on the consent form that you are interested in receiving further information about the research then you will receive an emailed summary of the research findings near the completion date (estimated to be mid-2020).

**What do I do if I have any concerns about this research?**

Any concerns regarding the nature of this project should be notified in the first instance to the Project Supervisor, Margot Solomon, [margot.solomon@aut.ac.nz](mailto:margot.solomon@aut.ac.nz), 09 921 9999 ext. 7191.

Concerns regarding the conduct of this research should be notified to the Executive of AUTEK, Kate O'Connor, [ethics@aut.ac.nz](mailto:ethics@aut.ac.nz), 09 921 9999 ext. 6038.

**Who do I contact for further information about this research?**

**Primary Researcher:** Emma Green, [emmajane.green@icloud.com](mailto:emmajane.green@icloud.com), 0220 635 838

**Project Supervisor:** Margot Solomon, [margot.solomon@aut.ac.nz](mailto:margot.solomon@aut.ac.nz), 09 921 9999 ext. 7191.

Approved by the Auckland University of Technology Ethics Committee on 9/4/18, AUTEK Reference number 18/79

## Appendix E: Consent Form



### Consent Form

For use when interviews are involved.

**Project title:** *Women's experiences of looking and being looked at*

**Project Supervisor:** *Margot Solomon and Deb Spence*

**Researcher:** *Emma Green*

- I have read and understood the information provided about this research project in the Information Sheet dated 28 February 2018.
- I have had an opportunity to ask questions and to have them answered.
- I understand that notes will be taken during the interviews and that they will also be audio-taped and transcribed.
- I understand that taking part in this study is voluntary (my choice) and that I may withdraw from the study at any time without being disadvantaged in any way.
- I understand that if I withdraw from the study then I will be offered the choice between having any data that is identifiable as belonging to me removed or allowing it to continue to be used. However, once the findings have been produced, removal of my data may not be possible.
- I agree to take part in this research.
- I wish to receive a summary of the research findings (please tick one): Yes  No

Participant's signature: .....

Participant's name: .....

How would you like to be identified in the research findings ? (please tick)

I would like to remain anonymous and identified with a pseudonym (a made-up name)

I would like to be identified in the research findings by my own given (first) name

Participant's Contact Details (if appropriate):

.....  
.....  
.....  
.....

Date:

**Approved by the Auckland University of Technology Ethics Committee on 9/4/18 AUTEK Reference number 18/79**

*Note: The Participant should retain a copy of this form.*

## Appendix F: Confidentiality Agreement (for audio transcribing)



### Confidentiality Agreement

*For someone transcribing data, e.g. audio-tapes of interviews.*

**Project title:** *Women's experiences of looking and being looked at*

**Project Supervisors:** *Dr Margot Solomon; Dr Deb Spence*

**Researcher:** *Emma Green*

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- I understand that all the material I will be asked to transcribe is confidential.
- I understand that the contents of the tapes or recordings can only be discussed with the researcher.
- I will not keep any copies of the transcripts nor allow third parties access to them.

Transcriber's signature: .....

Transcriber's name: .....

Transcriber's Contact Details (if appropriate):

.....  
.....  
.....  
.....

Date:

Researcher's Contact Details:

Emma Green [emmajane@icloud.com](mailto:emmajane@icloud.com)

Phone 0220 635 838

Project Supervisor's Contact Details:

Margot Solomon - [margot.solomon@aut.ac.nz](mailto:margot.solomon@aut.ac.nz)

Phone 021 997 570

Deb Spence - [deb.spence@aut.ac.nz](mailto:deb.spence@aut.ac.nz)

Phone 09 921 9392

**Approved by the Auckland University of Technology Ethics Committee on 9/4/18 AUTEK Reference number 18/79**

*Note: The Transcriber should retain a copy of this form.*

## Appendix G: Indicative interview questions



### Indicative Interview Questions

*Project title:* **Women's experiences of looking and being looked at**

*Project Supervisors:* **Dr Margot Solomon; Dr Deb Spence**

*Researcher:* **Emma Green**

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*Interviews are to be unstructured. These questions are examples of prompts that might be used to generate discussion. Not all questions will be asked in each interview.*

- What is it like to look at your own body?
- What do you experience?
- When looking at others – what do you notice/experience?
- Thinking about your relationship with your body and how you feel about your body, what sorts of things come to mind?
- Thinking back to an experience of being looked at, what can you tell me about how that felt? What was that experience like?
- What is it like to look at images of other women in popular media or on social media? What are you aware of about that experience?
- What do you think about 'modern beauty standards' for women? In what ways might you be impacted by these?
- Who do you look at?
- How do you feel when looking at others?
- What do you think about the ways women's appearance is commented on in the media?

## Appendix H: Ethics (AUTECH) Approval Letter



### AUTECH Secretariat

Auckland University of Technology  
D-88, WU406 Level 4 WU Building City Campus  
T: +64 9 921 9999 ext. 8316  
E: [ethics@aut.ac.nz](mailto:ethics@aut.ac.nz)  
[www.aut.ac.nz/researchethics](http://www.aut.ac.nz/researchethics)

9 April 2018

Margot Solomon  
Faculty of Health and Environmental Sciences

Dear Margot

Re Ethics Application: **18/79 Women's experiences of looking and being looked at**

Thank you for providing evidence as requested, which satisfies the points raised by the Auckland University of Technology Ethics Committee (AUTECH).

Your ethics application has been approved for three years until 4 April 2021.

#### Standard Conditions of Approval

1. A progress report is due annually on the anniversary of the approval date, using form EA2, which is available online through <http://www.aut.ac.nz/researchethics>.
2. A final report is due at the expiration of the approval period, or, upon completion of project, using form EA3, which is available online through <http://www.aut.ac.nz/researchethics>.
3. Any amendments to the project must be approved by AUTECH prior to being implemented. Amendments can be requested using the EA2 form: <http://www.aut.ac.nz/researchethics>.
4. Any serious or unexpected adverse events must be reported to AUTECH Secretariat as a matter of priority.
5. Any unforeseen events that might affect continued ethical acceptability of the project should also be reported to the AUTECH Secretariat as a matter of priority.

Please quote the application number and title on all future correspondence related to this project.

AUTECH grants ethical approval only. If you require management approval for access for your research from another institution or organisation then you are responsible for obtaining it. You are reminded that it is your responsibility to ensure that the spelling and grammar of documents being provided to participants or external organisations is of a high standard.

For any enquiries, please contact [ethics@aut.ac.nz](mailto:ethics@aut.ac.nz)

Yours sincerely,

Kate O'Connor  
Executive Manager  
Auckland University of Technology Ethics Committee

Cc: [emmajane@icloud.com](mailto:emmajane@icloud.com)