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# How can Storytelling Facilitate Body Positivity in Young Women Struggling with their Bodies?: Literature Review

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How can Storytelling Facilitate Body Positivity in Young Women Struggling with their Bodies?:

Literature Review

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Drama Therapy

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Abstract

In a society that promotes a “thin ideal”, it can be difficult for women to accept their bodies. Body positivity is a combination of positive body image, self-confidence, and body acceptance regardless of size, shape, or weight of the body (Caldeira & Ridder, 2017; Dalley & Vidal, 2013; Halliwell, 2015; Wood-Barcalow, Tylka, & Augustus-Horvath, 2010). This literature review presents an overview of the research conducted on body positivity and storytelling, finding that there are limited interventions currently being used to promote body positivity. A review of the existing literature suggests that storytelling might be an appropriate and successful drama therapy intervention to facilitate body positivity in young women and be used to give voice to diverse populations and communities. This paper ends with a number of recommendations based on existing research for drama therapists on how to incorporate storytelling for those seeking increased body positivity. Ideas for future research are also discussed.

How can Storytelling Facilitate Body Positivity in Young Women Struggling with their Bodies?:

Literature Review

### **Introduction**

While all genders can have a difficult relationship with their own bodies, patriarchal pressures have resulted in young women to disproportionately having a difficult relationship with their own bodies (Jones, Crowther, & Ciesla, 2014; Windram-Geddes, 2013). In a society that idealizes a “thin/skinny” culture, women can struggle to maintain healthy, positive perspectives and feelings about their bodies. This can also result in low self-esteem, low self worth, and poor body image about the way women look at their bodies (Jones et al., 2014). As a result, many young women develop a strong dislike for their bodies and engage in harmful, negative self-talk related to their weight and bodies (Jones et al., 2014). This negative self-talk surrounding physical appearance is known in current research as ‘fat talk’ (Barwick, Bazzini, Martz, Rocheleau, & Curtin, 2012; Jones et al., 2014; Salk & Engeln-Maddox, 2011).

The theme of healthy body image has been actively researched and interventions have been created to help women increase their self-worth and overall body image (Halliwell, 2015). Previous research has a strong focus on body image in connection with the eating disorder population (Kinsaul, Curtin, Bazzini, & Martz, 2014; Peterson, Grippo, & Tantleff-Dunn, 2008). Another trend in previous research is that many research studies that are conducted around body image use participants of “average” or “healthy weight” (Kinsaul et al., 2014; Paquette & Raine, 2004; Peterson, Grippo, & Tantleff-Dunn, 2008). In the research study entitled “Sociocultural context of women’s body image”, only women of a body mass index (BMI) that was deemed “healthy” were used in the sample (Paquette & Raine, 2004). It seems difficult to truly measure

positive body image when research is only using participants who are of “average” or “healthy” weight.

Within the healthy body image community, another movement with a new perspective called body positivity, has started to gain more momentum. Although there is limited research explaining the difference between body image and body positivity, in my experience, the concept of body image is focused solely on the physical appearance of the body and usually, but not always, focusing on weight and size of the body. In contrast, the concept of body positivity is focused on a more inclusive vision of the body; looking not only at the physical but also what the body is capable of doing while accepting the body for how it is in the present moment. Body positivity has less focus on how the body looks and how we can improve the appearance of the body and more focus on accepting your body for all the things your body can do for you. Body positivity has recently become a larger movement that is encouraging individuals to feel comfortable and proud in their bodies regardless of weight, size, shape, etc. (Halliwell, 2015; Wood-Barcalow, Tylka, & Augustus-Horvath, 2010). The concept of body positivity is helping young women appreciate their bodies and open up the standards of body image and health in today’s society (Caldeira & Ridder, 2017).

Researching the connection between storytelling and body positivity is important because when young women engage in ‘fat talk’ or any kind of negative self-talk about their bodies, they are writing a negative story about their bodies (either internally or externally) that can have serious effects on their self-esteem (Salk & Engeln-Maddox, 2011). The more negative things we say about ourselves, the more likely we are to not only listen to the negative talk but also start to believe the statements we are telling ourselves (Barwick et al., 2012; Salk & Engeln-Maddox, 2011). As a drama therapist, I am interested in exploring how storytelling can help facilitate

body positivity by working to break the habit of negative self-talk and encourage women to speak openly and with confidence, thus having the opportunity to rewrite the story of their relationship with their bodies. I am personally passionate about this project because I am a young woman who has struggled with my weight and my relationship with my body since childhood. I understand how difficult it is for young women to embrace body positivity in a society that encourages young women to look a certain way to be seen as beautiful. I hope through this research, we can find more methods to promote and facilitate body positivity in young women.

This project will examine the current research conducted in 1) body positivity and 2) storytelling, especially within a drama therapy context, and then put these two areas of study in conversation with each other. The purpose of this literature review is to suggest that storytelling can be a reasonable intervention used to facilitate body positivity in young women. Using the drama therapy technique of storytelling has the ability to help young women understand, create, and express personal stories about their relationship with their bodies and body positivity. Storytelling gives women the opportunity to find and share their voice. This capstone concludes with a number of research and practice implications for storytelling and body positivity.

### **Methods**

In this literature review, the main bodies of literature are peer reviewed articles from the Lesley University research database as well as the Google Scholar search engine. In the advanced search bar of the Lesley University database, I entered keywords such as “body image” and “storytelling, “self-esteem” and “storytelling”, “body positivity” and “narrative therapy”, “self confidence” and “body image”, and “negative self-talk” and “fat talk”. I used the quotation marks around all the keywords to ensure a clear results list of articles focusing on those specific key terms being used as the main topic of the research articles.

Due to the limited peer-reviewed literature on body positivity, I also researched body positivity influencers on the social media site, Instagram. Influencers are people who support a brand, theme, or cause and use social media as a way to support others and spread information quickly to many people at once. Two famous plus size models, Tess Holliday and Ashley Graham, are two of the most popular body positivity influencers on Instagram who are known for their strong presence in the body positivity community (Graham, n.d.; Holliday, n.d.). Both these women share their experiences of being plus-size through their social media accounts while encouraging body positivity and self worth among all women, especially women who struggle with their body and weight (Graham, n.d.; Holliday, n.d.). Using these two influencers as research provides a current example of how body positivity is being promoted in our society and how people are responding to it.

This literature review is organized into smaller subsections to clearly show the gap in the literature between body positivity and storytelling. The literature review will begin by discussing negative self-talk and fat-talk, then move into body positivity. Next the literature review will address any limitations in body positivity. Then I will discuss the limited research that has been conducted regarding storytelling and body positivity. Finally the literature review will close by examining the tool of storytelling in drama therapy literature. After the literature review, this paper will address and discuss future recommendations and plans for the research of body positivity and storytelling.

During the process of this capstone, I used two methods to keep track of my progress as I read through the existing research and literature: note-taking and journaling. I took extensive notes after every peer review article that I read. I kept these notes together with each article to keep my thoughts organized. Since I am passionate about this topic, I also found journaling

helpful during this process. I used journaling as a tool to express my own feelings about the literature I was reading. Whenever I felt personally activated by the literature, I found journaling to be a helpful tool of expression. I kept my peer reviewed articles organized by storing them in a binder that was divided into my literature review subsections. This helped me recognize what areas of the literature review needed more research and which had a substantial amount of research collected.

### **Literature Review**

#### **Negative Self Talk: “Fat Talk”**

Negative self-talk can be common for many young women; internal dialogues about concepts such as self-esteem, worthiness, and attractiveness are common in women’s thoughts (Barwick et al., 2012; Jones et al., 2014; Salk & Engeln-Maddox, 2011). While not limited to the body, a lot of negative self-talk for women does revolve around their bodies and the perceptions they have about the way they look (Jones et al., 2014). A specific type of negative self talk that relates to women’s sense of body image is called ‘fat talk’ (Barwick et al., 2012; Jones et al., 2014; Salk & Engeln-Maddox, 2011; Windram-Geddes, 2013). Fat talk is defined as “a style of verbal expression among young women involving negative self-statements, complaints about physical appearance, and weight management” (Jones, et al., 2014, p. 337). Fat talk is a term that was invented by Nitcher and Vuckovic (1994) to explain the way young women talk to themselves and others about their bodies’ shape, size, etc. Typical fat talk statements might include, “I’m so fat.”, “My legs are huge”, or “I’ve gained a lot of weight” (Jones et al., 2014; Nitcher & Vuckovic, 1994).

A common belief may be that women who are overweight or struggling with their weight engage in fat talk more than women of average weight. However, most women engage in fat talk



regardless of their weight or size (Barwick, et al., 2012; Salk & Engeln-Maddox, 2011). There is also a social aspect to women engaging in fat talk with friends and peers as a way to express their body dissatisfaction with others (Salk & Engeln-Maddox, 2011). In a society that idealizes “thin” as the look women should strive for, women may feel pressured to engage in fat talk to justify how their bodies look. Fat talk has been shown to have a strong connection with body dissatisfaction, body checking, as well as eating disturbances in women (Jones, et al., 2014; Salk & Engeln-Maddox, 2011).

There has been a significant amount of research done on the topic of fat talk. Most of the research conducted has been about how fat talk affects young women (middle school through college aged) cognitively and emotionally (Jones, et al., 2014; Windram-Geddes, 2013), as well as how other women react and respond when they hear/witness fat talk (Barwick et al., 2012; Salk & Engeln-Maddox, 2011). In the research article, “A naturalistic study of fat talk and its behavioral and affective consequences” (Jones et al., 2014), a study is conducted to examine the consequences of fat talk. This research explores fat talk through the lens of objectification theory and the authors find that “many women also experience appearance-related anxiety regarding the evaluation of their bodies by others, particularly when they are uncertain of how and when their bodies will be evaluated” (Jones et al., 2014, p.339). Through observation of fat talk experiences in a naturalistic study, 67 female college students recorded how many times they experience fat talk on an average day and what the effects/consequences on the participants were (Jones et al. 2014). The topics of fat talk discovered in this study were weight control and disordered eating behaviors, stated body dissatisfaction, body checking, and negative affect (Jones et al., 2014). The findings suggest that fat talk has serious consequences for college aged women, negatively impacting thoughts, behaviors, and feelings relating to their body image (Jones et al., 2014).

Another study researches the actual content of fat talk conversations and how women respond to fat talk (Salk & Engeln-Maddox, 2011). This research study characterized fat talk by “women (typically peers) engaging in mutual disparagement about the size and shape of their bodies” (Salk & Engeln-Maddox, 2011, p.18). In this study, participants were women ages 18-23 and they were asked to finish writing dialogues that began with a line of fat talk; that line being “Ugh, I feel so fat.” (Salk & Engeln-Maddox, 2011, p.20). A post survey given to the participants after writing their dialogues showed that 93% of women stated that they engage in fat talk. The findings of this study also showed that the most common way young women respond to fat talk is denial that their peer/friend is fat. This type of response usually leads to a “back-and-forth conversation” where the peers are denying that the other is fat and claiming that they themselves are fat instead (Salk & Engeln-Maddox, 2011). Participants in this study claimed that fat talk was a way to release stress associated with their body dissatisfaction. Therefore, an argument can be made that in some situations fat talk can be helpful as fat talk relieves stress for women who struggle with their perception of their bodies (Salk & Engeln-Maddox, 2011) The research article ends by stating “for most women, fat talk is not about being fat, but about feeling fat (Salk & Engeln-Maddox, 2011, p.27).

There was one geographic outlier research article found during this research on fat talk, different because it was conducted outside the US in Scotland (Windram-Geddes, 2013). This article examined how girls’ fears of being fat affected their emotional dynamics in Physical Education class (Windram-Geddes, 2013). Fears of feeling fat or becoming fat are ingrained in girls as young as primary school age (Windram-Geddes, 2013). The findings of this research suggest that fat-talk is being used by young women in other countries besides the US. As fat talk is being discussed and explored in other countries, it is possible that fat talk could be considered

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a universal norm for young women from various areas, although more research in other parts of the world are needed.

The research studies discussed above share a common theme in suggesting that creating awareness on fat talk and its effect on young women is crucial to improving women's feelings about their body image (Barwick et al., 2012; Jones et al., 2014; Salk & Engeln-Maddox, 2011; Windram-Geddes, 2013). Making young women aware that fat talk exists and noticing when they engage in this form of self-talk can be the first step in decreasing fat talk. Additionally, the literature suggests that the relational, conversational aspect of fat talk may serve some stress relief purpose, so considering how else these social aspects might be met is important. Hopefully, decreasing the use of fat talk may increase body positivity in young women.

### **Body Positivity**

In today's culture, the societal norms for women's bodies focus on thinness, beauty, physical fitness, and health (Paquette & Raine, 2004). Therefore, body image has become a popular concept researched in today's culture. Body positivity, which is a more inclusive term than body image, is a newer concept that has recently been created and researched in the last ten years (Halliwell, 2015). When addressing this topic broadly, body positivity is a combination of positive body image, self-confidence, and body acceptance regardless of size, shape, or weight of the body (Halliwell, 2015; Caldeira & Ridder, 2017; Dalley & Vidal, 2013; Wood-Barcalow et al., 2010). The specific qualities of body positivity are "holding favorable opinions of the body, respecting the body, feeling gratitude towards the body, rejecting societal ideals of attractiveness, inner positivity influencing outer demeanor, and a broad conceptualization of beauty" (Halliwell, 2015, p.177).

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In 1996, two licensed social workers, Connie Sobczak and Elizabeth Scott founded the organization called Body Positive Movement in San Francisco, California ([bodypositive.org](http://bodypositive.org)) (Sobczak & Scott, 2018). This organization was created to assist young women in appreciating and loving their bodies of various sizes through the support of other strong women and education on positive body image and health. The mission of the Body Positive organization is to “teach people how to reconnect to their innate body wisdom so they can have more balanced, joyful self-care, and a relationship with their whole selves that is guided by love, forgiveness, and humor” (Sobczak & Scott, 2018, [bodypositive.org](http://bodypositive.org)). This organization offers a variety of interventions to spread body positivity throughout the country, including their “Be Body Positive” model in group settings or individually. The Body Positivity Movement organization also offers online self-help classes, public workshops, and campus leadership programs. These campus programs allow college students who are interested in making a change on their campus regarding body positivity to receive training to spread and teach body positivity at their school. Lastly, the organization relies heavily on stories from women in the community to share their experiences with body positivity to the outside world.

Traditional forms of research in body positivity have focused on the qualities of body positivity and future areas of research (Dalley & Vidal, 2013; Halliwell, 2015; Wood-Barcalow, et al., 2010). A couple of the qualitative and quantitative research studies done on body positivity used the BAS, body appreciation scale, to measure participants levels of positive body image (Dalley & Vidal, 2013; Halliwell, 2015). Since the original version of the BAS, the BAS-2 has been created to be more inclusive of areas of body positivity such as a broader definition of beauty and inner positivity (Halliwell, 2015). Inner positivity is an important part of body

positivity, as the results of another research study conducted in 2013 shows a strong link between optimism and positive body image in young women (Dalley & Vidal, 2013).

Since the subject of body positivity is relatively new, only coming on the map in the past 10 years, a lot of the research conducted in this topic has used forms of social media and other creative ways to collect data as well as promote body positivity. With younger generations being more involved with the internet and technology, the internet has become a helpful resource to share body positivity with larger audiences and larger groups of young women. In the article, “The creative empowerment of body positivity in the cosplay community” (Kass-Lome, 2016), a case study is written about how cosplay (dressing up like fictional or historical characters) can help to increase body positivity for those within the cosplay community. Many elements of cosplay are learned about online as participants can research characters, costumes, make-up, and conventions through the internet (Kass-Lome, 2016). Cosplay can be described as “a transformative art form that can empower one’s creative identity while providing a space for body positivity...Cosplay makes people feel more confident about themselves-their bodies, their sexuality, and their physical abilities” (Lome, 2016, p.2). Although cosplay is a newer form of expression, this case study depicts a strong connection between cosplay and body positivity.

Similar to the recent trend of cosplay, the concept of body positivity has expanded rapidly throughout our society with the help of various social media sites, especially Instagram. Tess Holliday and Ashley Graham are both plus size models as well as body positivity influencers who use their instagram accounts to promote body positivity throughout their user following (Graham, n.d.; Holliday, n.d.). In February of 2013, Tess Holliday created an Instagram account called @effyourbeautystandards (Caldeira & Ridder, 2017). Tess Holliday explains that “this body-positive account aims to promote self-love and questions beauty ideals

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by sharing self-representations of ‘ordinary women’ (i.e. non-models or celebrities) who feel that they do not live up to the current beauty standards” (Caldeira & Ridder, 2017, p.321). Self-representation allows individuals to have more control over the image or media they are creating and sharing. People can decide when to take the photograph, posing, editing, etc. Tess Holliday encourages all women to embrace their bodies regardless of society’s views. The goals of this Instagram account “are to increase visibility of diverse representations of individuals who have been misrepresented or underrepresented in traditional mainstream media; promote self-love and acceptance towards stigmatized bodies” ( Caldeira & Ridder, 2017, p.327).

In a critical analysis of the Instagram account, @effyourbeautystandards, Sofia Caldeira and Sander De Ridder examine how body activism accounts can affect and shift traditional societal norms. The findings of this critical analysis show that @effyourbeautystandards Instagram account, as well as other body positive social media accounts, has an empowering affect on women who interact or “follow” the account (Caldeira & Ridder, 2017). Individuals who have seen and experienced this account felt a sense of connection and community to others who do not fit into societal ideals of beauty and people also experienced an increase in their self confidence related to their bodies (Caldeira & Ridder, 2017). A crucial finding in this analysis is that body positive Instagram accounts, such as @effyourbeautystandards, are bringing to light and carrying out an important and “much-needed conversation on unrealistic beauty ideals to an incredibly large audience” (Caldeira & Ridder, 2017, p. 333).

### **Limitations to Body Positivity**

Since body positivity is a newer term being used, there are still limitations in the research. The first limitation in the realm of body positivity is that the Body Positive Movement organization is based out of San Francisco, California and does not yet have a branch on the east

coast. Although the Body Positive Movement offers multiple online resources, it is difficult to get involved hands-on in the movement's work if you reside outside of California. As far as my knowledge and research collected there is no organization as well developed as Body Positivity Movement on the east coast yet that addresses body positivity in such a direct manner.

Another limitation is that a majority of the research has been on cis-gender, white women (Halliwell, 2015). As Halliwell (2015) points out, "there has been no investigation of positive body image among individuals with a visible difference or disfigurement" (p.180). When conducting research related to body acceptance, this is a large limitation to the research thus far. This creates a smaller research participant pool to collect data from and creates limited diversity in body positivity. Without conducting research with diverse populations of age, race, gender, ethnicity, weight, etc., we are not collecting well-rounded research that could be generalized to multiple populations. Although various social media accounts such as @effyourbeautystandards are promoting body positivity among diverse populations, there needs to be more diverse populations used in the research of positive body image and body positivity.

Also, in the research I have gathered so far, the main method used to expand body positivity is online resources such as social media sites and blogs (Caldeira & Ridder, 2017; Dickins, Thomas, King, Lewis, & Holland, 2011). Although using online sources can appeal to a large audience, the internet also creates limitations in body positivity. For those who do not have access to computers or online resources it is difficult to learn about body positivity or gain access to this movement. Additionally, I believe that online relationships, connections, and community are created at a more distanced level than in in-person contact. In my opinion and clinical experience, face to face experiences can create stronger connections, relationships, and tighter communities.

One limitation of the @effyourbeautystandards Instagram account is that the account still has a focus on fashionable plus size clothing and various makeup products which is still adhering to traditional appearance and forms of beauty when the body positivity community is trying to promote a new form of beauty that does not revolve around superficial, physical beauty (Caldeira & Ridder, 2017). This suggests that it can be difficult to promote body positivity without unconsciously falling back onto our society's strict ideas of what beauty is and how beauty is related to body size and physical appearance.

Research has shown that there are also limitations in the interventions used to promote body positivity (Halliwell, 2015). Although in the research there is a stated connection between embodied activities and positive body image, the research is vague in providing clear, direct examples of these embodied activities being used as interventions (Halliwell, 2015). The interventions currently used to measure body positivity are derived directly from literature written about positive body image and psychology and do not always use embodied techniques; some of these "interventions" used are the BAS (body appreciation scale) and other surveys or scales to gauge positive body image (Halliwell, 2015). There is also a connection between positive body image and social interaction in young women yet many interventions are completed individually and not in a group setting (Halliwell, 2015). There is a strong need to "further develop and test interventions specifically tailored to address components of positive body image" (Halliwell, 2015, p. 186). The lack of interventions within body positivity suggests that creating new interactive interventions in a group setting could be beneficial to increasing body positivity among young women.

### **The Fatosphere, Digital Storytelling, and Stories of the Body**



In the extensive research collected for this literature review, there was very limited research found working with storytelling and body positivity; even the few studies that have been done are a stretch to fit these exact two themes. In the research article, “The role of the fatosphere in fat adults’ responses to obesity stigma: A model of empowerment without a focus on weight loss” (Dickins et al., 2011), bloggers’ personal stories surrounding weight and fat acceptance are shared through “the Fatosphere”. The Fatosphere is “an online fat acceptance community” (Dickins et al., 2011, p.1679). This research examined people’s experiences with this online blog and the impact the Fatosphere created around weight stigma, fat acceptance, and overall health and well being (Dickins et al. 2011). The Fatosphere has become an important support alliance for overweight individuals because “there are extremely few places outside of diet and weight-loss clubs for obese adults to seek support, form networks, and engage in non-weight-loss focused discussions about their health and well being” (Dickins et al., 2011, p.1680).

On the Fatosphere, bloggers share their personal stories and experiences with their body and promote body positivity through sharing their stories with the online community (Dickins et al., 2011). In this qualitative research study, a grounded theory approach was used to explore 44 bloggers’ narratives and experiences after engaging with the Fatosphere (Dickins et al. 2011). The findings of this research discovered three crucial benefits in engaging/belonging to the Fatosphere: “(a) empowerment, (b) an increased sense of social connectedness, and (c) a perceived improvement in both mental and physical health and well being” (Dickins et al., 2011, p.1685). Although these stories and experiences were shared through an online blog, the results still show a connection between storytelling and positive feelings about the self related to the body.

Another study used a new critical arts based research method called digital storytelling with the eating disordered population to describe the participants relationship with the term “recovery” (LaMarre & Rice, 2016). LaMarre and Rice (2016) explain that “digital storytelling is an arts based research method that offers researchers an opportunity to engage deeply with the participants, speak back to dominant discourses, and re-imagine bodily possibilities” (p. 10). In this study, participants created personal narrative stories surrounding their recovery from eating disorders; these digital story projects included music, images, sound effects, words, etc. Seeing the final product of these digital stories was emotionally cathartic for the participants; however, since digital storytelling is a newer, more artistic form of research, digital storytelling is difficult to analyze in a way that results in numerical data. Both digital storytelling and the Fatosphere are using our society’s interest in the media and technology to share individuals stories related to the body (Dickins et al., 2010; LaMarre & Rice, 2016).

The last research article found that has a small connection between storytelling and body positivity is called “Stories of the body: Incorporating the body into narrative practice” (Karageorgiou, 2016). This research works to involve the body in narrative practice while working with clients stories in individual therapy (Karageorgiou, 2016). Although this article is helpful in providing information on ways to incorporate storytelling with “various body issues”, the body issues in this paper are mainly physical such as “quadriplegia, multiple sclerosis, sexual intercourse, and stress” (Karageorgiou, 2016). This paper provides an excellent example of using story with a client who is struggling with body positivity, although the term body image is used in the article instead of body positivity (Karageorgiou, 2016). I would argue that the client in this situation is struggling with body positivity instead of body image because the concern is related to a facial burn and not specifically a weight or body size problem based on physical appearance.

I feel as though struggling with a facial burn is a body positivity issue because the burn hinders more than just physical appearance or the client's "body image" (i.e. the burn is affecting self-confidence, body/face ability, relationships, feelings/emotions). Using the more inclusive term of body positivity opens up more opportunities for healing by exploring various issues in connection with the body. Even though this article has a thin connection between storytelling and body positivity, this research does provide evidence that using storytelling in practice with the body has the power to build or rewrite an alternative story for clients (Karageorgiou, 2016). The article closes with the following quote, "Engaging narrative practices in attending to the body has brought to the surface the role of dominant discourses concerning the body and highlighted the experiential, relational, and political ways our bodies participate in our lived experiences" (Karageorgiou, 2016, p.6).

### **Storytelling in Drama Therapy Literature**

Storytelling is an important element within drama therapy. As drama therapy is used with many diverse populations, storytelling is a tool that is used with a variety of populations ranging from people with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) (Lewis & Banerjee, 2013) to individuals with psychiatric diagnoses (Moran & Alon, 2011). The following research will give an overview of how storytelling is used as a tool within drama therapy, often as an outlet for expression and creativity among individuals. Below I summarize major branches of drama therapy which center storytelling in their practice and include relevant research studies on the importance of storytelling.

Playback theatre began in 1975 (Fox, 2015; Salas, 2009) and is described "a community-building improvisational theatre in which a personal story told by a group member is transformed into a theatre piece on the spot by other group members" (Moran & Alon, 2011, p. 318).

Playback is a branch of drama therapy that uses art, storytelling, and social connection to promote healing (Fox, 2015; Moran & Alon, 2011). Playback theatre's intention is "to heal and transform individuals and social groups" (Salas, 2009, p. 445). In Playback theatre, ordinary people are given the opportunity to act out the stories of their communities (Fox, 2015; Salas, 2009). There are currently two hundred registered Playback groups in over fifty five countries and is being used and performed in diverse communities and settings such as schools, hospitals, public theatres, and outdoor communities (Salas, 2009).

Playback theatre is a drama therapy method that is built on seven basic concepts revolving around the importance in the language of story and human connection (Salas, 2009). These concepts synthesized from Salas (2009) are listed as followed:

- 1) Most human beings and ideal cultures share the common characteristics of the capacity for connection with others, compassion, and creativity
- 2) To make sense of our society and understand who we are as people, people need stories
- 3) Even strangers can experience the wisdom and beauty that comes from listening to a personal story
- 4) While witnessing other people's stories, we are cultivating the traits of understanding and empathy
- 5) All human experience finds purpose when expressed through creative methods
- 6) The connection that is formed from sharing personal stories has the ability to decrease feelings of alienation and isolation
- 7) All people have the inner capacity to respond to another person's story with empathic creativity.

Although Playback theatre is not primarily a clinical therapy, it has been shown to have therapeutic and healing effects (Fox, 2015; Moran & Alon, 2011; Salas, 2009). Many mental health clients can benefit from Playback's ability to "strengthen identity, increase awareness and compassion, and express emotions" (Salas, 2009, p. 448). Playback theatre is also a flexible method that can easily be adapted or simplified for various populations or clients' needs (Salas, 2009). Playback's flexibility can be extremely helpful when using this drama therapy method as an intervention with different groups of individuals.

One research study examines the effects of a 10-week Playback course with individuals in recovery from severe mental illness (Moran & Alon, 2011). The mental illness diagnoses of participants included schizophrenia, bipolar disorder, post traumatic stress disorder, and major depression (Moran & Alon, 2011). Throughout this course, three forms of playback- fluid sculptures, pairs, and scenes- were taught to the participants. The participants also got to view playback performances presented by the True Story company. Data was collected through various quantitative scales to measure any changes in participant's personal growth, self esteem, and feelings on recovery after participating in the Playback course (Moran & Alon, 2011). The results showed that participants felt an increase in self-esteem and relaxation after the course (Moran & Alon, 2011). It was also found that "the acts of telling and playing back personal stories helped people gain insight and perspective on their own lives" (Moran & Alon, 2011, p. 321). This research study goes on to say that storytelling is a key element in recovery from mental illness.

As shown through the drama therapy literature on Playback theatre, performance is a tool that can be used to share and express a multitude of stories (Fox, 2015; Salas, 2009; Bailey, 2009). When a group of people create a story together, they are creating a group narrative in

which the group shares a common meaning (Bailey, 2009). In the article “Performance in drama therapy”, Bailey (2009) explains that, “the oral tradition of storytelling is a means of connecting individuals with a community by constructing shared messages and linking the feelings and actions of one person to others” (p. 376). When we perform stories to an audience, an element of sharing and witnessing is added to the story (Bailey, 2009). This is important because connections can be made and common themes can develop between larger groups of people when stories are told in a performance setting (Bailey, 2009).

One type of performative storytelling is self-revelatory performance (Bailey, 2009). In a self-revelatory performance, an actor(s) “explore their own personal life story through performance” (Bailey, 2009, p. 378). Below I synthesize Bailey’s (2009) description and application of self-revelatory performance. In a self-revelatory performance, the actor’s story is performed to an audience. The duty of the audience at this performance is to witness, honor, and validate the actor and the performance; the audience also provides positive feedback and acceptance (Bailey, 2009). Since self-revelatory performances are so personal in nature, Bailey (2009) argues, it is crucial for the actor to have a moderate level of insight and resolutions in the therapeutic issues they are performing about. This ensures emotional safety for the actor and the audience. In self-revelatory performances, it is also important that the experience of the actor is translated into universal truths that can offer generalizable meaning to a large audience. These performances can be emotionally healing for the actor(s) involved and also the audience. Performances such as these have the power to encourage connection in a community over a common experience or shared therapeutic issue.

The founder of role theory, Robert Landy, emphasizes the importance of storytelling within drama therapy. A method of storytelling that Landy uses is called ‘a hero’s journey’

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(Landy & Hadari, 2007). In a workshop that Landy led on stories of destruction and renewal, the hero's journey was described as having four sections. Landy (2007) explained the four sections as follows:

1. The hero is on a journey towards some unknown destination.
2. There is an obstacle blocking the hero's progress, causing some distress.
3. The hero, being limited, needs a guide to help move through the obstacle.
4. The hero concludes the journey with a sense of renewal. (p.416)

Using the model above, workshop participants created stories around the theme of destruction and renewal for their "hero". The stories created were then told and dramatized in the group setting (Landy & Hadari, 2007). The creation of these stories using a hero's journey prompt strengthened the group cohesion of this workshop and helped the participants learn about their personal experiences with destruction and renewal (Landy & Hardari, 2007).

Another branch of drama therapy that is rooted in storytelling is narradrama (Dunne, 2003). Narradrama is "a method of implementing narrative therapy using action techniques from drama therapy and other creative arts rather than solely verbal techniques" (Dunne, 2003, p. 229). Narrative therapists are strongly focused in looking at how stories can be the structure that helps us understand larger, existential questions such as the meaning of life. As Dunne (2003) explains, "Stories demonstrate how lives change and determine which aspects of our life experiences are expressed, understood, and valued" (p. 229). In this form of therapy, clients can explore elements of storytelling such as retelling, exploring the 'As if', and enactment to experience the true therapeutic value of storytelling. Narradrama also allows participants to explore various endings to a story that may or may not have connections to reality (Dunne,

2003). This exploration can open participants up to new possibilities as they use storytelling as a tool to problem solve (Dunne, 2003).

Alida Gersie is an influential drama therapist in the UK who specializes in storytelling, storymaking, and therapeutic storymaking (TSM) (Gersie, 1997; Seymour & Gersie, 2017). In Alida Gersie (1997) book, *Reflections on Therapeutic Storymaking: The Use of Stories in Groups*, she writes that storytelling can be used in group work to explore relationships and events that occur within the group as well as in our personal lives. In group work, Gersie uses pre-existing folktales to explore various common themes, suggesting that people can easily relate to stories because they can find a personal connection to their own life in the pre-existing storyline. These folktales can also be used as a stepping stone to original storymaking created by group members (Gersie, 1997).

In a interview conducted with Gersie in 2017 she stated the following in regards to addressing emotional dysregulation and mental health issues in her clients, “I was filled with ideas on how purposeful involvement with storytelling, drama, and stories might help my clients to surmount their painful plight” (Seymour & Gersie, 2017, p.126). Her passion for the tool of storytelling led to Gersie pioneering the method of therapeutic storymaking (Seymour & Gersie, 2017). Therapeutic Storymaking (TSM) “is a form of creative-expressive group work which focuses on the restoration of people’s ability to tell stories and the parallel development of their willingness to interact meaningfully with other people’s stories in order to alleviate emotional pain” (Gersie, 1997, p.41). In this form of storymaking, storytelling activities are used to show our connection to images, meanings, and social bonds (Gersie, 1997). Therapeutic storymaking, a creative-expressive subsection of drama therapy, uses many strategies to incorporate stories in emotional healing. After the monumental amount of work and experience that Gersie has



accomplished using story, she seems to encapsulate the power of stories in this simple quote: “Stories make you think differently. Make you look at life differently” (Seymour & Gersie, 2017, p.129).

### **Discussion and Recommendations**

Based on the above literature, we know that many young women often engage in negative self talk known as fat talk, and that fat talk can lead to low self-esteem and poor body image (Jones et al., 2014; Barwick et al., 2012; Salk & Engeln-Maddox, 2011). There are some existing interventions. Body positivity is working to combat fat talk and negative perspectives about the human body using online blogging, social media, and the Body Positive Movement organization (Dickins et al., 2011; Graham, n.d.; Halliwell, 2015; Holliday, n.d.; LaMarre & Rice, 2016). There are limitations within body positivity research such as limited diversity, lack of helpful interventions, and using the internet as the main form of communication within the movement and in research (Halliwell, 2015). There are also clear gaps in the existing intervention research.

While there is limited research demonstrating the effectiveness of storytelling and body positivity, there are some examples of using digital storytelling and the Fatosphere as positive results in attempting to combine elements of storytelling with body positivity (Dickin et al., 2011; LaMarre & Rice, 2016). Both digital storytelling and the Fatosphere are using forms of media and the internet to share stories with a larger audience. Digital storytelling was used with the eating disorder population to explore the concept of “recovery” (LaMarre & Rice, 2016). The Fatosphere is an online blog that promotes body positivity and fat acceptance for its viewers through the bloggers personal stories about their relationship with their bodies (Dickin et al., 2011). Both of these methods, digital storytelling and the Fatosphere, are using forms of

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storytelling to encourage emotional healing surrounding the relationship with have with our bodies (Dickins et al., 2011; LaMarre & Rice, 2016).

No known drama therapy research or practice articles have directly addressed the role of storytelling in enhancing body positivity. Yet, storytelling is a common tool and perhaps a core element to drama therapy, often cited as having important healing impact on various groups of people (Bailey, 2009; Landy & Hardari, 2007; Gersie, 1997; Salas, 2009; Seymour & Gersie, 2017). Stories have the ability to explore any topic or theme as well as bring change to various issue in our society and culture. The act of creating a story from personal experience and sharing it with others can have a therapeutic affect on the storyteller as well as the audience. The sharing of stories can also create stronger bonds and connections between groups of people who are struggling with a common issue.

Therefore, I propose that storytelling would be an appropriate drama therapy intervention to be used in facilitating body positivity in young women. As drama therapists, we could help young women pull from their personal experiences to create the story of their bodies. Encouraging young women to share their stories and experiences of learning to love and accept their bodies could be a way to strengthen and build the body positivity community. Storytelling can also be an empowering experience for young women as they give voice to the common issue experienced by many young women. If one woman tells her story, the effects can ripple out to many other women and encourage them to tell their stories and so on. For young women, embodying body positivity in oneself can be a difficult and life long journey. If women are supporting each other in this body positive mission through sharing their own personal stories and struggles, we are creating a space to have a much needed conversation in our society about women's relationships with their bodies.

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Playback and Self-Revelatory performance could both be used to explore the broader concept of body positivity through personal stories of individuals. Both of these drama therapy techniques can support those struggling with body positivity through interacting with their own stories. Playback is conducted in a group setting which research has already suggested could be helpful when creating new interventions to be used for body positivity. Self-revelatory performances are usually done by an individual, however, the performance can have therapeutic healing effects on the audience as a whole because the performance would represent the overarching concept of body positivity.

Playback workshops/performances and Self-revelatory performances can also give young women the opportunity to interact with their stories of body positivity in a dramatic format. Similar to narradrama, when exploring stories using drama therapy techniques young women are given the chance to interact with their stories using tools such as pause, rewind and replay, and exploring multiple ending to one story (Dunne, 2003). Storytelling within drama therapy gives participants access to these active ways of interacting with a story. Having women create stories about their bodies and share them with each other in a small group or with a larger audience may have the potential to facilitate body positivity among young women. The Body Positive Movement organization (2018) states the following:

We have made a commitment to telling our own stories, and offering space for others to do the same without fear of judgement, comparison, or criticism. It is in this type of environment that each one of us can find what we need to become embodied: to tell our own truth and step fully into-and love- our unique selves (bodypositive.org).

However, this is only one organization using storytelling in this way and we need more groups of women to tell these types of stories. In our society which is so focused on thinness, having

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women who do not fit the “average” mold share their experience with their bodies can help break down traditional societal norms of women's bodies and increase body positivity.

I recommend further research be conducted in using storytelling to facilitate body positivity for young women. This literature review is the first step in gathering current research that can be used as a springboard for conducting more specific research in the field of storytelling and body positivity. I can infer from the research collected in this project that storytelling would be an appropriate drama therapy intervention to experiment with using in facilitating body positivity but more research is needed to confirm this suggestion.

I would suggest conducting research studies with young women around creating stories about their bodies, society's affect on their bodies and perspectives, and their hopes for body positivity in the future. This research could be conducted in a group setting using Playback with a group of young women to explore body positivity in a group setting. The research could be used as further evidence to support Playback's effectiveness in facilitating body positivity. I also recommend future research be conducted on Self-revelatory performance used as a method to facilitate body positivity to a large audience or community. Using face to face storytelling will add more research to the field of body positivity that does not use the internet, social media, or blogs to facilitate storytelling. I believe that research using in-person storytelling could elevate the research in this field as well as expand the knowledge of body positivity to many more young women.

Finally, drama therapy is rooted in the idea of actively using our bodies for exploration and expression. Body positivity is rooted in helping people feeling comfortable and confident in their own skin regardless of societal ideals. Bringing these two bodily approaches together while using storytelling as a bridge can have a strong, lasting impact on young women's relationship

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with their bodies. Giving young women the opportunity to use their voice, tell their story, and express their bodies has the power to spread and increase body positivity for young women everywhere.

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In the judgment of the following signatory this thesis meets the academic standards that have been established for the above degree.

**Thesis Advisor: Christine Mayor**