

FLUFFY WOMEN OF COLOR: EXAMINING THE IDENTITIES OF PLUS SIZE  
LATINA AND AFRICAN AMERICAN WOMEN THROUGH  
A LENS OF INTERSECTIONALITY

by

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## DEDICATION

*To Mother and Daddy,*

*Words cannot express how much you mean to me and how much you have influenced my life in the most positive ways. You taught me to value my education, which is now a life-long pursuit. You taught me to help those who are less fortunate in the world. You encouraged independence, creativity, and my free spirit. Most of all, you taught me to appreciate life and all that it has to offer. You have been what all parents should aspire to be for their children: my role models. I could not have achieved this accomplishment without you. LBB.*

*Your “mija,”*

*Natalie*

*To My Brother Chris,*

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*Love you,*

*Sister*



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## **ABSTRACT**

This qualitative study examined the identities of fluffy women of color through a lens of intersectionality. The term fluffy is an emergent term used to describe plus size women, who also consider themselves to be confident and attractive (Barned & Lipps, 2014). Two-thirds of the U.S. population are considered to be overweight or obese in recent years, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). Of those who are women, most are of Hispanic and African American origins. Therefore, this study focused on those groups in regards to women of color. The study was also conducted by a woman of color (Latina), who considers herself to be fluffy. Participants self-identified as fluffy women of color in the recruitment phase of the study. Their ages ranged from 27-63 years old. The theoretical framework of intersectionality was utilized to examine the equation of size, ethnicity, and gender. As this study is situated in the field of adult education, it is important to note that of the limited research focusing on intersectionality, such research seldom includes the identity category of size. Adult education has a long history of discourses related to social inequities and marginalized individuals. In order to create learning environments that are inclusive of all individuals, it is important for adult educators to be familiar with the identities and experiences of learners from all backgrounds, including fluffy women of color.

The research questions examined the participants' (a) identities, (b) family backgrounds and cultures, (c) successes, (d) experiences of discrimination, and (e) how they responded to those experiences. A phenomenological research framework was utilized to analyze the lived experiences of the participants and collect thick, rich, descriptive data. Data sources included interviews, artifacts, and the researcher's journal. The participants contributed heartfelt stories about their identities. The findings revealed that the essence of fluffy women of color is complex. The identities of the participants was influenced by their commitment to health, spirituality and inner strength, gender norms, thoughts on stereotypes, and painful experiences of discrimination, including



those linked to their intersectionality as women of color and women of size. In addition, none of the women in the study used the term *fat* to describe themselves. That finding alone is inconsistent with the emerging field of fat pedagogy. This research adds to the fields of adult education, intersectionality theory, and to literature used to inform and advocate for diversity and inclusion.

## **I. INTRODUCTION**

A few years ago, my husband and I visited a small, but very popular town in central Texas. The trip was a weekend getaway to celebrate the Fourth of July holiday. After walking through a number of shops, wine tastings, beer tastings and various tourist attractions, we found ourselves feeling hungry and ready for a late lunch. We decided upon a well-known eatery in the middle of town. The restaurant was fairly crowded, but by no means overly so. We were told we could seat ourselves. Upon finding a table, we waited for our server to arrive. In a very short while, a young White man came over to our table to take our order. He looked directly at my husband and asked, "What can I get you to drink, sir?" I found that just a bit odd, as most often servers attend to the woman first, or at least that is what I have been told is proper etiquette. In any case, my husband asked for a beer while looking over in my direction. It seemed he was trying to guide the waiter's gaze towards me. However, the waiter never looked in my direction. I felt as if I was invisible. In a very short amount of time, my husband smiled an uncomfortable smile and said, "And she'll have...(waiting for me to fill in the blank and trying to make the waiter look me)." However, I could tell that the waiter appeared to be deliberately ignoring me, so I just asked my husband to order some water for me. I also began to feel a terrible feeling in my gut, which I had felt before. The waiter told my husband he would be back soon to take his order.

As he walked away to get the drinks, I told my husband that I did not feel comfortable and that I thought I knew why I was feeling that way. My husband seemed a bit nervous and said, "Let's wait and see what happens when he comes back." Still, though, I felt I knew where the situation was headed. As we waited, I told my husband

that I would not order any food, as I was worried the waiter would spit in it. I could tell my husband was feeling more uneasy, but I do not think he wanted to believe what was happening. The waiter soon returned to take my husband's order. He spoke only to my husband, in a respectful tone, addressing him as "sir" and continued to ignore me. When the waiter walked away, I felt so sad and also angry. I had been ignored or felt invisible in the past, but I thought times like that were over. My husband asked if I wanted to leave, but I said, "No." We had been walking around for hours and I knew my husband was hungry. I sat there and barely sipped my water, while my husband ate his lunch and drank his beer. Yet, both of us continued to feel uneasy. My husband asked if we should say something to the manager, again, I said "No." I did not want to. I thought that, in that small town, the waiter could find us if he got in trouble or fired. I honestly thought that this young White man was perhaps part of the Aryan Brotherhood and might want to hurt or kill me for being Latina and maybe even hurt my husband, who is White, just for being with me. Yes, as crazy as it may sound, I honestly had those thoughts.

If you have ever been ignored by waiters or sales people, or in other ways discriminated against because of the color of your skin, you know just the feeling. However, for some reason, perhaps because I was with my husband, that situation seemed a bit different. I could not stop thinking about how the waiter treated my husband like a king and, yet, completely ignored me. I then tried to analyze why that was the case. The waiter did not know either of us. We were both polite and fairly quiet. We were both dressed casually, like everybody else in the restaurant. While I continued to analyze the situation, I began to think about how my husband and I differ. In all honesty, my husband is almost the complete opposite of me in many ways, but in that situation,

the only differences were those that the waiter could see. The differences were the facts that my husband was a slim, White man and I was a fluffy, Latina woman. Having made that distinction, I wondered again why the waiter ignored me while attending so well to my husband. Was it because I was Latina, or a woman, or fluffy? Or was it all three? It was not until a few years after that experience that I began to learn about the concept of intersectionality (Cho, Crenshaw, & McCall, 2013; Cole, 2009; Crenshaw, 1993; Shields, 2008; Warner & Shields, 2013). Sadly, after reading Remedios and Snyder (2015) I realized I was not the only woman who felt the toll of not knowing which identity was the target of prejudice or maltreatment.

### **Theoretical Framework**

Legal scholar, Kimberlé Crenshaw is most often mentioned when referencing the concept of intersectionality for her work which focused on the marginalized identities of Black women (Crenshaw, 1993). “Because of their intersectional identity as both *women* and *of color* within discourses that are shaped to respond to one or the other, women of color are marginalized within both,” (Crenshaw, 1993, p. 1244). For example, when examining the experiences of victims of domestic violence, she described the importance of acknowledging the multiple identities of women of color and encouraging the telling of the entire story, so to speak. Crenshaw (1993) focused on “how the experiences of women of color are frequently the product of intersecting patterns of racism and sexism” (p. 1243). Years later, Cho, Crenshaw, and McCall (2013) described intersectionality “as a heuristic term to focus attention of the vexed dynamics of difference and the solidarities of sameness in the context of antidiscrimination and social movement politics” (p. 787). As such, the concept of intersectionality is actively situated within the “field of race and

gender” (Cho, Crenshaw, & McCall, 2013, p. 789). The authors also discussed how intersectionality grew out of critical legal studies into other domains and disciplines, such as “feminist studies, ethnic studies, queer studies and legal studies” (p. 787).

In the field of adult education, in which I am situated, there is actually very little discourse about the framework of intersectionality. It is interesting that while the field of adult education is rooted in social justice, there is also the recognition that “adult education literature centers the dominant White majority as the norm” (Johnson-Bailey, Baumgartner, & Bowles, 2010, p. 340). Though feminist theory and critical or radical perspectives are included in discourses concerning power and oppression, much of my research stemmed from gender and race literature.

Still, a number of adult education scholars have focused some of their research on gender and race issues through examining experiences in adult and higher education settings (Baumgartner & Johnson-Bailey, 2010; Bridwell, 2012; Gonzáles & Mejorado, 2010; Joaquin & Johnson-Bailey, 2015; Johnson-Bailey, 2010, 2015; Sheared, 1999). Some of these works will be discussed more fully in the literature review. However, one notable comment which relates to this present study’s focus on identity stemmed from Johnson-Bailey, who described how she has become “skilled at resistance and gained knowledge of the importance of looking beyond the obvious to find the essence of the experience” (2010, p. 84). This observation reminds me of an experience in which I attended a cultural diversity training years ago. The trainer, who was a Latina woman, described her work as a counselor for HIV positive clients. On one occasion, a young, gay Latino man went in for counseling. At that point, the intake staff assigned him to the trainer because they were both Latino. However, the trainer said that the counseling

session did not go very well. She further stated that when the young man left, he asked the intake staff if he could speak with a gay counselor during his next visit. He did not care what ethnicity they were. In that instance, the intake staff only saw the color of the young man's skin and did not consider his sexual orientation. The intake staff assumed that the Latino man would prefer a Latina/Latino counselor. That was not the case. His sexual orientation had been overlooked or ignored, when that identity was more important to him, at least in this situation. That example demonstrates how we cannot assume to know, not only what part of a person's identity requires attention, but we must also acknowledge that individuals with multiple marginalized identities may deal with intersecting issues that require our sensitivity and understanding. When viewed as a framework, Warner and Shields (2013) stated, "intersectionality serves as a reminder to researchers that any consideration of a single identity, such as gender, must incorporate an analysis of the ways that other identities interact with, and therefore qualitatively change, the experience of gender" (p. 805). Furthermore, the authors supported the inclusion of intersectionality in research practices stating the following:

The most profound change that the intersectionality perspective has brought to psychology is acknowledgement of the impossibility of generalizing about "women" or "men." Adopting an intersectionality perspective meets any such totalizing statement with the simple, but fundamental question: Which women? Which men? (p. 809)

In terms of the future of intersectionality studies Cho, Crenshaw, and McCall (2013) stated "intersectional insights and frameworks are put into practice in a multitude of ways, from the top down to the bottom up, and in highly contested, complex, and

unpredictable fashions” (p. 807). In this present study, focusing the research on the identities of fluffy women of color was one of those “complex, and unpredictable fashions” (Cho, Crenshaw, & McCall, 2013, p. 807).

### **Ethnic Identity and Women of Color**

There are many definitions of identity and various approaches to describing identity, such as social identity, gender identity, cultural identity and ethnic identity. This present study includes a review of ethnic identity, as it relates to marginalized individuals such as women of color. Phinney and Ong (2007) pointed out the multifaceted nature of ethnic identity, yet emphasized that “the process of ethnic identity formation involves the construction over time of one’s sense of self as a group member and of one’s attitudes and understandings associated with group membership” (p. 275). Numerous scholars have written about women of color (Bridwell, 2012; Cole, 2009; Crenshaw, 1993; Linder & Rodriguez, 2012; Mohr & Purdie-Vaughns, 2015; Moraga & Anzaldúa, 2015; Pearson, 2007; Remedios & Snyder, 2015), there have been some of distinguishing characteristics noted about them. When Moraga and Anzaldúa (2015) first wrote about women of color thirty-five years ago, they included “Chinese, Japanese and Filipina American, Chicana/Latina, Native and African American” (p. xvi). The authors further described intersectionality “where multiple identities converge at the crossroads of a woman of color life. The woman of color life is the crossroad, where no aspect of our identity is wholly dismissed from our consciousness...” (p. xxii). Additionally, in the field of adult education and learning, Bridwell (2012) wrote of the collective manner in which “women of color often negotiate their relationship to knowledge in ways that transcend negative effects of marginalization” (p. 129). It is, in fact, this effect of marginalization that

women of color share in relation to their identities, their multiple marginalized identities (Bridwell, 2012; Crenshaw, 1993; Mohr & Purdie-Vaughns, 2015; Purdie-Vaughns & Eibach, 2008; Warner & Shields, 2013).

### **On Being Fluffy**

At the beginning of this introduction, I described my husband and me as opposites in many ways, including the facts that he is a slim, White man and I am a fluffy, Latina woman. While it may have been obvious to some, I will describe what I meant by the term fluffy. For some years now, some of my friends and I have called each other fluffy for a few reasons, 1) we like cats, 2) we are plus size, and 3) we do not like the negative associations with the word fat. There is even a photo that has made its way through various social media outlets that my friends and I have embraced (Figure 1):



*Figure 1.* Photograph distributed widely on social media using the term fluffy.



Feline association aside, however, the term fluffy is thought to have been coined in the late 80's. According to Semler (1988) one of the founders of the fitness program entitled *Women at Large*, Sharlyene Powell, called the women in her program "fluffy ladies," (p. 53) as she considered the word fat to be too negative. The term fluffy also stems from a study which took place in Jamaica, in which participants looked favorably upon "larger-bodied women" (p. 55) and "believed 'fluffy' represented confidence, sexiness and security in oneself" (Pearce, Dibb, Gaines, Jr., 2014, p. 55). In the U.S., larger body types are generally referred to as plus size, more specifically, women who wear a size 14 and above (Bickle, Burnsed, & Edwards, 2015; Christel & Dunn, 2016). This distinction is relevant, the participants in this study will be asked about their size, rather than their weight when collecting demographic information.

An example of the judgment faced by fluffy women occurred in one of my adult education courses. Early in my studies, I considered speaking out about weight bias. When I mentioned the issue in class, I was often met with, "What does that have to do with adult education?" As we discussed numerous social justice issues throughout our coursework, I was surprised that others did not see the relevance of bias related to size. This came up one night in class while a group of us students were discussing the term fluffy. I explained that it was a term used to describe plus size women, such as myself. Interestingly, a male classmate mentioned that he had some fluffy students that he trained and he stated, in a very serious tone, that he actually found them to be among the better students, as they made better grades than other students. When someone asked why he thought that was the case, he remarked, "Probably because they're the ones sitting at home every Saturday night." He then laughed and said that he was just joking

and went on to try to offer a real explanation. However, his joke made the clear implication that the fluffy students obviously did not have much of a social/dating life, so instead, they spent their Saturday nights studying. I let him know that I did not appreciate his remark. The professor looked over at me, rolled her eyes and shook her head as a form of disapproval. It just became more apparent to me that I needed to continue with my research about the experiences of plus size women and intersectionality. In doing just that, I discovered a similar example addressing racist jokes. “The claim that a representation is meant simply as a joke may be true, but the joke functions as humor within a specific social context in which it frequently reinforces patterns of social power” (Crenshaw, 1993, p. 1293). In the case of my male classmate making a joke about his fluffy students, he was, in fact, portraying examples of sexism and sizeism. In a study examining people’s appreciation and distaste of weight-related humor and its association with their existing anti-fat attitudes, Burmeister and Carels (2014) confirmed the following:

Participants’ dislike for obese persons and their belief in disparaging stereotypes about obesity were associated with higher levels of appreciation for weight-related humor. These findings are consistent with previous research that has found associations between appreciation of sexist humor and sexist attitudes and beliefs. (p.230)

As for terminology, it is also important to note that many advocates and scholars who speak out for size acceptance, which is one of the purposes for conducting this current study, prefer to use the word fat as a means of making a political statement or taking ownership of a term that has been used to belittle people of size (Cameron &

Russell, 2016; Donaghue & Clemitshaw, 2012; Fikkan & Rothblum, 2012; Null, 2012; Rothblum & Solovay, 2009). Saguy and Ward (2011) noted the work of prominent fat activist Marilyn Wann and stated, “In proudly coming out as fat, one rejects the cultural attitudes that fatness is unhealthy, immoral, ugly or otherwise undesirable” (p. 66). However, there are numerous terms used to describe the body size of the women whom I targeted for this study. Czerniawski (2015) stated “In popular discourse, the terms ‘fat,’ ‘plus size,’ and ‘overweight/obese’ are often used interchangeably...Frankly, fat means different things to different people” (p. 7). Notably, it has been observed by those in the field of fat pedagogy that the terms overweight and obese are primarily used by those who are situated in the medical field (Cameron & Russel, 2016; Rothblum & Solovay, 2009).

In term of what word to use, adult educators, Elias and Merriam (2005) have stated, “the meaning of a text does not inhere in a text but in the interaction between the text and the reader” (p. 225). They further stated, “text can have different meanings for different readers and even for the same reader at different times” (p. 225). Keeping this in mind, the reader will notice a variety of words used to describe the size of the women in this study. Elias and Merriam (2005) also stated pointed out that, in the case of examining text, postmodern deconstructivist philosopher and literary critic Jacques Derrida maintained “that multiple layers of meaning are at work in language” (p. 225). Therefore, who is to say the correct way to describe the women in this study? In fact, they will ultimately describe themselves.

### **Statement of the Problem**

While the use of the term fluffy may lead some to make light of this research, it is

important to note that size and weight discrimination among women is a serious issue. In a national longitudinal study, Sutin, Stephan, and Terracciano (2015) examined whether or not weight discrimination influenced mortality, and their findings suggested “the possibility that the stigma associated with being overweight is more harmful than actually being overweight” (p. 1807). This is especially relevant as in recent years, two-thirds of the U. S. population was considered to be overweight or obese according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention ([www.cdc.gov](http://www.cdc.gov)). Additionally, of the women in those numbers, the rates were higher for Hispanic and Black women compared to other ethnicities (Ogden, Carroll, Kit, & Flegal, 2014, p. 811). Furthermore, McHugh and Kasardo (2012) stated “All fat people are subjected to fat oppression, but fat prejudice is experienced by men and women differently in our (U.S) culture. It appears that fat prejudice may impact women more severely than it does men” (p. 619). Chrisler (2012) described the standards to which women bodies are held to in our society in the following manner:

“The body ideal for women has become the standard by which all women are measured and against which all women are judged. Women who deviate from the standard are considered unattractive and unfeminine, and the farther they are from the ideal, the more harshly they are judged. Thinness is an important aspect of the beauty standard for women, and any woman who is not thin is considered fat. (p. 610)

The problem lies in the fact that women in our society are often judged by their appearance (Chrisler, 2012; Darlow & Lobel, 2010). Women who are not thin are often harshly judged or experience various forms of bias, discrimination, and prejudice

(Brewis, Hruschka, & Wutich, 2011; Fikkan & Rothblum, 2012; McHugh & Kasardo, 2012). Additionally, women of color are believed to possess multiple marginalized identities (Bridwell, 2012; Crenshaw, 1993; Mohr & Purdie-Vaughns, 2015; Purdie-Vaughns & Eibach, 2008; Shields, 2008; Warner & Shields, 2013). Therefore, it would seem apparent that plus size women of color would experience various forms of discrimination and prejudice. Currently, there is only limited research examining the experiences of such women. Most of the literature related to body size involved research on primarily White women and/or college-aged students (Cotter, Kelly, Mitchell, & Mazzeo, 2015; Donaghue & Clemitshaw, 2012; Esposito, 2011; Overstreet, Quinn, & Agocha, 2010; Puhl, Moss-Racusin, Schwartz & Brownell, 2008; Rakhkovskaya & Warren, 2014; Saguy & Ward, 2011; Warren, 2014).

Additionally, in the field of adult education, there is limited research that addresses weight prejudice and intersectionality theory. Finally, while the term fluffy was used a number of years ago in the U.S. to describe plus size women, versus the more negative term fat (Semler, 1988), it is re-emerging as recent studies in Jamaica have enlightened scholars about the positive attributes of women viewed as fluffy (Barned & Lipps, 2014; Pearce, Dibb, & Gaines, Jr., 2014). However, just because fluffy women have a high level of self-confidence and consider themselves attractive does not necessarily mean that they have not experienced multiple forms of discrimination or prejudice. In fact, both of the Jamaican studies about fluffy women described how others viewed them. How fluffy women viewed their own identity or felt about themselves was not examined.

Furthermore, in discussing stigma and intersectionality, Mohr and Purdie-

Vaughns (2015) noted that past research has “primarily focused” on others’ perceptions of individuals with intersecting identities and added that “little is known about how people with intersectional identities themselves perceive and respond to discrimination” (p. 392) which is also one of the issues that will be addressed in this study. Finally, in the *Fat Pedagogy Reader*, which is a collection of essays from fat activists and scholars, editors Cameron and Russell (2014) admit that the majority of the contributors are of a similar race (White). Therefore, a gap in the literature that will be addressed in this study is that it will be conducted by a researcher of color.

### **Purpose of the Study**

Lindeman (1926), a pioneer in the field of adult education stated, “Difference is the base of personal integrity. Only the unintelligent fear what differs from themselves. We should, if we were bravely intelligent, beg individuals to give us their difference, not their sameness” (p. 53). That statement which was made many years ago still speaks to today’s climate in relation to diversity and inclusion. We must not fear those who are different. The purpose of this study was to document the lived experiences of a number of fluffy women of color through a lens of intersectionality. This included asking the participants to share their own perceptions about their identities, and the factors that have influenced their identities, such as family backgrounds, cultures, and various life experiences, both positive and negative. By lending a voice to these women, those in the field of adult education and society, in general, will come to understand the identities of these women from their own perspective. While the theory of intersectionality speaks to having multiple marginalized identities, fluffy women have not been examined through this lens. The findings from this study will inform others about the experiences of these

women in order to promote body size diversity and acceptance, and in the case of adult education, to include such topics in coursework and discussions related to diversity.

### **Research Questions**

This study examined the identities of fluffy women of color through a lens of intersectionality. For the purposes of this study, the term fluffy was used, as it both current, and incorporates connotations from the past. It is also a term that is and was viewed by some as a more positive way to describe larger bodies or plus size women. The term also includes traits such as self-confidence and attractiveness. The fluffy women who participated were also women of color, more specifically, Latina and African American. In order to examine the identities of the women in this study, a phenomenological research approach was utilized, and asked the primary research questions below:

1. How do fluffy women of color perceive themselves in terms of their identity/ies?
2. How have family and culture influenced the development of their identity/ies?
3. What positive life experiences have fluffy women of color had, in relation to their body size, ethnicity, and gender?
4. What experiences of marginalization or discrimination, if any, are described by fluffy women of color? How do they interpret such experiences, relative to their ethnicity, body size, and gender?
5. How have fluffy women of color learned to cope with experiences of marginalization and discrimination, personally and socially?

## **Overview of Methodology**

As this qualitative study sought to examine the identities of fluffy women of color, a phenomenological research approach was utilized in order to attempt to capture the true essence of lived experiences of the participants in the study. Moustakas (1994) described phenomenology as being concerned with the wholeness of an experience and examining it from all points of view and perspectives “until a unified vision of the essences of a phenomenon or experience is achieved” (p. 58). The data sources included participant interviews, artifacts belonging to the participants, and the researcher’s journal. Data analysis included phenomenological processes, including, horizontalization, phenomenological reduction, and imaginative variation.

## **Summary and Moving Forward**

This chapter provided an introduction to the researcher’s personal interest in examining the identities of fluffy women of color through a lens of intersectionality. The discussion included key issues that will be addressed in this study, such as intersectionality, ethnic identity, women of color, women of size, and what it means to be considered a fluffy woman. The problem statement, purpose of the study and research questions were stated. In addition, a brief overview of the research methodology was also described. In the following Chapter 2, scholarly literature that is relevant to this study is reviewed. Chapter 3 describes the research framework of phenomenology and the research design in a more in-depth manner, including the sample selection process and the data collection methods. Chapter 4 examines the participant profiles and reveals data-based findings which include four emergent themes and numerous sub-themes. Finally, Chapter 5 highlights and interprets key findings,



implications for practice and future recommendations for research. In addition, potential impact of the study, delimitations on transferability, and the researcher's final reflections are also discussed.

## II. REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

This study sought to examine the identities of plus size women of color through a lens of intersectionality. In doing so, I researched and reviewed literature closely related to a number of the issue areas surrounding this topic. This chapter is divided into four sections: (a) women of size, (b) women of color, (c) intersectionality and ethnic identity, and (d) connections to adult education.

I conducted numerous searches in the university library database including the following terms in various pairings: women of color, fluffy women, plus size women, overweight/obese women, Hispanic women, African American women, Black women, Latina women, weight, identity, identity development, fat women, oppressed women, intersectionality, embodied learning, somatic learning, women of size, body image, weight discrimination, fat studies, fat pedagogy, adult education, and adult learning and development. Most of the studies that were found were outside the area of adult education, such as in psychology journals, social science journals and those involving gender and ethnicity studies. Within the field of adult education, I carefully reviewed the following journals: *Studies in the Education of Adults*, *New Directions for Adult and Continuing Education*, *Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*, *Adult Education Quarterly* and the *Journal for Lifelong Learning*. In those journals, I found limited research related to body image and intersectionality and some literature about embodied learning.

In other domains, when using terms such as overweight or obese, searches often yielded articles which focused on weight loss or health issues associated with being overweight. Because of that, there is limited inclusion of such literature, as this study

was not medically related. The terms overweight and obese in describing women in this study were not included for the same reason. The only time those terms were used was to cite relevant data about weight from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (2016) and the Journal of the American Medical Association (Ogden, Carroll, Kit, & Flegal, 2014), to cite related research, or in personal quotes from the participants themselves. Very often, the term fat was discussed when describing the stigma associated with being fat, or related to body image, or when describing women feeling pressured to be thin. Because of that, this review included literature and essays completed by fat activists and scholars, who use the term fat to describe themselves. “Scholars and activists who identify with fat studies or fat acceptance purposely use the word ‘fat’ and assert that doing so is a political action” (Cameron & Russell, 2016, p. 4). This action was similar to the adoption of the term queer in the 90’s by gay activists, who had been previously been stigmatized by that term. Or more recently, how third wave feminists have reclaimed words such as “bitch” (Snyder, 2008, p. 179).

There was very little research that included the term fluffy to describe plus size women. Upon initial review, Barned and Lipps (2014) utilized the term when describing plus size, attractive and confident women in a study which took place in Jamaica. However, a closer examination of the literature revealed the term fluffy was actually first mentioned in a prior study in Jamaica (Pearce, Dibb, & Gaines, Jr., 2014). Eventually, I was able to find the term referenced in some literature conducted here in the U.S. by means of one of the contributors in Rothblum and Solovay’s (2009) *Fat Studies Reader*. The term appeared to have been coined in the 80’s, which is discussed in more detail further in this review.

When examining the identities of women of color, it was important to refer to the theory of intersectionality, as well as identity. A number of feminist scholars have discussed the theory of intersectionality in describing the multiple marginalized identities of women of color (Babbitt, 2011; Crenshaw, 1993; Linder & Rodriguez, 2012; Shields 2008; Warner & Shields, 2013). While many have described the intersection of race, class, and gender, recent studies have also included sexual orientation and disability (Herndon, 2011; Mohr & Purdie-Vaughns, 2015).

Even more recent is the idea of including weight or size in the intersectionality equation. This chapter includes a review of the work by a number of scholars, some of whom are situated in the fields of adult education and critical education, who have contributed to the examination of body size and identity (Cameron & Russel, 2016; Rothblum & Solovay, 2009). Diversity issues continue to be in our nation's spotlight and the field of adult education continues to recognize and emphasize multicultural issues. Therefore, it is important for adult educators to become familiar with the identities and cultural experiences of all women, including fluffy women of color. All women must be heard. "How women come to know is as varied as women's being" (English, 2006, p. 22). Furthermore, Rice (2014) has written extensively about the role that embodiment has when examining women's identities. She stated "that neither genetics nor health habits determine weight; instead, individuals' weights may differ depending on the way their bodies are perceived and treated in the world (Rice, 2014, p. 127). While this opinion is quite contrary to views from the medical field, it does bring attention to the role of plus size individuals in society. Consequently, oppression and/or discrimination experienced by those who are fat or plus size is quite relevant to the fields of education,

critical education and social justice, as noted by Burford (2015) when describing a tweet by a professor at the University of New Mexico in 2013. The professor wrote “Dear obese PhD applicants: If you didn’t have the willpower to stop eating carbs, you won’t have the willpower to do a dissertation #truth” (p. 1). Obviously, that tweet caused quite a stir, but it reminds us that weight or size discrimination is a very current and real issue faced by many today.

### **Women of Size**

As stated in chapter one, McHugh and Kasardo (2012) asserted that all fat people face fat prejudice, but that women seem to experience it more severely than men. As my research sought to examine the experiences of fluffy women of color, it was important to examine previous research on how women of size are viewed in society, as well as how they view themselves, including their physical identity. In addition, because I included participants who identified themselves as attractive and confident, which implied a level of self-acceptance, I also reviewed previous studies on the current self-acceptance movement.

### **Stigma and Discrimination**

The ways in which women of size are perceived by others in our society gives context and relevance to the driving questions of this study:

Obesity is understood as a major medical and public health challenge, but the stigma attached to it also creates extraordinary suffering. The pervasiveness of morally negative views toward the overweight and obese, such as laziness and lack of self-control, are undeniable in mainstream U.S. society, situated both institutionally (such as health care barriers or media stereotypes) and

interpersonally (such as the negative comments of others). (Brewis, Hruschka, & Wutich, 2011, p. 491)

Fikkan and Rothblum (2012) discussed weight-based stigma experienced by women in a comprehensive examination of literature that included some of their previous research, as well as that of others. They opened their discussion with a review of the history of weight-based issues which surfaced in feminist discourse in the late 70's and early 80's. At that time, Orbach (1978) wrote the book, *Fat is a Feminist Issue*, which described women's issues with weight problems and "hatred of their bodies" (Fikkan & Rothblum, 2012, p.575) as stemming from the "social constraints placed on women's autonomy and a patriarchal devaluation of all things feminine (including fat bodies)" (p. 575).

Fikkan and Rothblum (2012) compiled literature which provided evidence of weight bias toward women through numerous studies conducted across a variety of domains. In my review of the literature, Fikkan and Rothblum appear to be experts in the field of weight-based oppression. They described studies that examined how fat women were rated more negatively than thin women within the workplace. One of the studies they reviewed even described how male job applicants were judged more harshly because they were sitting next to a fat woman (assumed to be their partner) before the job interview. Fikkan and Rothblum (2012) also cited longitudinal studies which showed that fat women often earn less than thin women and fat men in the workplace. In the social arena, the researchers described studies in which fat women were considered less attractive and less sexually desirable than fat men. Fikkan and Rothblum (2012) also examined a number of studies that discussed how fat women have been negatively

portrayed in the media. Finally, the researchers stated that the feminist movement seems to have forgotten about the experiences of fat women. Ultimately, Fikkan and Rothblum (2012) argued that the issue of weight-bias toward fat women should continue to receive more attention among feminists due to the “significant discrimination” (p. 588) faced by these women.

McHugh and Kasardo (2012) also described how fat women appear to face more discrimination than fat men. The researchers described previous work written about anti-fat prejudice, particularly directed at women and discussed how “the field of psychology has a responsibility to appreciate size acceptance and to strive to eliminate anti-fat bias,” (McHugh & Kasardo, 2012, p. 617). They examined introductory textbooks in the field of psychology and found that none of the textbooks mentioned the words “fat, fat oppression or even overweight” (McHugh & Kasardo, 2012, p. 621) in their discussions about fat people. Instead, the topic was listed only under the word obesity. They also researched anti-fat bias within the field of therapy. They mentioned that it is likely that, when fat clients enter therapy, the therapist will engage in discussing weight loss techniques. They described how engaging in such practices with women “implies that the therapist endorses the beauty myth (which equates a woman’s worth with her attractiveness),” (McHugh & Kasardo, 2012, p. 623). The researchers further described and encouraged fat acceptance therapies, such as the health at every size model (a holistic approach that promotes self-acceptance, appreciation of size diversity, engaging in self-care strategies, and appreciation of size diversity), discussions of fat oppression and fat acceptance groups.

McHugh and Kasardo (2012) concluded with the suggestion that psychologists adopt a more encouraging, and less oppressive, approach when working with fat people (particularly women), including understanding their own biases. They stated that the “field of psychology must promote that fat oppression, and not fat, is problematic in order to work towards eradicating anti-fat prejudice” (p. 625). The same could also be said for the field of adult education.

### **Body Image and Self-acceptance**

Cotter, Kelly, Mitchell, and Mazzeo (2015) chose to examine a group of African American women because “positive body image, such as body appreciation or acceptance, has gone largely unexamined in women of color in comparison with more pathological body attitudes,” (Cotter et al., 2015, p. 3). They studied the reliability and validity of the Body Appreciation Scale (BAS) in Black college women and the relation between ethnic identity and body appreciation. The researchers described body image as a complex construct that encompasses a person’s thoughts, feelings, perceptions, and attitudes regarding his or her body. Cotter et al. (2015) stated that “despite lower body dissatisfaction than White women, Black women are not immune to body image and eating concerns” (p. 5). These researchers also noted that ethnic identity may protect individuals from developing body image concerns because they identify less with the thin ideal of the majority culture. Their study included 228 undergraduate Black female college students, whose average age was 19. The participants answered a number of questionnaires related to body image, self-esteem, physical appearance, eating habits, eating disorders, and ethnic identity. A quantitative approach was used to analyze the data and results supported the construct validity of the Body Appreciation Scale. As for



limitations, self-reports of weight and height were used to calculate body mass index, which may not have been the most accurate measure. Also, the results of college-age students cannot be generalized to suggest similar results in older populations of women, assuming the college populations are primarily composed of traditional-age college students, who may not possess as much life and career experiences as older women.

In an another study, Lynch and Kane (2014) examined how a group of African American women defined body size as compared to the medical community's definition. The researchers used a quantitative approach, "cross-sectional survey design conducted in an individual interview format" (p. 412). Sixty-nine African American women were recruited from a low-income neighborhood. Most did not have a college education and were not employed. Using the Body Image Scale, a scale consisting of nine figures of women ranging from very thin to very obese, they were asked to identify those that were: overweight, obese or too fat. Then, they were asked to identify the figure that most closely resembled their own. Participants described larger body sizes as obese. They also did not identify body sizes labeled as overweight to be *too* fat. "This finding provides further documentation of the dramatic discrepancy that exists between lay and medical definitions of body size" (Lynch & Kane, 2014, p. 415).

This is important to note, as Lynch and Kane (2014) implied that certain cultural groups perceive their body size/weight, in ways that differ from the medical community's standards. Though the researchers also stated that these differences could be a barrier for overweight or obese women to seek medical assistance for potential health risks. However, their study could not be generalized to include all women of color or even African American women, as it consisted of a small, homogeneous population from a

low-income neighborhood. This present research study built upon that issue as well, by gathering qualitative data from the lived experiences of fluffy women of color, as opposed to the medical model perspective, such as examining weight, BMI and such.

In regards to self- acceptance, Donaghue and Clemitshaw (2012) acknowledged the ways that women in Western society feel pressured to be thin, and studied women who challenged the current ideas about body weight and health. The women in their study also promoted respect for people who were overweight or obese through supportive blog posts. Donaghue and Clemitshaw (2012) reviewed the blog posts of two women who rejected the thin ideal. Their blog posts were chosen because “they explicitly reflect on the complex subjectivities involved in taking on the philosophies of fat acceptance and rejecting the thin ideal” (p. 418). To analyze their data, the researchers used a feminist poststructuralist approach and categorized the commenters’ blogs into the following themes: *Diets don’t work*, *Thinness doesn’t equate happiness*, *Limits: the reality of thin privilege*, and *Misrecognition by others*.

Donaghue and Clemitshaw (2012) concluded that the fat acceptance blogging communities provided support to their members by countering the often stated claims which insist “that fat bodies are pitiable and pathological” (p. 422). In reviewing this study, a possible limitation of this could have been the fact that most of the female commenters consisted of a homogenous group (young, White, educated, and middle class). This differed from the data collected from *The Journal of the American Medical Association*, which reported higher percentages of overweight and obese women in America to be Hispanic and Black.

Another study related to fat acceptance was one conducted by Saguy and Ward

(2011). They led a study over the course of seven years, which involved interviewing women who identified as fat. The researchers studied their “coming out” (p. 60) narratives, an analogous term often used by gays who no longer kept their sexuality hidden:

In proudly coming out as fat, one rejects cultural attitudes that fatness is unhealthy, immoral, ugly, or otherwise undesirable. One claims the right to define the meaning of one’s own body and to stake out new cultural meanings and practices around body size. (p. 66)

Saguy and Ward (2011) discussed fat acceptance activists who took pride in their size by participating in activities generally thought to be restricted to thin individuals, such as wearing a bikini and hanging out by the pool. Related to that, in April of 2016, a popular news website, MSN, released photos of what they called “curvy” (Massiel-Vasquez, 2016) women posing in bikinis. They were all plus size women who felt confident enough to wear bikinis, despite general notions that bikinis are just for thin women. Therefore, the focus of this study is quite timely. Still, while Saguy and Ward (2011) noted some of the negative attributes of being overweight or obese, they focused on the social and political implications of stigmatization. The researchers concluded by suggesting that a coming out narrative could promote a positive identity associated with being fat, which could help create a movement that may address the social and political issues faced by fat individuals. It is also important to note that the majority of the 15 participants in Saguy and Ward’s (2011) research were White. This dissertation’s research added to their work and examined the identities of fluffy women of color.

## **Fluffy Women**

In the U.S. the term fluffy ladies is believed to have been coined by one of the founders of the fitness program entitled Women at Large, Sharlyene Powell, who, according to Semler (1988), stated that it was used instead of the “more negative term fat” (p. 53) to describe larger women who participated in their exclusive exercise program.

Otherwise, the only mention of the term fluffy hailed from two studies conducted in Jamaica in very recent years (Barned & Lipps, 2014; Pearce et al., 2014). The first included medical and health-related implications and is primarily included in this literature review because of the use of the emergent term fluffy and to offer some insight as to how another culture outside the U.S. views women with larger body sizes. Pearce et al. (2014) stated that Jamaicans “have a tolerance for heavier body weights” (p. 44). In their culture, fuller figured and more curvaceous body types were seen as more attractive than thinner body types. The researchers, while noting some of the health issues associated with being overweight or obese, stated that cultures that are more tolerant of heavier body sizes also may not have some of the psychological stressors that are found in cultures in which individuals feel pressured to be thin. However, with their study, they focused on the fact that “cultural perceptions of body weight could influence performance of certain health behaviours” (Pearce et al., 2014, p. 43).

The researchers carried out a qualitative study in which they conducted semi-structured interviews of 30 participants, 10 male and 20 female, whose ages ranged from 21-63. The brief interviews included questions such as: “How would you describe a healthy weight?” “Why do you think some people are overweight or obese?” “What are

some of the psychological experiences/outcomes of having a larger body type?” The researchers utilized a thematic analysis of their data, which included a manual procedure and the use of NVivo10 software. The responses to the question about what a healthy weight were varied. In regards to questions about body size, it appeared that both male and female respondents viewed medium and larger body sizes in women as more aesthetically acceptable. It was at this point that the researchers were introduced to the term fluffy. Participant statements included: “So when you’re fluffy it means you own your fat and you are confident and you’re, you feel sexy.” “The majority of people think that the fluffier type, whether it’s the big bottom, the big belly, or the big breast. Those are the more attractive type. Ahm, why? It’s just the culture I guess, Yea.”

In their discussion, Pearce et al. stated that the term fluffy “was important to convey the perception that a fuller bodied woman was normal” even if her body weight was actually deemed in the overweight/obese range according to the BMI. However, the other qualities that accompanied a fluffy woman, in addition to her size, were a high degree of confidence, sense of attractiveness and a feeling of security about her identity. “Consequently, stigmatization of larger-bodied women was no a major concern among this group of participants” (Pearce et al., 2014, p. 55). The researchers then discussed thoughts on why women might call themselves fluffy. One theory they mentioned, disidentification theory, led to the idea that women who called themselves fluffy could be doing so as a means of self-protection, or even as a means of resisting colonialism or Western ideals when used by Jamaicans. The researchers concluded with comments that emphasized the importance of socio-cultural behaviors when addressing various health issues.

Both in Jamaica and in the U.S., the term fluffy appeared to be used instead of the word fat, as that word had, and still has, negative connotations associated with it. Hence, both in Jamaica and in the U.S. the use of that term may denote a self-protective factor, due to the negative views that many people have towards women who have larger body sizes. Why women feel the need to protect themselves because of their body size in any culture is an interesting phenomenon that may lead to future research.

A second Jamaican study conducted by Barned and Lipps (2014) also incorporated the use of the term fluffy as a descriptor of “plus sized individuals” (p. 627). The researchers conducted this study in order to establish the reliability and validity of their Attitudes toward Fluffy Women Scale (ATFW), which measures “attitudes and perceptions about obese people” (Barned & Lipps, 2014, p. 628).

To establish concurrent validity, they incorporated the *Attitudes Toward Obese Persons Scale (ATOP)*. To establish discriminant validity, they also incorporated another scale, *Bogardus Social Distance Scale (BSD)*. Participants were students attending two universities in Jamaica. Surveys were emailed to the participants and included statements such as: “Slim women are healthier than fluffy women,” “When it comes to food, fluffy women have no will power,” “Fluffy women are lazy,” “Fluffy women do not care about their weight,” “Fluffy women are sociable,” “Men love fluffy women,” and “Most fluffy women feel that they are just as good as other women.”

Barned and Lipps (2014) concluded that the instrument, Attitudes toward Fluffy Women Scale, was both reliable and valid in measuring young people’s attitudes about fluffy women. While the definition and descriptions of fluffy women appear mostly positive in their study, Barned and Lipps (2014) noted some negative attributes about

fluffy women as well. For example, they suggested that women who identify as fluffy may ignore health concerns associated with being overweight due to their feelings of being attractive and confident. Limitations in this study included the participants' age and location, as college students in Jamaica most likely have a different perspective from adults in the U.S. Additionally, this researcher found it interesting that this scale was created to measure others' attitudes towards fluffy women. Why was it only important to know what others thought of fluffy women? Why not interview fluffy women directly? Related to this, Chrisler (2012) stated the following:

We need to study fat women's lived experience in order to understand the positive aspects of their lives rather than assuming that the negative aspects are all there is. It is time for a new surge of activism in the women's movement. If we really believe in our principle that all women should be liberated from oppression, we cannot leave any of our sisters behind. (p. 614)

In alignment with Chrisler (2012), this present study about fluffy women of color sought to lend a voice to the participants to describe both positive and negative life experiences.

### **Women of Color**

As the previous section examined issues related to women of size, this next section focused on the experiences of prejudice and marginalization faced by women of color. Remedios and Snyder (2015) discussed how women of color detected and responded to prejudice as compared to White women. They conducted a review of current literature related to this issue. Because women of color are said to have multiple stigmatized identities, the researchers stated:

Women of color who conclude that they have are victims of prejudice, in contrast, may face the additional task of identifying the type of prejudice (racism, sexism, or intersectional bias) they have experienced, if it is not clear which identity is being derogated. (p. 375).

One of the purposes of their research was to better capture how women of color experience stigmatization. However, Remedios and Snyder (2015) stated that it can be difficult to find women of color to even participate in research. As a good deal of research relies on college students, the researchers stated that there was often a lack of access in finding non-White participants for research. They also noted that various instruments were not made to capture the experiences of multiple forms of stigmatization. The researchers described the necessity for including women of color in research and admitted that much of the current research “almost exclusively” focuses on comparing women of color to White women (Remedios & Snyder, 2015, p. 373). However, they further stated that this approach treats White women as the norm, which in turn, devalues the experiences of women of color.

However, Mohr and Purdie-Vaughns (2015) expanded upon the data compiled by Remedios and Snyder (2015) and provided a commentary for future research. They suggested taking into consideration the different stereotypes among sub-groups which may comprise the category of women of color. They listed Black, Hispanic and Asian Americans as examples and encouraged the consideration of intersectional identities. The researchers gave an example of a Black manager and an Asian manager being asked to pour coffee at a meeting, and how they may each perceive the situation differently based on their different ethnicities. They also asserted that “little is known about how



people with intersectional identities themselves perceive and respond to discrimination,” (p. 392). They suggested that more research should be conducted in this area in order to advance knowledge related to stigma and discrimination. Mohr and Purdie-Vaughns (2015) discussed one study that concluded “most leaders that identify as women of color feel misunderstood and invisible” (p. 398). The authors further described other situations in which women of color felt stigmatized or excluded in the workplace. While their work appears to be situated in the field of psychology, this knowledge would also offer more insight to the field of adult education, a field that is focused on social justice and equality. This dissertation adds to the literature on women of color and how they have perceived various forms of stigma/discrimination.

The previous literature presented commentaries and reviews to encourage further research including women of color. Linder and Rodriguez (2012) addressed these recommendations in part, as they examined women of color who were also student activists on a predominantly White college campus to determine what led them to become activists, how they had experienced marginalization, and where they found safe places on campus. The researchers employed the lens of intersectionality theory and multiple identity development theory in order to study how the women made meaning of their multiple identities. Linder and Rodriguez (2012) positioned themselves within a “transformative paradigm” (p.386) while studying the “lived experiences of those who have been traditionally marginalized by systematic oppression” (p. 386).

The participants were self-identified women of color activists. The seven young women held various ethnicities including African American (one indicated “not Black” and one indicated “or Black”), Latina, and one who identified as Chicana, Spanish,

Caucasian and Jewish. Initial one-hour interviews were conducted with each participant, asking questions such as how their activism impacted their identity, how they experienced their race and ethnicity on campus, and where they felt safe on campus. A focus group was also conducted to follow up with member checks and get more clarification from interview questions. To analyze their data, Linder and Rodriguez (2012) utilized a three-dimensional- space approach. Because the women in the study were activists, the finding revealed that they spent much time reflecting on experiences of oppression and marginalization. Hence, the data revealed three major categories, including: “developing a path to activism, experiencing marginalization, and creating safe spaces” (Linder & Rodriguez, 2012, p. 389). The authors concluded with suggestions from their participants which “recommended validating experiences by providing safe spaces and programs to explore multiple identities and understanding and educating about systems of power and privilege” (Linder & Rodriguez, 2012, p. 396). These spaces would allow for support and further discourse as they shared experiences with each other. This study reflects a gap in the research in terms of participant demographics. Like many of the studies reviewed, this one was situated on a college campus with traditional college-age female participants. In addition, the participants were self-proclaimed activists. All of these descriptors define a very narrow group within research about women of color.

### **Intersectionality and Ethnic Identity**

This study included an analysis of the intersections of gender, body size and race/ethnicity while examining the identities of fluffy women of color. The theoretical framework for this study, intersectionality, hailed from a feminist perspective developed

years ago. Kimberlé Crenshaw first mentioned the term intersectionality while addressing issues facing Black women in the late 80's and early 90's. "Because of their intersectional identity as both *women* and *of color* within discourses that are shaped to respond to one or the other, women of color are marginalized within both," (Crenshaw, 1993, p. 1244). In later years, Shields (2008) elaborated further to describe how intersectionality has grown to include more social identity categories:

Since the 1980s, feminist critique of essentialist assumptions about gender increasingly has employed an intersectionality perspective to understand gender in relation to other social identities, such as race, class, ethnicity and sexual orientation. (p. 303)

In recent years, even more identity categories have been added to the intersectionality equation such as size, age and disability.

### **Intersectionality**

Warner and Shields (2013) examined trends in intersectionality research. The researchers described how individuals experienced intersections at both personal and social levels. "At the personal level, intersectionality affects the individual's experience of their own social spheres. At the socio-structural level, the individual's legal status, resources, or social needs may advantage them or marginalize them, specifically due to the convergence of identity statuses" (Warner & Shields, 2013, p. 804). They also discussed how intersectionality has taken on different forms amongst the various disciplines, including women's and gender studies. Examining the identities of fluffy women of color falls into both of those categories. The researchers also discussed how the application of intersectionality is primarily utilized with individuals who have

“multiple marginalized identities” (Warner & Shields, 2013, p. 804).

Just as a woman’s weight may change over time, so may her view of herself or her identity. The authors further described the fluidity of identity and noted that, “intersectionality serves as a reminder to researchers that any consideration of a single identity, such as gender, must incorporate an analysis of the ways that other identities interact with, and therefore qualitatively change, the experience of gender” (Warner & Shields, 2013, p. 805). The authors supported the inclusion of intersectionality in research practices by emphasizing how the perspective of intersectionality has brought a “profound change” (Warner & Shields, 2013, p. 809) to their field and has allowed for the opportunity to learn about more about the viewpoints and experiences from specific individuals, as opposed to generalized statements about groups of individuals.

On her own, Shields (2008) described how intersectionality grew from the study of inequalities such as dominance and oppression:

As the foundation for theory it [intersectionality theory] promised a more accurate and tractable way of dealing with two issues. First, it promised a solution, or at least a language for the glaring fact that it is dimensions of social structure/social identity that play a formative role in gender’s operation and meaning. Second, intersectionality seemed a generally applicable descriptive solution to the multiplying features that create and define social identities. It is not race-class-gender, but also age, ableness, sexual orientation, to name the most salient. (p. 303)

Shields (2008) also stated that “the specific definition of intersectionality varies by research context, but a consistent thread across definitions is that social identities which

serve as organizing features of social relations, mutually constitute, reinforce, and naturalize one another” (pp. 301-302). Her article described how intersectionality is a central tenet of feminist research and has influenced gender studies. She reviewed some of the history, in that, “the theoretical foundation for intersectionality grew from study of the production and reproduction of inequalities, dominance, and oppression” (p. 303). She described how discussions in the 1980’s took place among feminists about the relation of gender to other social identities, such as race, class, ethnicity and sexual orientation. Shields (2008) also described how difficult it can be for empirical researchers to change the way they think about examining differences and move towards “acknowledging linkages among social identities to explaining those linkages or the processes through which intersecting identities define and shape one another” (p. 304).

Shields (2008) described how useful intersectionality can be when examining narratives and case studies by stating “an intersectional approach can also facilitate an understanding of the fluidity in and between and within identity categories” (p. 308). She regarded intersectionality as being “urgent because it gets us as researchers to go beyond the individually informed perspective that we each inevitably bring to our scholarship and science” (p. 309). She concluded by calling for researchers to include intersectionality in order to enhance research methodologies and findings. Shields (2008) stated “Intersectionality theory, by virtue of its description of multidimensional nature of identity makes investigation through qualitative methods seem both natural and necessary” (p. 306). By examining a very specific group of women (fluffy women of color), the depth and intricate nature of using intersectionality theory as a lens will be of much benefit in my research.

Purdie-Vaughns and Eibach (2008) also explored the issues that individuals with multiple marginalized identities face. In their study, they described the concept of *double jeopardy* in which a person with two or more marginalized identities experienced the discrimination of each of those identities. They also introduced the term *score keeping*, in which individuals with multiple marginalized identities compared themselves to each other to see who suffered the most. Rather than asking who is more disadvantaged, the researchers stated that we should instead ask how the forms of oppression that people with intersecting disadvantaged identities experience differ from the forms of oppression that people with a single disadvantaged identity experience.

A number of dissertations also used intersectionality as a framework for their research. Toothman (2013), for example, examined how gender, weight, and age played a role in the ways men and women were treated in the workplace. She cited studies that revealed how fat women earned less than their thin counterparts in the workplace and were perceived negatively because of their larger bodies. Toothman (2013) also provided a thorough overview of the issues that overweight people face in the workplace. Other than social stigma, issues included their bodies not fitting into some chairs, or requiring more space in which to move around comfortably and without calling attention to themselves. She also cited a number of studies that demonstrated a negative view of fat people in the workplace because of their larger bodies.

Toothman (2013) used both quantitative and qualitative approaches to her research. Her quantitative approach sought “to uncover the patterning of earning inequality by fatness, gender and age” (p. 24). She examined “the association between fatness and ... earnings and how this relationship varies by gender and age” (p. 33). For

the qualitative analysis, she collected 20 interviews from women. During the interviews, Toothman asked each woman to “describe her fatness-related memories of experiences in school and work settings as well as memories of her experiences interacting with friends, family, and coworkers” (p. 37). The researcher utilized a modified version of grounded theory method in her approach to data analysis. Overall, Toothman’s (2013) findings revealed that the women interviewed felt devalued by their supervisors, co-workers and customers for being fat. Additionally, data confirmed previous studies demonstrating that weight had a negative impact on earnings, more so for women than men.

Situated in the field of sociology and social sciences, Null’s (2012) dissertation used an intersectional framework which focused on transformative experiences of fat women who became size accepting. A dominant feature of the study focused on the embodied experiences surrounding the participants’ transformation. Null (2012) recruited her participants via the Internet through size-acceptance blogs and other similar groups. She received numerous respondents and narrowed her focus to 23 women who met her criteria, including 13 White, 3, Black, 3 Hispanic, 1 Asian and 3 women of mixed ethnicities. Null (2012) conducted in-depth semi-structured interviews using SKYPE (except for one). In addition to the identity categories generally examined through an intersectional viewpoint (race, class, and gender), Null (2012) added weight and sexual orientation to the equation. The researcher used a modified grounded theory approach in her methodology and a thematic approach to analyzing the data. Some of the findings revealed that participants learned that their bodies were more physically capable than the limited stereotypes about fat people they had heard of. Others described feeling better about themselves after viewing other fat women, including celebrities who were fat

and also considered to be beautiful. Some described changing their attitudes about food, such as being able to enjoy foods and not viewing themselves in a negative way for doing so. Some spoke about learning how their fat bodies can experience pleasure. Some also described learning how to ask for changes regarding space, rather than struggling to fit into spaces that were too small, such as desks or chairs.

In relation to intersectionality, some of the women of color stated not feeling connected to the size acceptance movement, due to viewing it as predominantly White. An interesting commonality among participants was that “None of the participants indicated their parents identified as size-accepting or taught them to be size accepting” (Null, 2012, p. 162). Finally, Null (2012) stated that the analysis of her data in relation to intersectionality was limited and “lays the groundwork for future research which looks more closely at how gender, race, class, sexual orientation and body size are interrelated” (p. 160). Statements such as this have encouraged this present study which will specifically focus on fluffy women of color, in addition to being conducted by a woman of color.

### **Ethnic Identity**

An important area of literature reviewed for this study was that which focused on identity, both as it applied to ethnic identity and to body size. Ethnicity or ethnic identity, according to Phinney (1996), was defined as a sense of belonging to or acceptance of the norms, mores and practices of one’s cultural or subcultural group. Body size, as it related to identity, was described by Downing Peters (2014) as such:

While other identity markers, like religious, subcultural, or political affiliations, can be downplayed or accentuated through dress, fatness is a corporeal constant



that must be attended to and dealt with in the maintenance of an individual's unique sense of self on a daily basis. (p. 66)

Because the present study was focused on women of color, research that focused on ethnic identity in relation to body size/weight and body image appeared to be most salient for this review.

Rakhkovskaya and Warren (2014) stated "Research suggests that ethnic identity is positively correlated with psychological health for ethnic minority women, research examining ethnic identity's relationships to thin-ideal internalization, weight concerns, and eating concerns is sparse" (p. 438). Therefore, the researchers examined the relationships between ethnic identity, thin-ideal internalization, eating and weight concerns among a group of college women, including European Americans, African Americans, Latinas, and Asian Americans. Based on findings of previous studies, the researchers predicted that African American and Latinas would exhibit less of an endorsement of the thin ideal and prefer larger, curvier figures, as compared to the European American and Asian American women. The participants completed questionnaires for each of the categories examined. A quantitative approach was used to collect and analyze data, including hierarchical regression analyses. Some of the results included European Americans scoring significantly higher than African Americans on weight concerns and higher than Latinas on eating concerns. African Americans scored significantly lower than all other groups for thin-ideal internalization. The results suggested that "Ethnic identity may be a direct or interactive protective factor against eating concerns in ethnically diverse college women" (Rakhkovskaya & Warren, 2014, p. 438). While the number of participants was quite large ( $N=816$ ), they were college-age

women attending the University of Nevada. Therefore, it is uncertain whether women in different parts of the country would have similar scores and whether or not older women would score similarly. In addition, the researchers hoped the findings might lead to “culturally sensitive interventions for women with disordered eating symptoms” (Rakhkovskaya & Warren, 2014, p. 444).

Warren (2014) examined ethnic identity as it related to racial appearance among a diverse group of female college students. She highlighted previous studies that focused on race and body dissatisfaction and wished to build and expand upon those studies. The focus of her research “was to examine dissatisfaction with racially salient body areas in a sample of White, Black and Latina female college students and to test the relationship between body dissatisfaction and ethnic identity” (Warren, 2014, p. 543). She recruited two hundred and eighty-seven undergraduate female students from a large public university. They self-identified as Black, White or Latina with an average age of 18. A measure of body mass index (BMI) was taken, and the Black students had a statistically significantly higher BMI than the White and Latina students. The researcher used common instruments used to measure general body dissatisfaction among the participants, as well as an instrument that measured ethnic identity.

The findings indicated that the White and Latina students exhibited greater overall levels of body dissatisfaction than the Black students. More specifically, the Latina and White students indicated more dissatisfaction with facial features, lower body and overall body, as compared to the Black students. White students also reported more dissatisfaction with their skin compared to Black students. Yet, altogether, “Latina women reported the most dissatisfaction with racially salient appearance features”

(Warren, 2014, p. 549), most specifically their eyes and nose. The study also revealed that a strong ethnic identity predicted satisfaction among many of the appearance areas measured, including the overall body. Warren (2014) concluded with a call for continued research in the area of ethnic identity and body image, particularly as the Western ideals of the thin ideal continue to influence women and girls.

Another study focused on ethnic identity development among Latina women seemed relevant to this study, although it did not focus on body size or image. Providing a rationale for their study of Latina women, Martinez et al. (2012) stated that “identity development later in life has been addressed in the literature, but few studies have specifically focused on the developmental processes for Latinos in adulthood” (p. 191). Their study examined the influence of family and family dynamics on ethnic identity formation. They noted the importance in understanding more about identity development in Latinas, as their enrollment in educational settings has increased. The theoretical framework from which they viewed their research was that of ethnic identity theory. The researchers included background data that noted the important role that family has in the Latino culture. In order to examine a group of Latinas who had achieved a given level of education, the researchers relied on alumni and professional listservs to recruit participants. Once participants were selected, an online survey with questions about identity was distributed to them. A qualitative approach to data analysis was utilized, including the process of open and axial coding, which resulted in emergent ideas and themes.

The findings revealed that 54% of the participants stated that family dynamics influenced ethnic identity. Those dynamics included the transmission of culture through

their parents and then transmitting culture to their children. The dynamics also included how the participants made sense of their own ethnic identity while negotiating relationships with others. Martinez et al. (2012) included narrative excerpts of the participants describing their personal experiences.

In their discussion of the data, Martinez et al. (2012) noted that while early childhood experiences influenced ethnic identity, adult experiences such as marriage and motherhood also had an influence. As for limitations, the researchers noted that the online surveys as opposed to face to face interviews could have led to less of an understanding and did not allow for more probing questions. However, the use of open-ended questions allowed for narratives that described personal experiences.

### **Connections to Adult Education**

The following section provides connections between the field of adult education and this current study which focused on examining the identities of fluffy women of color. While the field of adult education includes studies related to gender issues, multiculturalism and diversity, the issue of size is rarely mentioned, except in relation to embodied learning. The discourse about women of color is even somewhat limited (Bridwell, 2012; Gonzáles & Mejorado, 2010; Joaquin & Johnson-Bailey, 2015; Johnson-Bailey, 2010, 2015; Johnson-Bailey, Baumgartner, & Bowles, 2010; Sheared, 1999). These topics were reviewed, as well as the newly emerging field of study called fat pedagogy, which does include some connections to adult education and learning.

### **Adult Education and Women of Color**

Sheared (1999) described the need for adult educators to create culturally responsive environments for African American learners who participate in adult basic

education (ABE) classes. She discussed the concept of polyrhythmic realities, which she introduced some years earlier, that referred “to the students’ lived experiences within a sociocultural, political, and historical context” (Sheared, 1999, p. 36). The intersectionality of race, class, and gender was, of course, included in this concept. Sheared (1999) described the importance of adult educators examining literature about the issues that impact their students, as well as having the educators reflect on their own cultural issues that could play in role in their relationship with their students. She also discussed “giving voice” to the lived experiences of learners, which allows them to express their differing thoughts and opinions, as well as encourages them to advocate on their own behalf. Sheared (1999) concluded by describing polyrhythmic realities as a “different way of knowing,” (p. 40) as it promotes a type of teaching and learning that is not linear and also incorporates an Afrocentric and womanist perspective.

While Sheared (1999) focused on adults in ABE classes, Gonzáles and Mejorado (2010) discussed their experiences as women of color in higher education. They described their Chicana identity in terms of the sociopolitical climate of the 1960’s and 1970’s which they experienced. When the two became scholars, they found themselves facing discrimination, having their credentials questioned, and feeling bullied by their academic peers. However, their connection with one another offered some insight into how they coped with those experiences:

As Chicana faculty we found in each other a safety net for openly speaking about issues that we were reluctant to raise with others; that safety net has provided us a means of support in an environment that has a history of marginalizing women of color. (Gonzáles & Mejorado, 2010, p. 56)

The scholars further described the importance of an open dialogue about issues that identify difference, such as race, gender, and class. They added that if scholars cannot engage in these types of dialogues with one another, how can they expect their students to do so?

Juanita Johnson-Bailey is an African American professor in the field of adult education who has written a good deal about her own experiences and that of other women in regards to gender and race inequalities (Joaquin & Johnson-Bailey, 2015; Johnson-Bailey, 2010, 2015; Johnson-Bailey, Baumgartner, & Bowles, 2010). Not only has she described some of her challenges of encountering sexism and racism throughout her life experiences, including at the academic level (Johnson-Bailey, 2010, 2015), she has also offered suggested teaching methods, such as narratives, while working with adults learners (Johnson-Bailey, 2010) in order to give the learners a different way of expressing themselves.

In the community setting, Bridwell (2012) conducted research about the learning experiences of women of color. For example, her study involved a group of homeless African American women living in a shelter, “who were regarded as marginalized by race, class, and gender” (Bridwell, 2012, p. 141). She described how women of color often “transcend the negative effects of marginalization” (Bridwell, 2012, p. 129). Within a supportive environment, some of the participants achieved transformational learning experiences which enabled them to carry their learning beyond the classroom and into their personal lives with families and communities. This also included the ability to see themselves as role models and to look for role models who represented them in society (other women of color).

## **Embodied Learning**

The connection between the way women come to know and experience their world will be explored in this section of the review. In relation to adult learning and development, a number of scholars have viewed the body as a vessel through which individuals learn and obtain various forms of knowledge (Clark, 2001; Esposito, 2011; Lawrence, 2012; Nieves, 2012; Rice, 2014).

In her research about embodied knowing, Clark (2001) specifically described the relevance of the body as a way that women come to know and learn. She discussed the time in history when a woman's knowledge about something was "somatic and emotional" (Clark, 2001, p. 84). Yet, she further stated, when the Scientific Revolution came about, the body was no longer considered a legitimate source of knowledge. However, as further time passed, Clark (2001) described how the Women's Movement gave rise to the "renewed legitimization of the body" because, she added, "one means by which women have been disempowered and marginalized in our culture is by associating them with the body" (Clark, 2001, p. 85). Additionally, she discussed how women became more comfortable speaking about their bodies, which led to an awareness that the body could be considered as a "source of knowledge" (Clark, 2001, p. 85). Clark (2001) concluded by encouraging adult educators to explore different modes of learning, such as embodiment, as they move forward in their field.

Nieves (2012) stated, "The idea that knowledge is stored in the body and can be transferred to others via performance is being birthed, in academia, as a legitimate ideology" (p. 34). She described this type of knowledge in her study about the lived experiences of second-generation Puerto Rican women, in which she attempted to

critically examine issues related to marginalization and identity. The idea of including the shared experiences with women in her study stemmed from the researcher's own experience with her sister and daughters sharing stories with one another. Her study involved collecting narratives from Puerto Rican women whom she knew and who trusted her. After collecting and reading the stories, Nieves then prepared a live performance of storytelling which culminated into a community theater project. She utilized critical race theory and critical race feminism in her analysis of the stories. She discussed the cathartic nature of the experience of performing for both her and the participants who joined her on stage. "Our bodies acted as tools to interrupt time and became the terrain where a subversive community education project flourished" (Nieves, 2012, p. 41). Nieves concluded by encouraging adult educators to embrace the idea of embodied knowledge, and in particular, to use this approach while working within the community setting.

Lawrence (2012) provided an overview of embodied learning, more specifically, intuitive learning or intuition. She described some of the different ways in which one can experience intuitive knowledge, such as through creative and/or physical activities, such as artwork, dance, and yoga. She also described how embodied knowing was related to our most primal senses, using the analogy of a baby being unable to talk, but able to feel bodily discomforts. She stated that knowledge "is present in the body before it reaches our conscious awareness" (Lawrence, 2012, p. 7). Lawrence (2012) also discussed activities that integrate embodiment, such as storytelling, dance, and theatre. She concluded by offering ideas for adult educators to include embodied pedagogy, such as



observing body language, and including body movement activities in various ways, such as protest and resistance.

Rice (2014) wrote extensively about the role of women's bodies in terms of their identity in her book, *Becoming Women: The Embodied Self in Image Culture*. With a critical feminist perspective, she interviewed a diverse group of almost one hundred Canadian women aged 20 to 45 of various ethnicities and backgrounds. She recruited women for her study through flyers and announcements shared in various organizations, including an advertisement in a national magazine. She was also careful to pay attention to cultural differences in her recruitment efforts. Rice (2014) utilized various methods of interviewing techniques, such as telephone interviews, semi-structured face to face interviews, and questionnaires. The interviews took place between 1997 and 2001. She examined the journey of girls becoming women in a culture that is filled with images of what a woman should be.

In her book, Rice (2014) claimed to utilize "a unique take on issues related to body image and embodiment" (p. 25) as she included women with disabilities and women of color, which, she stated are often not included in research. She also introduced a "body becoming" (p. 25) theoretical perspective which she referred to as a new way to analyze "women's embodiment narratives" (p. 25). Further, Rice (2014) described how women learned about how their bodies were viewed in society through their experiences in school. She described "a hidden curriculum that treated whiteness as normal and unremarkable, and bodies of colour as out-of-the-ordinary and inferior" and how this "robbed them of them of their right to develop identities in an inclusive environment that recognized their backgrounds, capacities and interests" (Rice, 2014, p. 122).

As noted previously, Remedios and Snyder (2015) highlighted that some individuals who experienced prejudice were confused as to which of their identities was targeted. Rice (2014) also mentioned that for some women “race-, disability-, and weight-related harassment often combined in ways that made it hard for women of colour and those with disabilities to distinguish which differences were being targeted for abuse” (p. 133). Also, just as Phinney and Ong (2007) described identity as a “process” (p. 275), Rice (2014) concluded that “racial identity formation is a process that begins at home and continues at school” (p. 144). Rice’s (2014) book offered a thorough account of the embodied experiences of Canadian women in terms of finding their identity within themselves and within society.

In a study that focused on a critical race analysis and embodiment, Esposito (2011) explored “how race and gender influenced the manner in which women of color negotiated their roles and promoted a culture of femininity that helped shape campus life in many ways (p. 143). She investigated how the students learned through what she called “the hidden curriculum of diversity” (Esposito, 2011, p. 144-145). She was interested in knowing more about the “informal interactions and lessons students learn regarding gender, race, difference, and power (p. 14). In terms of embodiment, the researcher stated:

The body routines employed in the production of racialized femininities must be understood as complex. They are as much sites for the inscription of hegemonic values as they are sites of critical agency, power, and pleasure. It is important that women of color be continually recognized as agents in their own lives so that

researchers do not continue the tradition of deficit thinking regarding black female students. (p. 144)

Esposito (2011) conducted a study of over 50 college aged women of color who attended a predominantly White college campus. Though, because of the large scope of this study, the researcher only discussed data from six women that she personally interviewed. She employed qualitative methods which included interviews and focus groups over the course of two years. Esposito (2011) utilized a grounded theory approach in which each step of her data collection built upon itself. Her research team continually identified themes and developed a system of coding in order to analyze the data. Similar to my study, the researcher identified herself as a woman of color (she was also Latina) and she shared some commonalities with the participants in her study, including having attended a predominantly White university for her undergraduate and graduate studies.

In her findings, Esposito (2011) described experiences that students' discussed where race appeared to be a factor in the ways that White professors and students interacted with them. The idea of embodiment revealed itself in the manner that the young women experienced their lives on the campus. Because they were women of color, they stood out and they were different from the norm (predominantly White students). In addition to standing out on campus, some of the participants felt they stood out even more so within their classrooms, particularly those who majored in traditionally male-dominated studies with classrooms filled with White males. In those situations, the participants' bodies stood out because of both their color and their gender. Thus, "feeling 'looked at' or 'stared at' because of either gender or race (or both) was a predominant issue the participants faced with which they often felt uncomfortable" (Esposito, 2011, p.

153). The students also described feelings of being ignored, or that they did not exist, which the researcher attributed to the “hidden curriculum of diversity” (Esposito, 2011, p. 144-145). The researcher found that “race and gender are embodied phenomena that affected their lives, their images of self, and experiences within a predominantly White institution of higher education” (Esposito, 2011, p. 143). Because of the experiences faced by the participants in this study, the students not only gained academic knowledge but also a keen social knowledge in terms of how they fit into their environment. Esposito (2011) explained, “Because their bodies were often used to instruct White students about difference, they did not have the privilege of being able to pretend that race and gender do not matter” (p. 155). The researcher concluded with recommendations such as support networks for women of color and social events to encourage friendships with those of different races.

A gap in this research included the age and location of the participants, meaning younger college-age women on a college campus. This current study focused on older participants who possessed more diverse life experiences.

### **Fat Pedagogy**

In the book, *The Fat Studies Reader*, Rothblum and Solovay (2009) compiled research by various authors from diverse genres to create a rich account of historical, socio-political, and personal experiences to describe the essence of fat studies. Rothblum and Solovay (2009) defined fat studies as follows:

In the tradition of critical race studies, queer studies, and women’s studies, fat studies is an interdisciplinary field of scholarship marked by an aggressive,

consistent, rigorous critique of the negative assumptions, stereotypes, and stigma placed on fat and the fat body. (p. 2)

Fat studies or fat pedagogy is a form of critical education, as various authors described some of the dynamics of power and oppression that circulate issues faced by fat individuals. For example, Escalera (2009) discussed the stigma associated with being fat and how anti-fat bias could impact how students evaluate a fat professor. She further discussed suggestions for reducing anti-fat bias in the classroom and a means of evaluating this intervention. She concluded by discussing her findings which showed some reduction of bias in the students, which she hoped would influence the students and their encounters with others in the future. Koppelman (2009) examined the extent to which content including fat characters was included in academic curricula. She listed numerous books included in varied curricula, which were often coupled with lectures that often pathologized fatness. This, she stated, was an example of how fat individuals continue to be oppressed by others—by only having negative associations related to the lives of fat people. She concluded by offering other suggested readings that offered a different perspective.

The implications of power and privilege are carried further in the book, *The Fat Pedagogy Reader: Challenging Weight-based Oppression through Critical Education*, in which Cameron and Russell (2016) also compiled a solid body of research related to body size and challenging the dominant discourses surrounding fatness. In their book, numerous authors discussed fat studies within the contexts of various educational settings. Most interesting was the section in which the authors pointed out gaps in their

compilation, as this encouraged conducting the study proposed here. For example, some of their gaps included:

(a) intersectional analyses [to] clarify how various oppressions interact in complex ways, (b) fat pedagogy needs to build on the lived experiences of those who have experienced weight-based oppression and those who have grappled seriously with their thin privilege, and (c) that fat pedagogy must raise awareness and inspire critical thinking. (pp. 254-255)

The authors concluded by calling for, and maybe even inspiring, others to continue to further develop research that educates others and challenges the construct of weight-based oppression.

### **Gaps and Trends in the Literature**

In keeping with the four major areas of research that were reviewed in this chapter, the following gaps and trends were noted. In the area related to women of size, including fat pedagogy, a number of scholars have addressed discrimination towards women based on size or weight. However, many of the participants involved in the research were primarily White or conducted by White scholars (Cameron & Russell, 2016; Donaghue & Clemitshaw, 2012; Rothblum & Solovay, 2009; Saguy & Ward, 2011). When women of color were included in studies related to size, the women were most often traditional college-age students, generally 18-25 years old (Cotter, Kelly, Mitchell, & Mazzeo, 2015; Rakhkovskaya & Warren, 2014). The studies related to intersectionality and ethnic identity also often included college-age women. In the field of adult education, there was some amount of discourse about women of color, but research about intersectionality was somewhat limited, and did not include reference to

body size. In fact, hardly any research was found about body size in the field of adult education, unless it related to embodied learning.

Because body size is part of the intersectionality equation for this study, the literature review included research about embodied learning and fat pedagogy. Research about embodied learning included issues faced by women of color in terms of their identity. The research of fat pedagogy generally examined weight- and size-based discrimination, and included a stance that embraced the use of the word *fat* to describe larger-bodied individuals, similar to how the derogatory term *queer* came to be embraced by the LGBTQ community in the 90's (Walker, 2009). That term is not used in this study, which instead uses the terms *fluffy* and *plus size*, both of which were found to be more acceptable to the study participants. This review also included studies which called for more research about intersectional analyses (Cameron & Russell, 2016) and more studies that examine how individuals respond to discrimination (Mohr & Purdie-Vaughns, 2015). An obvious gap in the literature included providing more research about adult women of color of diverse ages. Additionally, research conducted by women of color, who are more likely to possess insights grown from personal experience relating to intersectional realities of plus size women of color would also be of benefit.

### **Summary**

While there exists a good deal of research on women of color and women of size, there is still a need to focus on the intersectionality of gender, ethnicity, and body size, particularly in the field of adult education. It has only been in recent years that body size or weight has been included in the equation in terms of intersectionality. It is important to conduct research about women from all walks of life and diverse backgrounds. Fluffy

women of color could easily be adult educators or adult learners, or both, as in my case.

Chapter 3 provides a comprehensive description of the phenomenological approach used in this study, which included face to face in-depth interviews, allowing participants to use their own voices to describe the experiences that contribute to their identities of fluffy women of color.



### **III. METHODOLOGY**

This chapter describes the research framework and research methodology utilized for this study. Because the lived experiences of the participants were examined, a phenomenological approach was used in order to examine the essence of what it means to be a fluffy woman of color. This chapter additionally includes the research questions, overall research design, sample recruitment and selection, data collection methods, and data analysis. Ethical considerations, trustworthiness, and delimitations are also discussed in relation to demonstrating the rigor of the study.

#### **Research Design**

##### **Theoretical and Research Framework**

The study that I conducted was qualitative in nature. Merriam and Tisdell (2016) stated that “qualitative researchers are interested in understanding how people interpret their experiences, how they construct their worlds, and what meaning they attribute to their experiences” (p. 6). My study examined the identities of fluffy women of color. In two studies that described fluffy women (Barned & Lipps, 2014; Pearce et al., 2014), participants were asked what they thought about people who were overweight or obese, and specifically their thoughts about fluffy women. It is interesting that those studies did not seek to ask fluffy women to describe themselves, or to describe their own identities, in their own words. Utilizing intersectionality theory, this study examined issues concerning the participants’ body size, and how these issues intersect with their ethnicity and their gender through the participants’ own voices. Numerous scholars have addressed intersectionality theory and described the oppression and discrimination of individuals who possessed multiple marginalized identities (Crenshaw, 1993; Purdie-

Vaughns & Eibach, 2008; Shields, 2008; Warner & Shields, 2013). Yet, in the U.S., little, if any, has been written about the identities of plus size or fluffy women of color.

The research questions for this study were as follows:

1. How do fluffy women of color perceive themselves in terms of their identity/ies?
2. How have family and culture influenced the development of their identity/ies?
3. What positive life experiences have fluffy women of color had, in relation to their body size, ethnicity, and gender?
4. What experiences of marginalization or discrimination, if any, are described by fluffy women of color? How do they interpret such experiences, relative to their ethnicity, body size, and gender?
5. How have fluffy women of color learned to cope with experiences of marginalization and discrimination, personally and socially?

**Interpretivism.** As research employing intersectionality has a history of relating the experiences of those who possess multiple marginalized identities, an interpretive approach towards research will be utilized in order to fully understand the experiences of the participants involved in this study. According to Merriam and Tisdell (2016), “Interpretive research, which is the most common type of qualitative research, assumes that reality is socially constructed; that is, there is no single, observable reality. Rather, there are multiple realities, or interpretations, of a single event” (p. 9). For this reason, interviews were used in this study in order to capture the reality and experiences of fluffy women of color in their own words. Merriam and Tisdell (2016) further stated, “The overall purposes of qualitative research are to achieve an understanding of how people make sense out of their lives” (p. 15).

**Phenomenology.** A phenomenological research approach was utilized in this study, as Moustakas (1994) described phenomenology as being concerned with the wholeness of an experience and examining it from all points of view and perspectives “until a unified vision of the essences of a phenomenon or experience is achieved” (p. 58). In this study, the “phenomena” being examined includes the lived experiences of the participants, who have in common being self-identified fluffy women of color. Moustakas (1994) also stated that the phenomenological researcher has usually experienced the phenomenon that is being examined and therefore has a personal interest and connection with the phenomenon. As mentioned in chapter one, I identify as a fluffy woman of color and feel personally connected to this study.

A key feature of phenomenological research includes having the researcher “examine dimensions of the experience and in part to become aware of personal prejudices, viewpoints, and assumptions” (Merriam, 2009, p. 25). This process is called *epoche* (Merriam, 2009; Moustakas, 1994). Moustakas (1994) further described *epoche* as “a Greek word meaning to refrain from judgment, to abstain from or stay away from the everyday, ordinary way of perceiving things” (p. 33), or viewing the phenomenon with a fresh set of eyes. Merriam (2009), however, questioned whether or not a researcher would really be able to do that, although she mentioned that the process has become “common practice” (p. 26) for qualitative researchers to “examine their biases and assumptions about the phenomenon of interest” (p. 26) prior to beginning their study. In addition to viewing the phenomenon with a fresh set of eyes, Moustakas (1994) described the experience of the research process as “a comprehensive story that is portrayed in vivid, alive, accurate and meaningful language and that is further elucidated

through poems, songs, artwork and other personal documents and creations” (p. 19). With that in mind, multiple forms of qualitative data were included in this study.

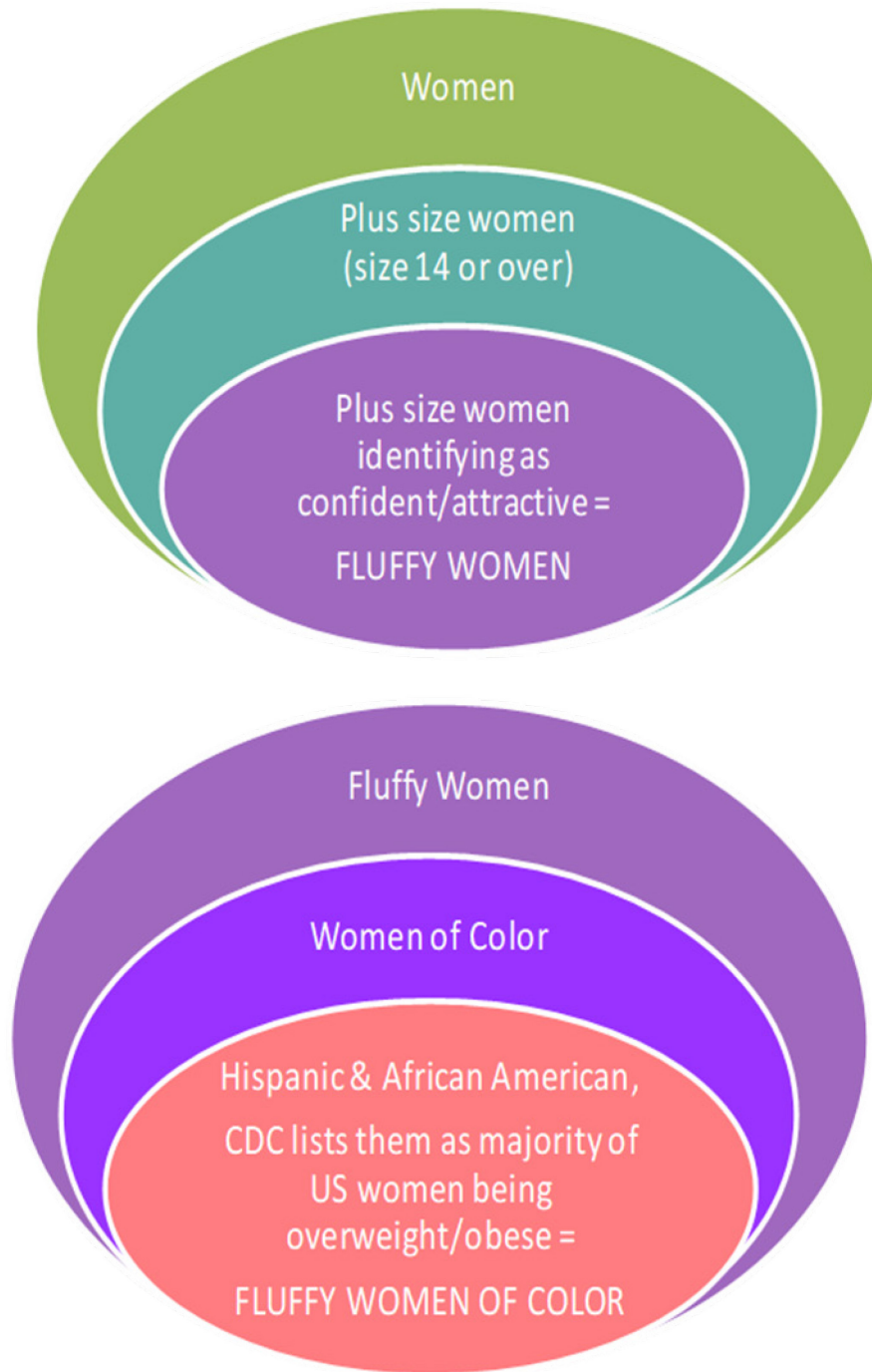
### **Research Sample**

Glesne (2016) and Merriam (2009) suggested that the selection of study participants in qualitative studies be done in a purposeful manner. According to Merriam (2009), “purposeful sampling is based on the assumption that the investigator wants to discover, understand, and gain insight and therefore must select a sample from which the most can be learned” (p. 77). As I was interested in learning more about the identities of fluffy women of color, my initial goal was to select 10 women who described themselves as plus size. Most of the literature stated that women who wear a size larger than 12, such as a 14 or above, are considered to be plus size (Bickle, Burnsed, & Edwards, 2015; Christel & Dunn, 2016). Surprisingly, some of the literature also stated that the average American woman wears a size 14 (Alexander, Pisut & Ivanescu, 2012; Bickle, Burnsed, & Edwards, 2015; Christel & Dunn, 2016). In addition to being plus size women, participants in this study also responded to the descriptors of being confident and attractive, the criteria used to identify fluffy women, as defined within weight and body size studies of women in Jamaica (Barned & Lipps, 2014; Pearce et al., 2014).

Furthermore, in order to learn more about the theory of intersectionality, and because current research addressing body size and identity issues primarily includes White women, this study included women of color. Most specifically, Latina and African American women were the focus of this study, given those groups have been identified by the CDC as having higher percentages of being overweight and obese in comparison to other ethnicities among women in the U.S. My goal was to recruit five Latina and five

African American participants utilizing various email network connections (see Appendix B), including Facebook, as a form of snowball, chain, or network sampling, a method which Glesne (2016) described as obtaining “knowledge of potential cases from people who know people who meet research interests” (p. 51). I also wanted to include women between the ages of 25-65 years old, as currently, there is a good deal of research related to identity, and weight or body size that includes young adult, college-aged women (Cotter, Kelly, Mitchell, & Mazzeo, 2015; Rakhkovskaya & Warren, 2014). As an adult educator, I was interested in hearing the perspectives of women who were not necessarily part of that young adult category.

Using email as a recruitment strategy, ten women responded and agreed to participate in the study. On the following page, Figure 2 depicts a visual of the sample selection process.



*Figure 2.* Visual of selection sample. The top circle depicts women who were plus size and considered themselves to be fluffy. The bottom circle depicts those who considered themselves to be Hispanic (Latina) or African American.

## **Data Collection Methods**

Based on Moustakas' (1994) approach to phenomenological research, participant interviews were the primary data sources collected and analyzed in this study.

Additionally, personal artifacts belonging to the participants were utilized as a means to collect another layer of data, in that they assisted the participants in describing their identities more fully. Finally, my own written observations and reflections from my researcher's journal were also included as a data source in order to add to the richness of the data collected. The experience between participant and researcher involved a process which Moustakas (1994) described as *epoche*, which is "a process of setting aside predilections, prejudices, predispositions, and allowing things, events and people to enter anew into consciousness...as if for the first time" (p. 85). The following paragraphs explain the data collecting procedures in greater detail.

### **Interviews**

In order to get at the essence of the experiences of fluffy women of color, I conducted an initial one-hour in-depth interview with each participant at a mutually decided upon location that allowed for privacy. I also conducted follow-up interviews in order to expand and confirm information gathered during the first interview, and to ask further questions that came up after initial data analysis. The locations where the interviews were conducted, and were ideally chosen by the participants, included coffee shops, tea shops, office buildings and a public library. Only one participant was unable to meet for a second time due to her very busy schedule. However, we were able to speak over the phone for the follow-up interview.

At the start of each initial interview, I reviewed a consent form which was signed by each participant. I also explained that each interview would be recorded. During the initial interviews, I gathered demographic information from the participants including a pseudonym, age, occupation, parental status, marital status, level of education and clothing size. With each initial interview, I worked to develop a rapport with the participant and engaged in a bit of small talk before moving into the questions. After the first couple of interviews, I learned to start the recorder as soon as I met the participant, as some good data emerged during some of the small talk. When I began asking interview questions, in order to gain a description of what the phenomenon means to participants (being a fluffy woman of color), I asked questions that were considered to be “open-ended and yield descriptive data, even stories about the phenomenon” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 120). Therefore, I used semistructured interviews in order to gather comparable but personally variable data from the participants. Though I began with a list of preset interview questions, I allowed for flexibility in sequence or added follow-up questions, as suggested by the flow of the interview since Merriam (2009) stated, “less structured formats assume that the individual respondents define the world in unique ways” (p. 90). See Appendix B for a list of the interview questions. Merriam and Tisdell (2016) described the phenomenological interview as such:

To get at the essence or basic underlying structure of the meaning of an experience, the phenomenological interview is the primary method of data collection. Prior to interviewing those who have had direct experience with the phenomenon, the researcher usually explores his or her own experiences, in part



to examine dimensions of the experience and in part to become aware of personal prejudices, viewpoints, and assumptions. (p. 27)

As a fluffy woman myself, I worked to separate my own feelings and thoughts to focus on the words being spoken by each participant. In doing this, I went into each interview with a fresh set of eyes and ears, and relished each experience with each participant. I felt so honored that they trusted me enough to share their stories, it became more and more important for me to share their views with the utmost accuracy.

During the interviews, I asked the participants to describe what it is like to experience the world as a fluffy woman of color. Since current literature has noted that fat or plus size women, and women of color are often discriminated against and marginalized in our society (Donaghue & Clemitshaw, 2012; McHugh & Kasardo, 2012; Linder & Rodriguez, 2012; McHugh & Kasardo, 2012; Remedios & Snyder, 2015; Saguy & Ward, 2011), I asked the participants to discuss such experiences, as well as how they have coped or responded to those experiences. While the women in the study were not only plus size, but also fluffy (they felt confident and attractive), I included questions that asked about both positive and negative experiences related to their size, gender or ethnicity. On their own, some of the single women included dating experiences that related to this line of questioning.

Additionally, I asked the participants about their own family backgrounds and cultures, and how those have played a role in their identity. Some of the current literature has suggested that women of size have received harsh criticism about their body size from family members, but that levels and forms of such criticism vary across cultural groups (Brewis, Hruschka & Wutich, 2011; Donaghue & Clemitshaw, 2012; Null, 2012;

Puhl, Moss-Racusin, Schwartz, & Brownwell, 2008; Rice, 2007). Additionally, as this study is situated in the field of adult education and learning, I asked specifically about experiences that the participants have had in the workplace or in educational settings, which, I felt, could create awareness and help influence practices within the communities of adult education and learning.

### **Artifacts**

Merriam and Tisdell (2016) stated that “the product of a qualitative inquiry is richly descriptive. Words and pictures rather than numbers are used to convey what the researcher has learned about a phenomenon” (p. 17). In keeping with that line of inquiry, while setting up the interviews, I asked the participants to bring an object or *artifact*, with them that represented who they were. “Artifacts are usually three-dimensional physical things or objects in the environment that represent some form of communication that is meaningful to participants and/or the setting” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 162). While I offered examples of items to bring such as a photograph, a drawing, a poem, a song or anything that they felt represented who they were, most of the participants appeared excited to bring something with them to the interviews. Some even brought a number of items. As LeCompte and Ludwig (2007) stated that “artifacts powerfully evoke identity,” (p. 6) when used in qualitative research, I believe that the participants’ artifacts added to the richness of this study. Additionally, Merriam and Tisdell (2016) stated “documents or artifacts have been undersused in qualitative research” (p. 180). I am in agreement with that statement, as one participant brought an entire collection of her personal writings, which revealed to me how some individuals may truly appreciate the opportunity to share pieces of themselves (artifacts) in describing their personal experiences.

## Researcher's Journal

Embarking upon my research journey, I maintained a researcher's journal in order to document my observations of the participants' interviews, and record my own reflections and experiences related to the phenomenon. Glesne (2016) suggested that it is a good practice for qualitative researchers to maintain a "research diary" (p. 78). She stated that its purpose is "to keep a record of your reflective and reflexive thoughts and emotional journey through the inquiry" (p. 78). Glesne's thoughts about the use of the researcher journal are similar to Moustakas (1994), in that she stated that the "research diary becomes a means for thinking about how the research is cocreated by you and the research participants, how actions and interactions shape what follows, and where power dynamics lie" (p. 78). Reflexivity is a term often used within the field of qualitative research. It is a process that takes place throughout the entire study that involves constantly asking questions about the course of the study, my interactions and thoughts about the interviews with the participants, and my assumptions and biases. Moustakas (1994) further noted, in regards to the process of *epoche*, "Although the process of *Epoche* requires that everything in the ordinary, everyday sense of knowledge be tabled and put out of action, I, the experiencing person, remain present. I, as a conscious person, am not set aside" (p. 87). This created a bit of a quandary for me, as I felt very much a part of the interview process, yet I knew I had to focus on the participants' experiences.

Because of that, I used my researcher's journal to describe what I saw and heard during the interviews, such as a tone of voice, a laugh, a look, or body language. In some instances, I indicated thoughts or feelings I had while interviewing the participants in

order to more fully describe the entire interview experience, as those moments cannot be recreated. Yet, I tried to be very clear in *bracketing* my own thoughts, feelings and ideas about the study participants and their experiences. I also felt that including my *bracketed* perceptions would serve to benefit me later, as part of the data analysis process (imaginative variation) includes analyzing possible meanings, in that “there is no single inroad to the truth, but that countless possibilities emerge that are intimately connected with the essences and meanings of an experience” (p. 99). Additionally, Glesne (2016) stated that critical reflection involved in the process of reflexivity may mean, that you actually “conduct two research projects at the same time: one into your topic and the other into you, your interactions and the research process” (p. 145). Therefore, notes from my researcher’s journal are included and labeled as such throughout some sections of the data analysis chapter.

### **Data Analysis**

The data analysis for this present study included collecting data from two primary sources (interviews and artifacts), and one secondary data source (the researcher’s journal). On the following page, Figure 3 offers a visual description of these data sources, along with more details about how the data were collected and utilized.

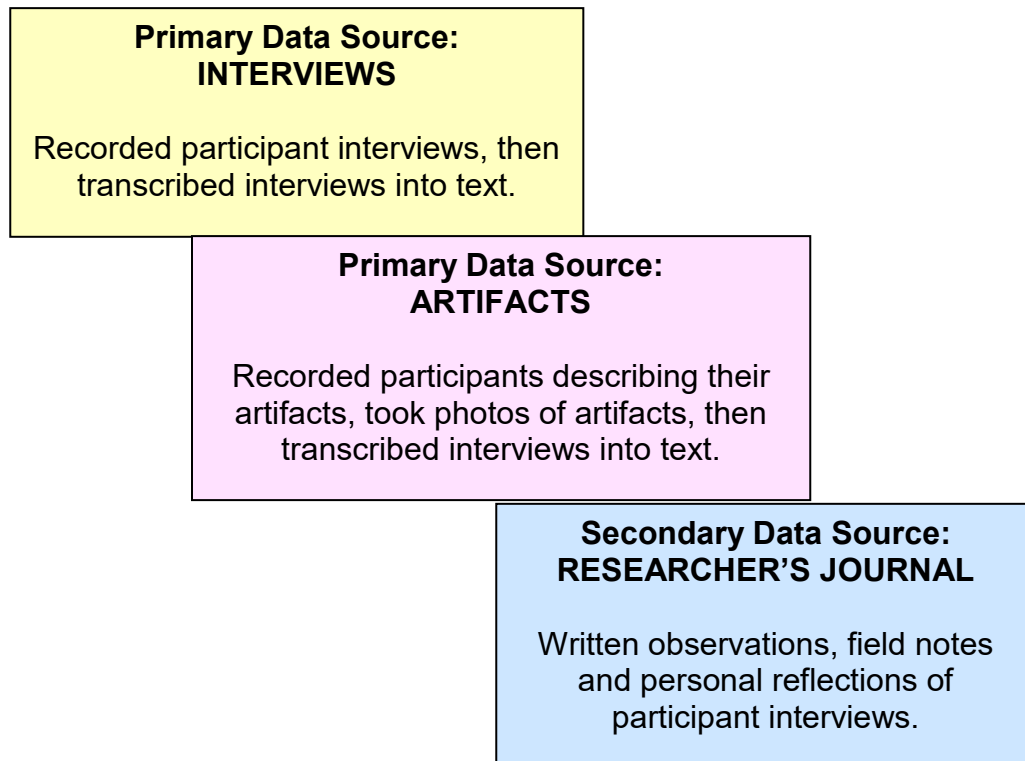


Figure 3. Data sources. Visual description of primary and secondary data sources.

In describing phenomenological research, Moustakas (1994) noted some important features which are key to data analysis. These included *phenomenological reduction*, in which:

The task is that of describing in textual language just what one sees, not only in terms of the external object but also the internal act of consciousness, the experience as such, the rhythm and the relationship between the phenomenon and self. (p. 90)

In this manner, I conducted an intensive analysis of the transcripts of the interviews, as well as the actual process of interviewing. Part of the process of phenomenological reduction includes *bracketing*, in which I worked to set aside my preconceptions about

the topic so as not to interfere with the data collected from the participants in the study (Merriam, 2009; Moustakas, 1994). Another key feature of phenomenological reduction includes *horizontalization*, in which each statement made in regard to the phenomenon was “treated as having equal value” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 97). A further key feature of phenomenological research described by Moustakas (1994) was *imaginative variation*, in which the researcher seeks out “possible meanings through the utilization of imagination, varying frames of reference, employing polarities and reversals, and approaching the phenomenon from divergent perspectives, different positions, roles, or functions” (pp. 97-98).

Data collected in this present study were analyzed by utilizing methods and procedures of phenomenological analysis, as described by Moustakas (1994, p. 118):

1. Horizontalizing the data and regarding every horizon or statement relevant to the topic and question as having equal value.
2. From the horizontalized statements, the meaning or meaning units are listed.
3. These are clustered into common categories or themes, removing overlapping and repetitive statements.
4. The clustered themes and meaning are used to develop the textural descriptions of the experience.
5. From the textural descriptions, structural descriptions and an integration of textures and structures into meanings and essences of the phenomenon are constructed.

In order to perform the first step listed above referred to as “horizontalizing,” each interview was sent to a professional transcription service to be transcribed. Upon receipt

of the interview transcripts, I converted the Word documents to pdf documents and uploaded them to NVivo, a “software that supports qualitative and mixed methods research” (<http://www.qsrinternational.com/nvivo/what-is-nvivo>). I reviewed each interview transcript a number of times in order to get a feel for the data, or an overall impression. I also compared the transcriptions to the recorded interviews and made a few word corrections that were either unnoticed or unknown by the transcribers. While reading each statement, I began to notice similarities in some of the experiences and feelings described by the participants, as well as some unique differences.

For the second step listed above, regarding “meaning units,” I began to code the data, or create “nodes” as NVivo calls them. I initially did this by utilizing the research questions and finding common words or statements, as well as make note of those that appeared to stand out from all others.

To perform the third step, after identifying codes, I was able to begin clustering certain categories of data and label them into various themes. After identifying various themes, the fourth step in analyzing the data involved utilizing an Excel spreadsheet to visually organize each theme and list textural descriptions of the participants’ experiences. These themes are listed and described in Chapter 4 of this study, in the Emergent Themes section.

For the final step of data analysis, I constructing meanings and the essence of the phenomenon by reviewing descriptions and textures within the themes and sub-themes, which included analyses of the interviews, artifacts and the researcher’s journal. These analyses are presented in both in Chapter 4 and Chapter 5 of this study. By utilizing these steps and tools to analyze the data collected from this study, I gained a deeper

understanding of the identities and experiences of fluffy women of color as discussed in the following chapters.

### **Ethical Considerations**

In order to uphold ethical considerations in regards to “informed consent, protection from harm, and confidentiality” (Roberts, 2010, p. 32), I followed the guidelines put forth by the Institutional Review Board prior to beginning the study. The purpose of the study was explained to participants, and they were assured of its voluntary nature. In order to be involved, each participant signed a consent to participate (Appendix A), which provided detailed information about their rights. They were also given the option of being assigned a pseudonym or having one assigned to them. All of the participants chose to create their own pseudonym. This helped ensure confidentiality. Additionally, in presenting demographic information about participants, as well as interview data, care was taken not to present data in a way that might allow for the identification of participants. Because sensitive topics, such as experiences of discrimination and family backgrounds were discussed during the interviews, the consent form also included information for counseling services. In addition, I assured the participants that they did not have to answer questions that they did not feel comfortable doing so. All documents, recordings, and photos from the study were labeled by codes (not names) and securely stored in my home. Only my dissertation supervisor and I had access to the research data.

### **Trustworthiness**

In the case of phenomenological research, it can be questioned whether due to the researcher’s close relationship to the phenomenon, can the study really be objective?



Lincoln and Guba (1986) (as cited in Schwandt, 2007, p. 17) stated “the interactive nature of the relationship is prized, since it is only because of this feature that inquirers and respondents may fruitfully learn together.” They further described four basic criteria for qualitative research to meet the demands for providing a study with trustworthiness. These included: “credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability” (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 300). This study incorporated many of the elements described by Lincoln and Guba (1985), in order to ensure for trustworthiness. In order to provide *credibility*, which includes member checking and triangulation, I conducted second interviews that offered the participants the opportunity to clarify and expand upon the information they shared during the first interview. At times, I exchanged emails with participants for further clarification even after the follow-up interviews. The artifacts also provided an opportunity for triangulation, as the participants first verbally described their identity to me, and then later demonstrated how the artifact(s) represented their identity. For *transferability*, which enables the reader to draw conclusions from the data, I conducted in-depth interviews with the participants in order to gather descriptive data of the phenomenon and then utilized a phenomenological approach to analyze the data. With that approach in mind, more personal information, as well as standard demographics, was included in the Participant Profiles. Additionally, actual text from the participants was examined. All of this information provided for thick, rich data. In order to achieve *dependability*, which speaks to the quality of the study, I maintained an audit trail of data, preliminary reflections of data, and more formal data analysis, and conducted myself and my procedures in a professional and ethical manner while engaging in this study. This included periodic progress meetings with my dissertation

advisor. Finally, for *confirmability*, which also includes an audit trail, I maintained a researcher's journal to bracket my own opinions, experiences, and biases, and kept them separate from the experiences and data collected from the participants.

### **Delimitations**

The delimitations of this research study include the fact that only Latina and African American, in terms of women of color, were included in this study. One reason to limit the sample to those ethnicities was because those two ethnic groups have recently been described by the CDC as having higher percentages of women being overweight/obese, or plus size, as compared to women of other ethnicities. Including these two groups also allowed for my study to examine the concept of intersectionality of identity related to size, along with identity related to race or ethnicity, including participant perception of instances of bias or discrimination. Additionally, this study only included plus size women who self-identified as fluffy, according to the definition described in recent Jamaican studies (Barned & Lipps, 2014; Pearce et al., 2014), which reflected both a sense of confidence and perception of feeling attractive. In previous research reported in the literature, fluffy women of color have not voiced thoughts about their identity in their own words but instead, have been described by others.

### **Summary**

This chapter described the theoretical framework of intersectionality, as well as the phenomenological research methods that were utilized for this study. The research questions of the study were also presented. In addition, detailed descriptions about the overall research design were provided, including sample recruitment and selection process. Also, the three data sources, interviews, artifacts, and the researcher's journal

were discussed. A description of the data collection methods and phenomenological steps for data analysis were also fully described. This chapter concluded with an examination of ethical considerations, trustworthiness, and delimitations as related to the present study. In the upcoming Chapter 4, the participants' demographics and abbreviated individual profiles will be presented. Additionally, themes emerging from the data analysis described above will also be presented, along with supporting direct quotations from participants, with an aim to provide a better picture of the phenomenon under study—the intersectional identities of fluffy women of color.

#### **IV. Findings**

As the field of adult education and learning continues to become more diverse, the purpose of this study is to inform adult educators about the lived experiences of fluffy or plus size women of color. Every person's voice should be heard. As Okpalaoka and Dillard (2011) stated, "We must learn to honor the wisdom inherent in all the experiences that learners bring to the classroom. Only then can we begin to achieve the relationship-building that is a necessity for critical conversations" (p. 73). Upon hearing from the women in this study, adult educators will be better prepared for discourses related to body size diversity, women of color and intersectionality. Thick and descriptive data were collected from the primary data sources, interview texts of the participants. This included textual data gathered from the participants' descriptions about their artifacts. A secondary data source includes text from the researcher's journal. A phenomenological approach to data analysis was utilized to discover the essence of the lived experiences of the participants. The findings of the research include a summary of the demographics of the participants, brief profiles of individual participants, and a presentation of relevant themes and subthemes derived from analysis of the data. Pseudonyms are used in place of the participants' actual names.

##### **Study Participants' Demographics**

This research study included five Latina women and five African American women as participants. Their ages ranged from 27 to 63 years old, and their clothing sizes of the participants ranged from 14 to 22. One participant noted that she wears different sizes on top and bottom. One participant had lost weight recently and let me

know what size she used to be, as well as the size that she was at the time of the interviews.

All but one of the participants had either graduated college or had completed some amount of college. The career status varied among the women from one who was just beginning her career to a couple who had achieved retirement. The participants held jobs in a variety of fields. One of the participants had worked in the past, and was now a stay-at-home mother. The relationship status of the women varied, as listed below:

- Four of the participants were married,
- Three participants were single, two of them were dating and one was in a relationship,
- Two participants were divorced,
- One participant was a widow and currently dating.

Seven of the women had children. Most of their children were teens or young adults.

The table on the following page (Table 1) depicts some of the more pertinent demographics of the participants in alphabetical order.

Table 1

*Study Participants' Demographics*

<b>Participant</b>	<b>Ethnicity</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Size</b>	<b>Education</b>	<b>Relationship</b>	<b>Career</b>
Beth	Latina	51	22	Some college	Widow, dating	Travel
BfloSldrGrI	African American	48	16	Bachelor's Degree	Divorced	Mediator
Genise	African American	60	From 20 to 14	Bachelor's Degree	Married	Social Worker
Kekino	Latina	63	16	Associate's Degree	Married	Retired, Government
Laurita	Latina	36	18-20	Some college	Single, dating	Auto/ Finance
Lupita	Latina	62	22	Associate's Degree	Divorced	Retired
Sadie	Latina	52	14-16	High School	Married	Stay at Home Mom
Sasha	African American	27	16-18	Bachelor's Degree	Single in relationship	HR
Star Gaze	African American	59	14, 2X on top	Bachelor's Degree	Married	Social Worker
Tequila	African American	35	20-22	Some college	Single, dating	Home Health

## **Participant Profiles**

### **Beth**

While emailing one another to make arrangements to meet, Beth disclosed that speaking to me about her identity would most likely bring up some strong emotions for her. I let know that she did not have to answer any question that she did not want to and that I would be as understanding as possible, as I, too, was a fluffy Latina woman. Of course, when reviewing the consent form with her, I reviewed the possibility of a counseling referral if she felt she needed to speak with someone further about her emotions.

While walking up the stairs to meet Beth at a local tea shop, I briefly wondered how I would find her as neither of us had described ourselves to the other. However, Beth approached me wearing a friendly grin on her face. Though I was a bit startled by her exuberant nature, we instantly seemed to know that we found each other. Beth mentioned that she had recently gotten a new haircut, and often tossed her hair from side to side during the interview. She had big eyes and a big smile, and I immediately felt comfortable in her presence. We sat in the very back of the tea shop where there was no one else around us. We established a rapport rather quickly. Just as she had predicted, she did become emotional and shed some tears from time to time as she spoke about her life and experiences. (Researcher's journal entry, April 22, 2017, 12:00pm)

The word that Beth used most often in describing herself was *strong*. She was raised by her grandmother and spoke about what a strong woman and role model she was. After Beth revealed some difficult times in her life, she stated:

I'm strong and there's nothing that can stop me. Single motherhood. I had an abusive spouse. I got cancer (in my twenties) and I feel like there isn't anything that can stop me from anything that I really want to do. I'm invincible.

The one thing that Beth really struggled with in speaking about herself and her identity was a physical description. I asked each participant how they would describe themselves to readers of a book about their lives. Not one participant revealed a physical description, unless I specifically asked them. They only described their personality, character traits and inner qualities. Since this study examines size, as well as ethnicity and gender, I thought it would be good for the women to have the opportunity to describe themselves physically, as opposed to other studies in which non-plus size participants were asked to describe a plus size or fluffy woman (Barned & Lipps, 2014; Pearce et al., 2014). Beth struggled with describing herself physically more than the other participants, stating, "I don't think I've ever done that." When I asked how she described herself to a man she planned on meeting for a date, she said, "I'll be the blonde in the green dress." We both chuckled a bit, as I told her that sounded like the name of a book. Then she added that it was not really necessary for her to describe herself, as the man would already know what she looked like from the dating app where they initially identified each other. During the second interview, she mentioned that she still had a hard time trying to describe herself in physical terms. Though, she finally stated, "I usually say I'm a big girl." Beth added,



though, that it did not paint a great picture of her, as she said someone could “imagine me to be six feet tall.” She finally stated, “I like to think of myself as vivacious.”

For her artifact, Beth brought a painting that she felt represented her identity. This was a painting she had created at a meditative workshop she once attended. As you can see in Figure 4, Beth painted the word *love*. She told me that although the word represented her, it was also a tribute to her late husband and how he will always remain in her heart. She stated, “In my heart, in my life, he's always going to be there.”



*Figure 4.* Photograph of Beth’s artifact. A painting with the word *Love* depicting her identity.

### **BfloSldrGrl**

I met BfloSldrGrl (stands for Buffalo Soldier Girl), age 48, in the same tea shop as Beth. BfloSldrGrl described herself as:

A woman warrior. Someone who has been through many battles but is still here to not only fight, but to teach the ones coming behind me to preserve our...

people of color, to preserve and protect our culture, our heritage, our history, and our voice.

She went on to describe herself physically as, “Tan skinned, big brown eyes. Strong in stature. Gentle in nature, but strong in resolve.” However, she, too, added that it was difficult to describe her physical traits.

I arrived a few minutes before BfloSldrGrl, and luckily the weather was pleasant enough for me to sit at an outside table which offered more privacy than sitting inside. Since we had connected via Facebook, I looked up her profile to see what she looked like while I waited. As she walked up to the shop, I caught her attention and introduced myself. Similar to my meeting with Beth, we established a rapport rather easily. The longer we conversed, the more comfortable I felt with her. BfloSldrGrl appeared to listen very carefully to my questions. She paused to think for a bit, then provided her answers in a very thoughtful manner.

(Researcher’s journal entry, June 24, 2017, 12:30pm)

As we continued to speak, BfloSldrGrl mentioned that she considered herself an activist and someone who helps defend others. Not only did she discuss various political and cultural events that were important in her life, but she also described her job, which included mediating and advocating on behalf of others.

For her artifact, BfloSldrGrl brought a photo from a book she was currently reading. It was a picture of a girl holding a book, looking up into the universe (Figure 5) which represented her identity. She described how the photo was a representation of her in the following manner:

The picture that I brought today, it's a picture of a child that's looking up at the galaxy – the stars at night. So that's one thing I always think about, that we're star dust, we're celestial beings, if you will, or spiritual beings. We're all connected. I describe myself as just part of—I'm part of everything else, the trees, the sky, the water, the moon. I see myself as just another piece of that.



*Figure 5.* Photograph of BfloSldrGr1's artifact. The photo depicts her identity. Cover Art from the book, *Astrophysics for People in a Hurry* by Neil deGrasse Tyson (2017), image from Getty's IStock.com, used under Fair Use.

## **Genise**

I met Genise, age 60, through my work connections. She and I were acquainted prior to the study, and she had expressed an interest in participating even before I began to recruit participants. When I sent a recruitment email out through my work connections, she responded immediately. When asked to describe herself, Genise stated, "I'm constantly growing. And if I was to write a book about myself, it would be

probably like a recipe, looking at something, and adding stuff and tweaking as I go.”

This recipe analogy seemed to hold true for her physical description as well. “Physically, I’m working on my stuff, physically, all the time—on my body, on my mind, on my spirit. I want my body to be in the best shape that it could be in.”

Our first meeting occurred during the lunch hour at a coffee shop. The second meeting occurred after hours in an office building. During the first interview, Genise wore a red, white and blue outfit that was stunning. She was well dressed each time that we met, glamorous, even. I believe she literally commanded the room with her confidence and style. Her outfits were perfectly matched, and she topped them off with bright and colorful bracelets, necklaces, wigs, scarves or hats, and, of course, shoes to match! Not only that, she was also extremely engaging and expressive, and shared some deeply personal experiences with me. (Researcher’s journal entries, May 22, 2017, 1:30pm; June 5, 2017, 7:45pm)

Genise had lost 50 lbs. over the past year. Knowing this, I wondered if she would still want to participate in my study, as she dropped from a size 20 to a size 14. While size 14 is considered to be plus size, I was not sure if Genise still viewed herself as a plus size woman. However, I found that Genise, as well as some other women in this study, had been various sizes throughout their lives. In the past year, Genise had worn four different clothing sizes. While she was very proud of her weight loss, it was not the end of her journey. This was due to the fact that Genise viewed herself as a role model to her daughter. She stated:

She's watching more as an adult, as a 21-year-old, than she did when she was a child. So I'm watching what I eat, now, more than I have ever done in my life.

I'm even exercising now, and that's something that I've never done.

Changing, growing, and working to improve herself—those were all words that Genise used to describe herself. In addition to that, she also revealed some of the most hurtful experiences that I heard from the participants. Yet, still she exhibited some of the greatest resilience and confidence. Genise, like some of the other participants, was also very clear that her spirituality and belief in God was a big part of what made her the person she had now become.

For her artifact, Genise told me that she could not decide what to bring at first. After some thought, Genise began describing her global hat collection to me. She then stated, “When I put them on, I’m a different person.” Then, she also revealed that wearing hats make her feel “sexy.” Below is a photo of just one of Genise’s hats.



*Figure 6.* Photograph of Genise’s artifact. This is a hat that she chose to depict her identity.

## **Kekino**

Kekino, age 63, was the first participant that I recruited for this study. She learned of this study through a recruitment email posted on a listserv of a Latina women's network. When we spoke, Kekino described herself in the following manner, "I love being a *Hispana*. I love the brown skin. I love being bilingual." At times, during the interviews, Kekino referred to me as being more "blanca" (white or fair skinned), as compared to her. She brought up the topic of skin color a few times while we spoke. At one point, she stated, "Do we go to salons to be white or black? No, we go to get tan. Tan means brown."

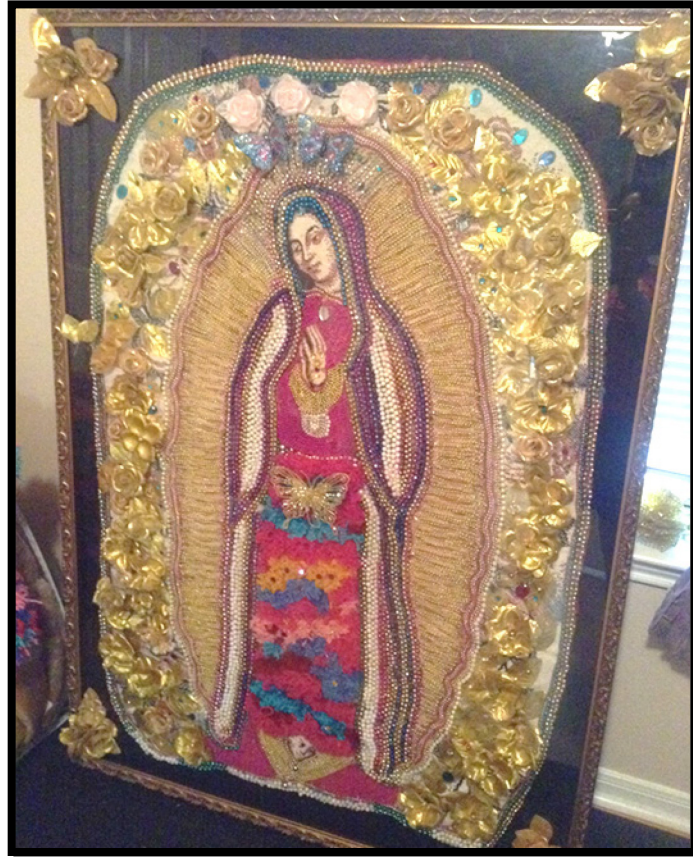
Kekino and I agreed to meet after work at a coffee shop near her neighborhood. I told her that I was wearing a pink sweater so she could find me and I sat waiting for her at an outside table. When she arrived, we hugged each other, then exchanged pleasantries. I immediately found her to be very kind and warm-hearted. I felt as though I was speaking with one of my aunts. She called me "mija" at times (a term of endearment in Spanish) and said that I was cute. She said, "mira, how cute" (mira means "look" in Spanish). Throughout both interviews, she interjected some Spanish words and phrases. Most were short and simple enough for me to understand, as I understand basic Spanish. However, I am not fluent in Spanish, and I had to ask her to explain what she had said on a couple of occasions. As warmly as she came across to me, she was also quite spirited. This came across as she described some situations when she was treated badly. She informed me that she considers situations like that to be

a challenge. She sees them as opportunities to prove to others that they are wrong about her. (Researcher's journal entry, April 5, 2017, 8:00pm)

Kekino appeared to have a great deal of pride in her culture and enjoyed talking to me about her background. This included growing up on what was considered to be the less affluent side of the city, and then eventually moving to what she considered to be the nicer part of the city. In describing her identity, she stated that she was "funny, very sensitive, caring" and the "more stable" one in her family, as she has been "married the longest." As we spoke, it became evident that her family was very important to her.

For her artifact, Kekino shared a photo with me, as the object she chose to represent her was too large to bring to our interviews. The photo (Figure 7) depicted a large painting of La Virgen of the Guadalupe (a Catholic symbol of the Virgin Mary). However, it was more than just a painting. One of her aunts had hand beaded the entire piece, meaning she glued colored beads to it one at a time. Because of the intricate work done by her aunt, this art piece was a very special treasure to Kekino. She said, "It represents my belief in myself and my family. It makes me feel like she is taking care of us and watching us. It's going to stay with me forever until I die."





*Figure 7.* Photograph of Kekino’s artifact. This is a hand-beaded image of La Virgen de Guadalupe, which Kekino stated represented her identity.

### **Laurita**

Laurita, age 36, heard about my research study through a university connection. In describing herself, Laurita stated, “Physically, I would describe myself as ... unique. I think more of voluptuous or even, I mean, I think even overweight for me is even a better word than fluffy.”

We met coffee shops for both of the interviews. When I asked her about her identity, more specifically, how she would describe herself physically, she made it clear that she did not like the term fluffy. She said it reminded her of the comedian, Gabriel Iglesias, who calls himself “Fluffy.” Laurita believed the term



is used to refer to someone who is extremely large. Upon hearing that, I felt that we may have gotten off to a bit of a rocky start. I was not quite sure she would have participated if our mutual acquaintance had not encouraged her. However, as Laurita revealed some of her experiences related to culture and dating, we discovered some similarities that we shared with one another. I felt more connected to her and believed that she, too, became more engaged in the interview process. (Researcher's journal entries, May 13, 2017, 6:30pm; June 4, 2017, 4:00pm)

It also became clear to me that Laurita's family was very important to her. She stated, "My family, parents, especially, have meant everything to me and have made me the woman that I am." While sharing her experiences with me, she often shared comments and advice given by her parents. Laurita used other words to describe, such as "passionate, compassionate, kind, courageous and sassy." As we spoke further, Laurita revealed some of the personal challenges that she has faced in her life. It became quite evident to me why she described herself as both courageous and sassy.

For her artifact, Laurita showed me a silver cross that she was wearing around her neck (Figure 8). She told me that this represented her identity because it had been given to her by her parents at a time when she had been extremely ill. While the cross was special to her for that reason, Laurita also mentioned other reasons why it was so meaningful to her. She stated:

It reminds me of who I am. It helps me with my physical identity as well. It helps me to say more positive things about myself because we are made in God's image, and if I call myself trash or if I call myself ugly or fat then I'm saying

that to God. This is just a reminder for me to speak better about myself and to know who I am and who He says I am.



*Figure 8.* Photograph of Laurita's artifact. This is a silver cross that she chose to depict her identity.

### **Lupita**

Lupita, age 62, was the older of two sisters (Lupita and Sadie) who learned about my study through my email posting on a listserv of a Latina women's network. While messaging each other, she told me that her sister may be interested in participating as well. As it turned out, they both met the study's criteria and agreed to participate in the study.

Lupita and I agreed to meet at a neighborhood library. We told each other what we would be wearing and easily found each other. Lupita encouraged me to sit outside in an area that seemed private. While the weather was great, the library

was near a train track, so the sound of a train horn interrupted us a couple of times during the interviews. Yet, we both commented that we actually liked the sound of the train horn. It reminded us of something familiar and comforting. While Lupita appeared to be a bit guarded when we first met, I soon began to feel a very special connection with her. Though we started out as completed strangers, I felt honored that she trusted me enough to share her heartfelt experiences with me. Lupita spoke in an eloquent and sensitive manner. When she described some of her hurtful memories and experiences, her pain was palpable. When she described her successes and accomplishments, her body language exuded pride.

(Researcher's journal entry, April 14, 2017, 5:30pm)

Lupita described herself as, "A faith-filled woman, strong, resilient, extrovert and introvert, loving mother, blessed mother, orphaned but not, positive, and loving." The faith and spirituality that guided her life were evident in every sentence, every thought, and every memory that she described. Lupita often spoke of herself in the third person, as if she was telling me a story about someone else. She described herself as "A fluffy woman, but she's also very pretty. She is dark-skinned. She has bright eyes, gorgeous hair," and she added, "loves to take care of herself." Lupita brought a large briefcase with her to the initial interview. When it appeared that she felt more comfortable with me, she shared one of her poems with me. Here is an excerpt from it, in which God is speaking to angels:

Look, you see that special child. She melts the coldest hearts with her smile.  
And when she looks into your eyes, she sees right to the soul of all, young and

old. You see, angels, she is a treasure, a vision, a gem, a pearl, a life with my love as her mission. (Excerpt from a poem written by Lupita)

Lupita (and I) teared up as she read the poem in its entirety. I told her how beautiful it was, and she said, “I get so emotional because that's us. We go around this world, and everybody tries to keep us underfoot, and we don't realize how special we are and how loved we are.” Lupita went on to describe how this poem had been *given* to her. In my pragmatic manner, I asked who gave it to her. She replied, “I wrote it. When I say it was given to me, the Holy Spirit, I'm his pencil. I hear the words, and then I write them.”

When Lupita first read the poem to me, she told me that she knew ‘I was meant to hear it.’ I took that to mean that maybe she felt the poem was about me.

However, when I read the poem again and then one more time, I realized that the ‘treasure,’ and ‘the child’ she described in the poem was Lupita. I was unspeakably touched that she shared that with me. (Researcher’s journal entry, April 14, 2017, 5:45pm)

For her artifact, Lupita brought a painting (Figure 9) that was very special to her. She described how it represented her in the following way:

The sunflower, to me, it represents God. It represents faith. And if you read about the sunflower, when they're growing, they will follow the sun. To me, that's a play on words. They follow the Son. And so it's a very sturdy flower. It gives us a lot. That represents me. This picture is like, everything in this picture is rejected. The sunflower is thrown away. Eh, who cares about the sunflower? The little dark Mexican girl? Eh, who cares about that little girl? Put her away.

Dark skin, you know. But look at the blessing. She's beautiful. The sunflowers are beautiful. They bless us in so many ways. So that represents me.



*Figure 9.* Photograph of Lupita's artifact. This is a painting that she felt was a representation of her identity.

### **Sadie**

When I asked Sadie, age 52, to describe herself to me, she thought about it for a minute, then stated:

A woman of faith. A woman that's been through a lot of things in life growing up –abuse, neglect. You name it. I've been through it. By the grace of God, by his strength, I've been able to survive and overcome and accepting of others no matter who they are, whatever life they walk.

Just as with her sister, Lupita, Sadie made it clear that spirituality was a big part of her identity. Sadie further added the following about her physical identity, “I’m an overweight person. Don’t judge me by my weight. I’m healthy, strong, and I’ve learned to accept who I am.” While Sadie had lost a lot of weight, she described herself physically as “fluffy,” and said that her size contributed to her being physically strong and able to “lift my dad and his wheelchair and my little sister,” who needed her assistance at different times in her life.

Sadie was Lupita’s younger sister. I met her at the same library as her sister and we were able to sit outside as well. Sadie had very dark curly hair and dressed in jeans and a t-shirt. She appeared to be a bit shy and, initially answered my interview questions with very short responses. I think there was a hesitation to trust me, for both sisters, in the beginning. (Researcher’s journal entry, April 14, 2017, 6:30pm)

Sadie opened up to me much more during the second interview. She made such kind and heartfelt statements. Again, just as with her sister, I felt a sense of honor in meeting her. In addition to sharing some of their experiences with me, both Sadie and her sister Lupita seemed genuinely interested in meeting me and connecting with me during our interviews. They asked me questions about myself, and I felt that this dialogue added to the vivid and heartfelt stories that they shared with me. At the end of the second interview, Sadie shared that she would pray for me and said:

‘Whatever the reason, the Lord wanted me to pray, it’s between him and you. I don’t know if—you seem like a very sweet person, very gentle. But if there’s

anything going on in your life, reach out to God. He's there and he loves us all.

Chunky or not chunky. He loves us all.' Sadie and I both laughed when she said that, as we both considered ourselves to be chunky! (Researcher's journal entry, June 2, 2017, 6:30pm)

Building trust and developing a rapport with Sadie and her sister, as well as the other participants, I believe, was crucial to the integrity of this study.

For her artifacts, Sadie pointed out both a ring and a t-shirt that she was wearing (Figure 10). The ring was a silver cross ring and the t-shirt is a tribute to her faith. She described the items in the following way:

I was going to bring my bible, because my life is the Word of God. So I was going to bring my bible with all that stuff. So I didn't bring it. So I brought my ring that my grandson gave me. It has the cross. My t-shirt. God, Jesus, love. Because that's what's gotten me through accepting that I am fluffy.



*Figure 10.* Photograph of Sadie’s artifact. This photo includes a t-shirt and silver cross ring, both worn by Sadie, and both items she chose to depict her identity.

### **Sasha**

Sasha, age 27, was another participant that was recruited through work connections, though she worked for a different organization altogether. Sasha was the youngest of the participants and I called her my “outlier.” Not only did she stand out due to her age, she also seemed to view some of the questions I asked differently from most of the other participants. Additionally, she did not describe as many experiences as the other participants, in part, also due to her age (and life experience). When I asked some of the interview questions, she even stated, “My life has been mainly about work and school. *[Laughs]* I haven’t lived too long.” By school, she literally meant K-12 and



college. Her current job was one of her first “real” jobs since college and she considered herself to be at the very start of her career.

Sasha and I were able to meet in the evenings at an office location after we both got off work. Sasha smiled and laughed happily much of time during both of our interviews. As with Laurita, I knew that a mutual connection had referred her to me for this study. Because Sasha’s answers to my questions were often very brief, I wondered if she really wanted to participate, or felt obligated due to our mutual connection. Though, her youthful exuberance made the interviews quite enjoyable for me. So, I felt very grateful for her participation. (Researcher’s journal entries, May 3, 2017, 7:30pm; June 17, 2017, 9:45pm)

Sasha further described herself as “A confident person who is very outgoing and loves interacting with people, loves to try new things, and enjoys life.” In regards to her physical appearance, she said, “The way I am, I feel like this size is normal and it should be the average size of an American woman—African American, (size) 16 to 18. Maybe on a good day, 16 and natural hair.” Sasha’s job was in the human resources field. She made it clear that her department, not only was very diverse in genders, ethnicities and sexual orientations, but that it was also very careful not to engage in any discriminatory behaviors. “We accept pretty much anything, and we’re all, I guess you would say, heavier,” said Sasha. Another distinction about Sasha is that she graduated from a college that is considered to be an HBCU (Historically Black Colleges and Universities).

For her artifact, young, lively Sasha brought a juice box (Figure 11). When I first saw it, I thought she brought a snack to the interview. However, she soon described how it represented her and it made perfect sense to me. She said:

I love apple juice, it's my favorite thing in the world and it's 100% real, so that's me and my personality. Honest, even when I don't need to be honest, sweet but not too sweet, which is me. This box looks like it's happy, like me.



*Figure 11.* Photograph of Sasha's artifact. A box of apple juice, which Sasha stated represented her identity.

### **Star Gaze**

Star Gaze, age 59, had an interesting background, though it bore some similarities to BfloSldrGrl, in that they were both raised in military families and moved around quite a bit. Star Gaze even lived in a different country during part of her youth. She spoke very highly of that type of upbringing. Because of all the moves, she stated that she was more adaptable and better able to get along well with others.

I recruited Star Gaze through my work connections and we met after work at an office location for both interviews. Perhaps because they took place at the end of the day, Star Gaze appeared a bit weary at times, but also seemed appreciative to

be able to share some of her experiences. In truth, she stated that she was ‘glad that people would be able to hear about what we go through.’ However, the weariness in her voice also seemed to stem from years of experiencing discrimination and marginalization, as I learned through her interviews. Yet, she also exuded a great deal of pride when describing some of her successes and accomplishments. I was very touched when hearing her personal stories.

(Researcher’s journal entries, May 3, 2017, 8:30pm; June 17, 2017, 8:45pm)

Star Gaze told me that she knew from the age of five that she wanted to be a social worker after seeing commercials about the Peace Corps on television. She told her mother, “I’m gonna be a social worker, and I’m gonna help people, and I’m gonna do all that!” She further described herself as “taking life to its fullest,” and stated that was the case even when she was a baby. She described how she was premature and her parents were told she might not survive, yet she did. So she said, “When I was young, apparently, I was already living life to the fullest according to my mom.”

During both of our interviews, Stare Gaze spoke of feeling different at many points in her life, such as being the only African American girl at her high school, having a body that seemed different than the others around her, moving around and having to make new friends all the time, and also knowing her true calling at such an early age—helping people. One time that she appeared tired or weary, she described a situation in which she experienced racism. She said, “I’m like, not this again, you know? I’ve lived that all my life, and as I’m older, I just kind of want to chill and relax. I feel like, here we go again with people.” When I asked Star Gaze to describe her physical identity, she stated, “Physically, I guess I think I’m a happy person, but I’ve noticed that now that I’m

older I can't do some of the things that I'd like to because of my body." As with some of the other participants, Star Gaze appeared a bit uncomfortable when asked to describe herself physically.

For her artifacts, Star Gaze appeared to enjoy sharing a number of items with me. She brought a little angel figurine, a butterfly and a ceramic giraffe that she had made (Figure 12). Here is how Star Gaze described how they represented her identity:

The little Black angel represents my faith. I'm a prayer warrior. I pray for anybody. I pray every day. The butterfly represents being free, and it's a pretty thing. You see a lot of butterflies flying together, and then some that don't fly with others. I feel like I'm that one—unique. And the giraffe, its brightness, and its strength.



*Figure 12.* Photograph of Star Gaze's artifacts. She felt each item represented her identity in a unique way.

## Tequila

Tequila, age 35, was one of the first participants that I interviewed. A total stranger, who learned of my research through my Facebook page, she said, “I just saw *Fluffy Women of Color* and said, ‘That’s me!’” She contacted me by my email, so I then sent her the recruitment email for this study.

Tequila was extremely expressive in the way that she spoke and interacted with me. She even mentioned having wanted to be an actress at one point in her life. She truly delighted me with her recollections and experiences. For both interviews, we met at a casual restaurant during an off hour, so it would not be busy. Also, for both of the interviews, we met at times in which she was on her way to a weight loss program for a weigh-in. Each time, Tequila was dressed very casually in cotton summer dresses. I felt more of a connection with Tequila when she mentioned her previous employer, as I had worked there years ago. Unfortunately, she described an incident that occurred there in which she had been physically attacked by a client. She was badly hurt at that job and was now working on healing, both physically and mentally. The incident she described sounded terrible. However, the more we spoke, the more I found Tequila to be quite resilient. She appeared to be a glass-half-full kind of person, not dwelling on the negative. As Tequila spoke, she sounded both sweet and spunky at the same time. I smiled quite often during our interviews. (Researcher’s journal entries, April 11, 2017, 7:45pm; May 16, 2017, 7:30pm)

When I asked Tequila to describe herself to me, it appeared that she could not wait to respond. She stated:

I am the person that people come to for advice and insight. I'm able to take constructive criticism as well as give it. So you can tell me I'm making a mistake, I'm messing up, and I'm not going to get bent out of shape. I'm going to accept it and want you to tell me how to fix it. But at the same time, if you're willing to dish it out, you have to be willing to take it back.

Tequila told me that she was currently single and dating. She described various social situations and interactions between herself and others. At one point she mentioned that she often finds that other women do not view her as a threat when she is around men that they are dating, due to her size. She also added, "I'm not intimidated by small women. I'm not intimidated by big women. I'm not intimidated by medium women." Physically, she described herself as such, "I am a bright, full figured, fun female. I like to wear bright colors. I like to be seen. I'm not too loud, but I'm loud enough."

For her artifacts, I was not surprised that Tequila brought items that related her dating life (Figure 13). The top photo is a container of lip gloss. Tequila said it represented her in the following way:

So, I'm a fresh-faced girl. I don't know a whole lot about makeup. I hardly wear makeup. But, when my eyebrows are done, and my lip gloss is poppin', that's my makeup. Like, you notice me with that lip gloss shinin'.

The bottom part of the photo shows a pair of shiny dice that represented how she felt about herself in the dating scene, "Take a chance with me. Like, I'm not the Lotto or anything like that, but open my book up. Take a chance with me. Roll the dice with me. See what I'm about."



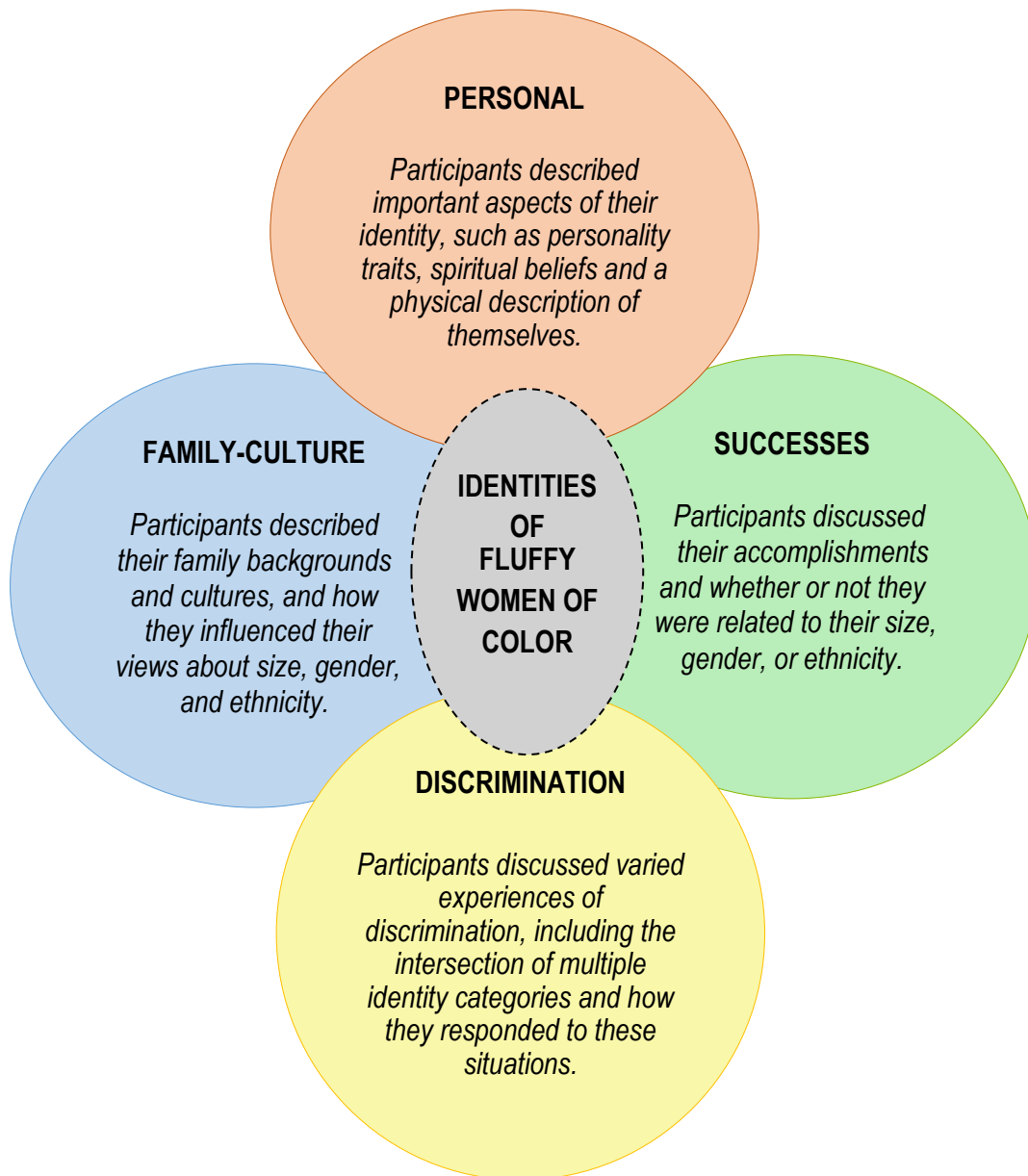
*Figure 13.* Photograph of Tequila's artifacts. The top portion shows a container of lip gloss and the bottom portion displays a pair of silver dice.

While examining the data gathered within the Participant Profiles section, it is possible to see a glimpse of what led to the emergent themes, as well as some of the sub-themes that will be discussed within the section that follows. The participants were asked to describe their identities and highlighted issues related to their: (1) personal qualities, (2) family and culture, (3) experiences of discrimination, and (4) successes. Personal qualities included discussing aspects of their personalities, strengths and spiritual beliefs. Other issues that influenced the participants' identities related to their family backgrounds and cultures. The study participants also mentioned experiences of discrimination, including the intersectionality of some of their marginalized identity categories. Finally, the participants discussed some of their successes, which included health, career, and other personal accomplishments.

### **Emergent Themes**

While the Participant Profiles section introduced the four emergent themes, this

next section examines the data more closely and offers greater details about these themes and sub-themes that were revealed while utilizing a phenomenological approach to data analysis described by Moustakas (1994). On the next page, Figure 14 offers a visual of these major themes.



*Figure 14.* Graphic representation of emergent themes. Visual depiction of four major themes revealed through data analysis.



## **Personal**

Under the Personal theme, the participants described some of their overall personality traits and characteristics. Some of these are described in the Participant Profiles section. However, during the interviews, I asked a number of questions aimed at gaining deeper insights into their identities. Because of that, additional subthemes emerged. The participants described aspects of strength, both physical strength and as an inner quality. Often, the inner strength they described was linked to their spiritual beliefs. They also described their physical attributes, including a description of their size. Also, as one of the criteria for this study was that the women considered themselves to be fluffy, which included feeling attractive and confident according to Bamed and Lipps (2014), the participants described experiences when they had those feelings as well.

**Strength.** The characteristic of strength was mentioned by Beth, Sadie, and BfloSldrGrl in the Participant Profiles section. Beth repeatedly used the word “strong” to describe the inner strength she utilized to survive difficult times in her life. She also referenced the “strong” women in her family and credited them for passing that trait down to her. Sadie and BfloSldrGrl used the terms “strong” or “strength” in describing both physical and inner qualities that they each held. While Sadie’s physical strength is noted in the Participant Profiles section, she also stated that God has given her “the strength that I need to get through all the ugliness that people throw at me.” Also noted in the Participant Profiles section, BfloSldrGrl used the word “strong” to describe both her stature and her inner resolve. Laurita described how her parents have taught her about being strong, “So I’ve been through... just a whole bunch of different things that I’ve had to overcome. And so I feel like they have taught me strength through

everything.” Star Gaze also described her “strength” while discussing her artifact in the Participant Profiles section. She related that characteristic to feeling strong physically, as well as her inner qualities. She stated, “I’m strong willed and have a strong self-esteem.” Lupita described the physical aspect of being strong and how she has been stereotyped due to her size. She stated, “I led aerobics classes off and on throughout my life for years and years and years. It’s like, don’t assume because I’m heavy that I’m not strong or I’m not healthy.” Genise shared with me some terribly hurtful experiences in her life, and then described how they made her a stronger person:

That’s why I’m as strong as I am. You just practically have to run over me with a Mack truck because I’ve been run over a couple of times. So, please, you telling me that you hate me. Join the group. Bitch, get in line. We want you to quit. We want you out of here. Leave. I’m not going anywhere. I’m not going anywhere especially because you want me to. It’s like get in line.

That mention of strength described by Genise leads right into another form of strength described by many of the participants.

**Spirituality.** For some of the participants, inner strength was linked to their faith in God or spiritual beliefs which also influenced their identities. For example, BfloSldrGrl described how her spiritual evolution has helped her with decisions in her career and stated:

So from a spiritual perspective, I identify as a Christian. But I also study other religions, and other, like, yoga or meditating, sacred geometry, things like that because I believe it’s all connected. It’s just a different expression of the same thing.

The artifact that BfloSldrGrl brought, a photo of a girl looking up into the universe, also related to her spirituality and universal feeling of connectedness. On more than one occasion, Genise stated that the only way she was able to make it through challenging times in her life was because of her deep faith in God. For example in describing an experience in her workplace, she stated “It was one of the hardest things that I had to deal with, but I made it through by the grace of God and nights of crying.”

Similarly, Kekino described the importance of her artifact, a tribute to the Virgin Mary, and how it represented “belief in myself and my family.” Her faith is an important part of her identity as she mentioned when describing to me how her mother taught her how to pray in Spanish. She further shared that every time her children visit her, she tells them, “May God bless you and may he show you the light along the way.” Laurita also spoke about her faith in God a number of times when describing how she handled various situations in her life. Early in our first interview, she made the following comment about her parents, “They’ve also taught me how to have faith, which is a large part of myself.” This was validated by the silver cross that she brought as her artifact, which was a gift from her parents.

In similar fashions, Lupita and Sadie both described how influential their faith in God was in regards to their identities. Lupita stated that she was a “faith-filled woman” and spoke of God frequently during our interviews. Sadie described herself as a “woman of faith” and described the role spirituality played in her life many times as we spoke. With both participants, the artifacts they shared with me were also closely related to their faith, including Lupita’s poem and painting of a girl looking up to the sun (or Son), and Sadie’s cross ring and spiritual t-shirt. Star Gaze also referenced how important a role

spirituality played in her life as she described one of the artifacts mentioned in the Participant Profile section.

**Physical identity.** When the participants were asked to describe themselves as the main character in a book about their lives, not one of them included a physical description until I specifically asked them to do so. Below, Table 2 illustrates some of the actual words and comments that the participants used to describe themselves.

Table 2

*Words and Comments Participants Used to Describe Themselves*

BETH	BFLOSLDRGRL	GENISE	LAURITA	KEKINO
<p>Vivacious Big girl</p> <p><i>I'm the blond in the green dress.</i></p>	<p>Tan skinned Big brown eyes</p> <p><i>I consider myself a fluffy person.</i></p>	<p>Plus size woman</p> <p><i>I've always thought I was beautiful.</i></p>	<p>Voluptuous Overweight</p> <p><i>I would describe myself as, still, unique, but I wouldn't categorize myself as fluffy.</i></p>	<p>Fluffy</p> <p><i>I feel real happy that I'm not having to stay skinny, go hungry to make somebody else like me, because I'm plus size.</i></p>
LUPITA	SADIE	SASHA	STAR GAZE	TEQUILA
<p>Fluffy Okay, healthy looking</p> <p><i>I was a very small woman. So, versatile, I'm very versatile when it comes to physical.</i></p>	<p>Overweight Healthy</p> <p><i>I'm constantly reminded of my fluffiness.</i></p>	<p>Plus size</p> <p><i>The way I am, I feel like this size is normal, size 16-18.</i></p>	<p>Solid</p> <p><i>Bigger people - maybe that's how we are supposed to be, could be because of illness, or something else.</i></p>	<p>Full figured</p> <p><i>And I ask you, like, 'I'm big. I'm not small. Here's a full body. Are you still interested?'</i></p>

The participants did not use the word *fat* when describing themselves, except when using it in a negative manner, primarily when describing being made fun of or put down by others.

**Fluffiness.** In recruiting participants for this study, one of the criteria included that the women considered themselves to be “fluffy.” The description of *fluffy* included characteristics of feeling confident and attractive, as noted by Barned and Lipps (2014). The following participant statements related to that description.

Beth likened the term *fluffy* to the way a peacock will “fluff themselves” and stated, “I’ve never felt like I try to blend in. I feel really good when my hair looks good. I love shoes. And I still wear heels, which is ridiculous, but yeah, I feel any time I put on a pair of high heels, I feel super attractive.” Beth offered an example of her confidence when she described what she says to men while dating online, “You’re not going to find someone better. I’m the whole package. I’m going to be your cheerleader. I’m going to be your shoulder to cry on, the whole thing.” BfloSldrGrl described feeling confident and attractive on certain occasions. She described how the Black community presents debutantes during the fall social season. Each year, she enjoys dressing up in a formal gown and feels attractive. She also described how she enjoys attending conferences and dressing up for the social hours. She has told people, “Do you see me today? I’m comfortable, I’m relaxed. I’m not wearing makeup. Tomorrow, I’m going to look like Diana Ross.” BfloSldrGrl also described feeling very confident in her skills including, ballroom dancing, cooking, and “defending someone” in her job.

Genise described how she feels attractive “in the morning when I get up and at night, and especially when my husband tells me how sexy I am—and that’s almost every

day.” Genise spoke about being confident at any size and said that she is just as confident as the smallest size woman in the room. She said, “No matter what size, she [a woman with confidence] can do whatever she wants.” Kekino initially described feeling attractive “when I get out of the shower.” She chuckled, then she added, “After I finish exercising. You could see the difference when you finish exercising. For some reason, you feel all, you know, the energy that you get after you exercise. I feel good.” Kekino added that she also feels confident when hanging around other women who are educated and take good care of themselves. Laurita stated, “Like, I always think I’m cute, you know, but I think I feel attractive. I think my boyfriend makes me feel attractive. When he’s hugging me or touching me or holding my hand, I feel very attractive.” She also added how she used to try too hard to *look* attractive versus *feel* attractive. Now, she “doesn’t wear make-up anymore and dresses more comfortably,” she said. Like Beth, Laurita also mentioned the dating scene and said that she “knew what she was worth” and that she “is confident” in everything that she does.

Because Lupita was brought up in a shame-filled environment, she stated that she did not feel comfortable with the word *attractive*. Physically, she squirmed a bit when saying the word. She said she preferred the word *pretty* and stated, “I feel like I’m pretty. And more than anything, I love people. And I think that’s what’s attractive is the way that I treat others and the way that I treat myself.” In describing her confidence, she listed skills such as facilitating parent groups, coordinating parenting programs, serving the community and being a mother. “I was very adamant, very confident, very sure of what I wanted for them and what I didn’t want for them as a mother,” said Lupita. Sadie described how she has felt receiving compliments from others, even younger men. She

said, “That really made me feel good being fluffy. That there's people out there ... not just looking at your weight. They're looking at you. They're looking at your beauty. So that's made me feel real good and confident.”

Sasha told me that she feels attractive every day. “I feel attractive as a person because I take time to make myself up and dress up sometimes. I just feel attractive when I’m walking and someone might glance at me twice and I’m like, ‘Yes!’” She added that she “takes selfies all the time!” Sasha mentioned feeling confident by not allowing her size to dictate what she wears. She also said that she shows confidence because she feels “okay to joke around with people about weight.” She said, “I realize that I’m plus size, I’m obviously not blind.” She added, “I accept it and I let other people know that you don’t have to watch what you say. Just asking that you don’t judge me for something.”

Star Gaze described how she learned over the years that being attractive was more than her looks. “It’s what you have inside of you. I think I can be attractive from the inside-out.” In regards to feeling confident, Star Gaze described how she does not let others’ perceptions affect her. She said, “I think people, like, they would get mad because I felt confident or they felt that I thought I was better or something, and I’m, like, I’m taking care of myself and feeling good for me. If it happens to affect you, that’s on you.” Star Gaze also had two very positive role models in her life. Her parents both contributed to her “having a high self-esteem and self-confidence,” as she stated she observed those qualities in both of them. Tequila stated that feeling attractive involved “getting a brand new outfit, having my hair combed just the way I want it, and having my eyebrows done.” She added “When you feel attractive, other people treat you better.

When you don't feel attractive, you don't get noticed. You don't get seen. People kind of, just like, pass over you." She added, "Confidence is the way you carry yourself. For me, I definitely define myself as confident."

Within the Personal theme and sub-themes, the participants described a number of factors that influenced their identities, which included aspects of strength, both inner strength and physical strength, spiritual beliefs, perceptions about their physical identities and what it means to be considered a fluffy woman. While the participants mentioned a variety of ways to describe their physical identity, they did not use the term *fat*. Additionally, it was evident that inner strength and spirituality were very important parts of their identities. This was also apparent through many of the participants' artifacts. Finally, while some of the participants struggled to find the right words to describe their physical appearance, they all appeared to consider themselves confident women, though the term *attractive* seemed to be more subjective and held different meanings to some of the participants.

### **Family and Culture**

The following section of data findings includes experiences related to the participants' family backgrounds, culture and gender norms. Many of these experiences related to body size.

**Family backgrounds.** Some of the participants described positive family experiences, and others described more challenging experiences. For example, Genise stated that her mother "always told me how beautiful I was and how, if I put my mind to anything, I could get anything that I want, and I've always believed that." Kekino also described positive experiences involving her mother, such as:



My mother, when she was alive ... she would tell me exactly if I looked real nice. And I used to say, 'Mom, am I too heavy?' And, 'Do I look too heavy?' She goes, 'No, no, mija. You look so cute. That's such a pretty outfit. Oh no, you look so nice.

Other participants, such as Laurita described both parents, "My mother made sure to teach my siblings and me to try to treat everybody like family. Your friends and your family, everyone's your family, love everybody, to be very compassionate. And my father is just very strong." Sasha described having a bad experience in elementary school in which her parents were very supportive, "so I brought it to the attention of my parents and we talked to the principle" and the issue was resolved. Star Gaze described her close relationship with her mother, viewing her almost as a sister. She added that her dad was also very supportive and encouraging. She remembered a time she got a bad grade and wanted to drop out of a class. Her father, who was in the military, said, "Sometimes you're not always going to make it." Star Gaze said, "He encouraged us to keep... if you fall down, you get back up and you try harder." BfloSldrGrl also had a father who was in the military and described her family background as a male-dominated, Southern Baptist home. She stated that while her parents were strict, they were supportive and "really reinforced spirituality with the church."

The participants who had challenging family backgrounds described some of the following experiences:

Tequila received some confusing messages from her family in regards to her body size. "My mom's side of the family, 'Embrace it. You're cute. You're fluffy. You're fat. So what?' My dad's family, 'You need to lose some weight. Something is wrong.

You've got a problem.'" Beth faced many challenges growing up, including watching her mother leave and return to abusive relationships. While she did have a grandmother who doted on her and made her clothes, she also remembered older women in her church telling her how much prettier she would be if she lost weight. Lupita and Sadie, though sisters, started out being raised in different families, yet both experienced many painful challenges. Lupita described what she was told, "So keep your mouth shut and work hard. But no matter how hard you work, it's never good enough." She was also taught "to be very ashamed of her small waist and big behind." Sadie made the following statements about her family, "I was made fun of, teased so much. I always wanted to hide. Like, oh my God, I'm an ugly little girl. I need to hide from the world."

**Cultural influences.** Beth grew up in a small Hispanic community with her grandmother being her role model:

I think that Hispanic women, and I'm not trying to say less of any other culture group. I think that we're just stronger. And for me, I grew up with the strongest woman in the world [her grandmother]. Years later someone tried to insult me by telling me that I was just like her, 'that you have to have the last word' and whatever. And it's like, 'you say that to insult me, but to me, it's not an insult.'

Beth was the oldest in a family of all sisters. She described her younger sister as being smaller in size and more popular, but added, "I always felt like, later, I thought she was weak because of it. Because what happens when you lose your cuteness and your skinny[ness]?" After speaking further about how she saw her grandmother work so hard cleaning laundry for all the White women in town, Beth added, "I didn't know that I

didn't have to always be so strong." BfloSldrGrl recalled experiences she had growing up as an African American teenager:

My close friends, as we went through puberty, Black women, most of us tend to... you get a butt, you start filling out pretty quick. And then most of us were athletic, so we were plumped up more. We weighed more. We couldn't wear the regular clothes that the other girls... I remember wanting to wear Levis, but my thighs were too big. I wasn't an average size. I mean, I never saw women that looked like me.

BfloSldrGrl said that she often ended up buying clothes that were oversized and had them altered, and added that her mother often made some of her clothing. Genise identified herself as a Black woman and when asked about her culture, she said the following:

I think my mom, for me, has played a huge role in the woman that I am today, a big role in who I am, and especially being a plus size woman. I never saw myself as being different from a woman who was a size two or a size four.

Genise constantly described what a powerful and positive influence her mother had on her identity.

Kekino described her culture in various ways, including Mexican, Hispanic and Latina. According to her, she was raised in a Catholic home where women and men's roles were very traditional. She added that she attended catechism (religious classes) to teach her right from wrong. She spoke fondly of both her mother and father. While some members of her family commented about her size at times, Kekino believed they only did so in loving ways and out of concern for her health. She also recalled others speaking positively about her appearance. She said that she was very shapely in younger

days, and some people called her “guitarra,” (a Spanish word to describe her guitar-like figure). Laurita identified herself as Mexican. She mentioned that growing up in that culture, “You are very respectful. You are very kind and your family is number one.” Yet, she also described how “Mexicans don’t eat right. It took me a long time to understand that how my family eats is not correct.” In terms of Laurita’s body size, other issues have also had an impact. She has been dealing with a serious health matter that has contributed to weight gain and has also caused concern as to whether or not Laurita will be able to have children in the future.

Lupita also identified herself as Mexican. In the first family she grew up in, her midwife became her mother who “instilled in me such a confidence and such a love for God.” Later, however, she went to live with another family where she was taught to be ashamed of herself, her body, and her skin color. Sadie referred to herself as both Mexican and Latina. When she spoke about her culture, she stated:

I think the Latinas, the Latina women are so ... I know I was brought up to, you don't take care of yourself. You don't tend to yourself. You've got to take care of the family. Take care of your husband. You don't need to worry about how you look. You're married. So I think that has a lot to do with being Latina and the way we were raised, the older generation.

Sadie added that she believed the younger generation of Latina women take better care of themselves as compared to women her age.

Young Sasha described her culture as African American and stated that her culture has had more of an influence on her identity than her size. She stated, “My culture played more of a role in identifying who I was as a person.” She added that

attending an HBCU helped her learn “about what it is to be Black.” Sasha further stated, “We don’t have to define ourselves, or let Africa define us, or let America define us. We just kind of are who are. We’re individuals.” When Sasha did speak about being a plus size woman, she noted that there were “various body types in her family.” She added, “In my culture, with my family, [being plus size] it’s not something that’s looked badly upon.” Star Gaze identified herself as a Black woman. She stated that she does not call herself African American because she was not born in Africa. However, in addition to being Black, Star Gaze also grew up in a military culture which had an influence on her. She found herself having to adapt to different locations and different cultures. Sometimes, her family would move to a location in which they were the only Black family in the midst of White families. Star Gaze remembered feeling frustrated “because my body shape was different.” She mentioned almost the exact same experience as BfloSldrGrl in regards to not being able to find jeans to fit her body. She also recalled being bullied and teased because of her size and, in particular, because of her larger bust size. Star Gaze added:

I just remember people saying that we had weird shapes, that Black people had weird shapes. I remember going to school and stuff, people would talk about stuff. I experienced a lot of prejudice when I was growing up because we traveled to different places, so every place had a different version [of prejudice].

Cultural experiences had different meanings to each of the participants.

Tequila did not speak as much about her African American culture. Instead she spoke more about growing up in a culture that was very critical of one’s body size. “My dad's side of the family? They all have problems with fat people, overweight people.

Like it's contagious, like they're going to get it or something.” Tequila also described what one of her relatives said in regards to plus size individuals. She said, “No fat people, no fluffy people, no nothing. You shouldn't even look like you're overweight, or getting there at all.” She also mentioned that growing up, “People were always trying to put me on a damn diet.” After being treated in such a way, Tequila stated:

If I had a child who was a little bit chunky, I'm not going to deprive my child of anything. However, if there's some cake, maybe your slice won't be as big as your siblings. Maybe it'll be a bit smaller, but you get cake.

She made that statement after recalling how badly she felt when deprived of certain foods as a child.

**Gender norms.** When discussing family and cultural experiences, some of the participants noted some very different ways in which females and males were treated. BfloSldrGrl recalled her grandfather telling her “You’re eating too many starches. You need some green stuff. You’re going to get heavy.” It was a different story for her brother. She said, “He was always the chubby kid. They thought that’s cute. Yeah, eat some more. He’s a big guy, they thought, he’ll be a football player.” Genise stated that the men in her family never made comments about the size of women in her family. “They wouldn’t dare,” she said, and added that the men in her family were "nervous or scared of the women in our family."

Kekino mentioned that women played a key role in her culture. She stated that whenever she passes away, the family’s precious artifact that she currently possesses would not be given to either of her two sons for safe keeping. Instead, she stated that it would be given to other female relatives. Kekino said, “No, I’m going to keep it with the

girls. The women are probably going to take better care of it.” Though Laurita’s parents have been accepting towards her regarding her size, she felt that they have been a bit hard on her brother. Because he is heavy, they have encouraged him to lose weight. Laurita stated, “They’re ready for him to carry on the name. They’re wanting him to find a wife, have children.” Due to Laurita’s health issue, she stated that she may not be able to give her parents any grandchildren. So, her parents seem to treat her brother differently.

Lupita also described men being treated differently than women in her family. “They were valued more and their size never really came into play. I had some big uncles. No one ever made fun of them. They were considered strong.” Sadie, Lupita’s sister, recalled something similar, “I only had one brother that was a little husky. He was considered strong... muscles.” Tequila stated, “Nobody ever talked about men being heavy, probably because I’ve never seen any men on my mom’s side of the family that were heavy.” Yet, she added, “No one talked about men on my dad’s side of the family that were heavy. The focus was the ladies.”

Within the Family and Culture theme, family backgrounds, cultural influences, and gender norms were discussed by the study participants in terms of how those factors had an influence on their identities. A notable (though not new) finding included how a number of the participants spoke of the different ways that females and males were treated in regards to their body size. Some of the participants spoke of supportive family backgrounds and positive cultural experiences. Others noted less supportive environments, such as being teased or standing out from others due to their size or skin color. There did not appear to be noticeable differences between Latina and African

American families. Both groups included positive and negative supports. All of these findings lead us to one of the next themes that emerged from the data.

## **Discrimination**

The participants were asked about feelings or experiences discrimination, prejudice or feeling marginalized, as Mohr and Purdie-Vaughns (2015) discussed how “little is known about how people with intersectional identities themselves perceive and respond to discrimination,” (p. 392). Each participant described at least one experience in which they felt discriminated against or marginalized. At times, these experiences related to only one of the identity characteristics being examined in this study, yet often the discrimination involved the intersectionality of multiple identity characteristics. These sub-themes include the three identity categories that this study is based upon (size, ethnicity, and gender). However, other sub-themes emerged, such as colorism, intersectionality, responding to discrimination, and comments about the ways in which plus size women are portrayed and *should be* portrayed in the media.

**Size.** In her workplace, Beth described a situation in which she regularly works later hours than another woman in her company. However, when the company hosts happy hours, the other woman is asked to work late in order to host the happy hours. Beth has not been asked to do so, even though, she is already there. Beth stated she believes it is because the other woman is “skinny and younger.” BfloSldrGrl described how her boss, a woman of color, does not treat her well. She stated:

I consider myself a fluffy person, and I never have let that stop me from being outgoing, or dressing nice, or doing my hair, doing nails, doing makeup when we have functions and when we present at different things. And I can feel the



jealousy [from her boss] behind that.

BfloSldrGrl stated that her boss says that she is an empowering and supportive manager, but BfloSldrGrl does not feel any of that from her. Genise described how she has been told that people feel intimidated by her in the workplace. More specifically, she stated, “I find that a lot when I got supervisors that are little White women.” She told me how one White female supervisor had suggested she change her hairstyle, stating that Genise looked more approachable when her hair was curled rather than straight. The supervisor added that she might appear less intimidating with curled hair. Genise stated, “That’s so strange. Her hair is straight. She was the one who was intimidated by me. It had nothing to do with my hair, but because I was a big woman.”

Lupita described a couple of situations that occurred in the workplace related to her size:

But in the most recent job that I had for quite a few years, it got back to me that I was so unprofessional looking because of my weight. Yeah, because of my weight. So, most definitely, I've had people assume that I can't move, that I'm not fast enough.

Lupita added that she has been strong and active all of her life in spite of the fact that she is a plus size woman. She described another situation in which she applied for a job with a chiropractor, and he did not hire her. Sometime later, she visited him for his services. After some months passed, he ended up telling her "I'm so sorry I didn't hire you. I think you were the right person. I held back because of your weight." He added, "That was my mistake. Will you consider the job now?" Lupita said, "Thank you, but no thank you."

As with other topics, Sasha's take on size discrimination was a bit different than some other participants. She stated "Being plus size is actually pretty easy. Being African American is a little difficult." However, she added that because of her confidence, she does not mind if people make jokes about weight at her workplace. She said:

I realize that I'm plus size, because sometimes they don't want to say certain things, don't want to offend you and it's not a big deal. I'm obviously not blind [smiling]. So I accept it, and I let other people know that you don't have to watch what you say. Just asking that you don't judge me.

Because Sasha said she did not mind if people make jokes about weight, I asked her for more clarification about her thoughts on this topic and she replied with the following:

Recently, we had a situation where someone was making fun of another associate's weight. This bothered me because I don't think it's ever appropriate to make someone feel less than. Our bodies change daily and shouldn't have an impact on how someone is viewed by others. Making jokes about weight is different from making fun of someone because of their weight.

She went on to say that "playing around with stereotypes and making general statements about weight is all fun and games." Though, she clarified that directly making fun of an individual is not okay with her.

In addition to workplace discrimination, Beth and Laurita described social situations in which they felt discriminated against or marginalized due to their size. Beth mentioned that she has heard that "men think because you're a bigger girl, you're up for anything, like sexually." However, she added that she can sense if that is what is going

on upon having a conversation with a man, and she will put a stop to it. Laurita added, “I think the main challenge that I have had all my life has been my dating. It’s hard to date when you’re a certain size.” She discussed how society usually views thin women as the only ones who are considered attractive. She then added:

The men that did find me attractive treated me like a piece of meat. Like I should be thankful that they took me out. I would get yelled at if I didn’t put out on a date because they bought me dinner.

Laurita even went on to apologize to the man for maybe having given out the wrong signals. She then told me how “disheartening” it has been for her to deal with “the rejection that I felt from men.” She did reveal her sassy side when describing how she has been told by men, “Well, you’re lucky I took you out for dinner.” And she quipped back with, “You’re lucky I went out with you!”

Finally, in regards to size, before Sadie had lost over 100 lbs., she described an incident when she took her 5-year-old child to see the doctor. She said that when the doctor came into the examination room, he completely ignored her. He only spoke to her son—a child, and never even addressed her. She stated:

No, I don't deserve to be treated like that. I don't need to be disrespected like that. I'm not the only overweight person in the world. And I'm sure I'm not the only overweight person he has come in contact with. So I stopped. That was the last visit that I had.

Sadie said the doctor had treated her that way during previous visits, and she chose to overlook it. This time, she had enough and decided not to use that doctor anymore.

**Ethnicity and race.** It was noted in the Participant Profiles section that

BfloSldrGlr believed that she was hired because she “fit the diversity mold.” Also, she had not been feeling that she was being treated well at her job for some time. During our second interview, she informed me that she had “finally stood up for herself” and had filed a complaint with the human resources company for a number of discriminatory practices that she believed she had been experiencing. Genise also described co-workers in her current workplace treating her poorly by not giving her the same opportunities as others to speak at meetings or not even having a chair for her at meetings. She believed this was due to her skin color and stated, “They never had a person of color in that department. They did not want me there and they were going to do everything in their power to not have me there in that department.” She added that though the team met with human resources, not many changes took place.

Racial or ethnic discrimination impacted some of the other participants in other settings as well. When Kekino moved to a nicer part of the city into a new home, she accidentally set off the alarm. She was busy unpacking when a White policeman arrived. She heard him speak into his radio, “I’ve got a middle-aged female, Hispanic, appears to be the maid service approaching the door.” He was very rude and asked her for her ID in her own home. She told me that she asked him questions, and he just ignored her. She felt so angry, she told him that she was going to report him to his sergeant, and she wanted to say, “I’ll have you know, we own three houses!” Sasha remembered a teacher who wanted to hold her back a grade in elementary school. She did not understand why, as she was a straight A student. Then, she noticed that the only other African American children in the class were also going to be held back. Even at that young age, she thought, “Why is it just us? It was a little racism going on.” Fortunately, Sasha’s parents

intervened and remedied the situation. Yet, the other children remained in the same grade. Sasha added that the teacher was not there the next year. Tequila, who moved to central Texas recently from a northern state, stated she was just walking down the street when some folks drove by her and yelled out, “You nigger!” She recalled thinking to herself, “Oh, you’re real bold, because Trump is your president now.”

**Gender.** Beth described a situation in her workplace that involves a man who seems to talk down to all the women there. “There’s a guy in our office that talks down to women, but to me, it’s not a thing. I bite his head off anytime he comes in. I usually retaliate.” BfloSldrGrl described being the only woman of color who covers a large region in her job. She said, “Then there’s times when we have functions, people will make comments and they tend to be a little freer with me in saying inappropriate things. I’m talking about men.” She also added examples of how they treated her:

‘You sure look like nice.’ Things they wouldn’t say to another man or even another woman in a professional setting. Or they’ll want to buy drinks, or they’ll just test you to see if you’ll go out with them. Yeah, totally in my mind, inappropriate for workplace.

BfloSldrGrl stated that men seem to think they can treat her differently, as she is the only female in her region.

Laurita reported that she works in a male-dominated field and recently learned that she makes a lot less money than her male counterparts. She added that she hopes it is because they have more experience and said, “But I work very hard, and I’m just one of those kinds of people that, I do believe that my efforts will, you know, work out for me and show who I am and what I can do.” Lupita described a time that she worked for a

very large company for a number of years. One of her supervisors actually told her to go somewhere else and find another job. He said, “People like you, you deserve to be a leader, and it’s not going to happen here.” He told her it was because she was both a woman and because she was Latina.

**Colorism.** BfloSldrGrl discussed how she has been impacted by colorism. “There are times when my own folks, they would look at me and say I’m light skinned versus darker [skinned] people.” She further described how people called her a Mexican when she was young. Though, even as an adult, in her advocacy work, BfloSldrGrl stated, “Other Black people kind of push me out and say, ‘Well, you’re not really with us’” due to her lighter skin. Genise described a painful memory that brought her to tears in regards to how a fellow African American woman treated her when she was a child:

Out of all my sisters and brothers, I had the darkest skin, and I was the largest in my family. When we would go over to her house, she wouldn't let me sit on her couch. She would let my two sisters and brother sit on the couch, but she wouldn't let me sit on the couch. They were light skinned and they were smaller. She would say, ‘You have to sit on the floor.’

Genise added that the woman told her she did not want Genise to get her couch “all muddy.” She went on to describe how other African Americans have mistreated her due to her darker skin, and added:

I would have cut my damn wrists a long time ago. Thinking there was something wrong with me when it's my own race telling me I'm ugly because of dark skin and treating me bad. Could you imagine your own race calling you a nigger, your *own* race?

Genise credits her mother's love and support for getting her through some of those difficult times. Sadie described being made fun of by her own family members. "Even now, I'm still being teased. If it's not the weight, always being told I was the ugliest one of my sisters because I was the darker one, and my other sisters were lighter skinned than me." Sadie added that some family members called her "fea" (Spanish word for ugly), and they called her sisters "güera" and "bonita" (Spanish for fair-skinned and pretty).

**Intersectionality.** Previously, Beth described a situation in which she believed that a thin woman was asked to represent her company instead of her, but she also stated that the woman was younger as well. She was not the only one to bring age into the equation. While revealing that others have treated her badly as she gained weight over the years, Kekino described situations when men used to hold the door open for her or help her lift things at work, and that does not happen anymore. She mentioned that to her husband, who said, "Well, because you're older." Kekino answered, "No, no. There's a lot of women that are pretty that are older. And they get treated real nice at work." However, the combination of being older and heavier is why Kekino believed she was not treated as well by men. Genise touched on the issue of colorism previously, but added the following remarks related to intersectionality, "I had it double in the black community being darker skinned and heavier, too, by my own people." Lupita also described being discriminated against for multiple identity characteristics. She described how she used to have long dark hair and pulled it back into a bun. "I would be stopped by police officers, asked for my papers." She further stated:

I was in a professional position. I was at the district level for many years. I would get stopped and asked if I was a food lady, the taco lady, you know. And

all those things are great, there's nothing wrong with that, but it was because, like I said, the skin color, the weight.

An exasperated Star Gaze described how intersectionality has impacted her in the following way:

[Discrimination] was more about my color than my weight, and eventually later, it becomes about your weight. Then it becomes about you being a female, and then you're like, 'Well, which one is it today [laughs]?' Because it's different, you just never knew what eyes they were seeing you through. And I remember people used to always call me stuff.

Star Gaze told me that she used to be called ugly names by others, but it was apparent she did not want to repeat those names during our interview. She also added, "I'm judged by my size, I'm judged by my color, judged by being a woman, but that's the whole package. I don't know how I survived it." Further echoing the uncertainty that Star Gaze mentioned above, as to which identity characteristic was being targeted, Lupita added:

I don't see myself as fluffy. It doesn't even come into my mind until I see the reaction in the person I'm meeting. When I see that rejection, I'm like, 'Oh, they're uncomfortable with my weight or *something about me*.'

Previous researchers (Remedios & Snyder, 2015; Rice, 2014) have touched upon this feeling of uncertainty among those with intersecting identities as well.

**Responding to discrimination.** Only BfloSldrGrl specifically described how she learned to better stand up for herself through a formalized (workplace) training. As her job requires her to defend and support others, she stated:



You learn how to be an activist. For example, if I'm standing up for civil rights, then, duh, I should be able to do that for myself. Nobody ever taught me to do that kind of stuff when you're a kid, especially for girls. But my [workplace] training taught me how to ask questions, how to keep documentation. It's just a matter of deciding how far out there you're going to put yourself. You can't fight about everything, but you should fight about the big stuff.

BfloSldrGrl went on to discuss feeling discriminated against at work, and why she filed a complaint at her job. She said, "It was ongoing. It was making me sick. It was making me suffer. I had just had it." Other than this one example of formalized training, most of the participants described ways that they responded to or overcame discrimination previously in the Personal sections that examined Strength and Spirituality. Laurita, Lupita, Sadie and Star Gaze spoke about their strong sense of faith helping them get through difficult times such as dealing with discrimination. Others, such as Beth, Genise, Kekino, and Sasha described solid role models who instilled in them love, support, or some kind of inner resolve and self-confidence.

While earlier, Sasha mentioned that she was employed in the human resources field, she further stated that her current team of co-workers is very diverse, including size, ethnicity, gender, and sexual orientation. She said, "We accept pretty much anybody." Also, she added, "Because we're HR, we know what to stay away from" because they are all familiar with the "laws regarding discrimination." Star Gaze described that she had just come to a point in her life where she just did not let things bother her anymore. After speaking about examples of the intersectionality of her multiple marginalized identities, she went on to mention how she dealt with those

situations. In addition to using humor, she noted the importance of her faith and her wisdom, and stated, “Because I’m strong-willed and have a strong self-esteem, but I do remember trying to fit in all the time, but now I just don’t care.”

**Portrayals of plus size women of color in the media.** It appears that both plus size women and women of color have been getting more attention in the media in recent years. Therefore, the participants were asked how they felt about the ways in which fluffy women of color have been portrayed in films and magazines, as well as how they should be portrayed. Below are comments made by the participants regarding how they see fluffy women of color being portrayed, most of which the participants found to be hurtful to them:

- “I don’t like the stereotypical mom that you see on t.v., the Hispanic mom. Or characters played by Monique and Queen Latifah. It’s not like they’re educated, intelligent, or well-mannered,” said Beth.
- BfloSldrGrl stated that because her father was in the military, “We got to see a lot of people of color in high positions. So that was a time when the Cosby show was on television. To me, that was like every other person that I knew, but I’ve realized that people thought that was exceptional.”
- Genise said that she felt fluffy women of color were portrayed “as being people who eat all the time and being lazy.”
- Kekino added, “Too many times, they’re the hired help. Lower class jobs. They play the victims. They’re not portrayed as educated, like they have a high intellect. And they’re not successful.”
- Laurita stated, “I think we’re always the underdog. I think that goes to how we’re

conditioned to not see those people. They are just in the background. Nobody really cares about them.” Laurita also informed me of something that I had never heard of before—a movie called *The DUFF* (Cartsonis, McG, Viola, & Sandel, 2015), which stands for “designated ugly fat friend.” In such a portrayal, the title character is taken advantage of by someone in order to get to their prettier or more popular friends. Laurita described how she has come to feel “indifferent” to such portrayals.

- Lupita, who reminded me that she was in her early 60’s, stated that she could only recall characters or actors such as “Aunt Jemima,” “Aunt Bea,” who were older and motherly. Then she added, “Of course, there’s Oprah.”
- Sadie said, “I think they’re used to be made fun of - to laugh at. It’s ugly. That’s the majority of what I see. There are times that things are funny, but it’s like, ‘Why do y’all have to use an overweight person?’”
- “Society wants you to believe that a skinnier version is what’s ideal and everything else is just kind of awkward, weird, not accepted. So, I think plus size falls into not being accepted in society,” said Sasha. She further added that plus size women of color in movies and television are “usually the mom that stays at the house, cooks, cleans, runs after the kids all day, or single and can’t find a man.”
- Star Gaze recalled when she only used to see commercials for toilet paper with White people in them. She said, “Hello, we use toilet paper, too!” Or she remembered how old Westerns did not have any Black people in them, she stated,

“There had to be some Black people back in the day. How would we have ancestors?”

- Regarding television and movies, Tequila told me that she felt bad when thinking back and “not having anyone to identify with or anyone who looked like me.” She added that she had wanted to be an actress when she was younger, and she had people tell her, “You’ll never get that role,” because of her size.

On a more positive note, or on the plus side, below are the ways in which the participants felt fluffy women of color *should* be portrayed in media, primarily movies and magazines:

- Beth stated that she would like to see “more real” and “more balanced” Latina roles in movies. She also praised actress, Octavia Spencer, who has appeared in recent movies, such as *Hidden Figures* (Gigliotti et al., 2016) and *The Shack* (Netter et al., 2017).
- BfloSldrGrl said that she thinks “plus size women of color should play a full range of characters, because that’s who we really are. They shouldn’t be stereotyped or pigeon-holed.”
- Genise told me that she would like to see fluffy women of color portrayed as “business women getting things done, very creative. Just like you would see any other woman, very smart because we are, [and] very sexy.”
- Kekino spoke about the magazine covers that she sees in the grocery store. She said that she wanted to see more people of color “not for bad things, but in beautiful ways like the Obamas.” She added, “We want to look all prestigious. Don’t make us look less American. We’re beautiful.”

- Laurita and Sasha had recently seen the movie, *Wonder Woman* (Roven, Snyder, Snyder, Suckle, & Jenkins, 2017) and thought that her character should have been played by a plus size woman. Sasha said she liked the fact that the actress was at least a woman of color. However, she added that according to the backstory, the character is “from the Amazon and she should be tall and big, like Serena Williams, that’s what an Amazon woman looks like!”
- Lupita and Kekino said that they would love to see more Latinas in movies. Both mentioned feeling “proud” when the *Selena* (Quintanilla Jr., Esparza, Katz, Nava, 1997) movie came out. Lupita also noted the movie, *Hidden Figures* (Gigliotti et al., 2016) and said, “We didn’t study that. Nobody ever told us about that. Fluffy ladies can be smart and gorgeous!”
- Sadie also stated that she would like to see more plus size women in movies and magazines. She added, “There’s a lot of women that are overweight that are freaking beautiful. You’ve got to look at the inside, not just the physical.”
- Star Gaze told me that she would like to see plus size women of color in roles such as, “survivors, overcomers, congresswomen.” She added, “We’re everywhere, all kinds of roles!”
- Tequila summed it all up by stating that fluffy women of color should be portrayed in the following ways in movies and magazines, “We’re sexy. We’re desirable. We’re clean. There’s nothing wrong with us. At the end of the day, it’s different strokes for different folks. You should not discriminate. If you don’t like it, don’t look.”

The thematic category of Discrimination was based on a very large body of data, and included a sizeable number of sub-themes. Some important findings included the fact that many of the experiences of discrimination or marginalization took place in workplace settings. This should be especially noteworthy for adult educators. An additional marginalized identity category also surfaced for a couple of the participants, that of *age*. In regards to how the participants responded to experiences of discrimination, spirituality and inner strength were most often noted as helping the participants to cope. Finally, it appeared very evident from the participants' comments that, overall, they are not pleased with the way that plus size women are portrayed in the media. That being said, they offered numerous suggestions to promote more positive portrayals.

### **Successes**

The participants were asked about their successes and accomplishments, as previous research about plus size women or women of color so often focused on their challenges or struggles. Because of that, I wanted to lend the participants a voice in describing how successful experiences have influenced their identities. They were also asked if they believed their size, ethnicity or gender played a role in these successes.

**Health.** One type of success that most of the participants discussed was related to improving their health, including changing their body size. This was interesting, as I did not ask any specific questions about health. BfloSldrGrl described a group that she is involved with, "We do yoga in Spanish, and we do like a circle talk. And it's all about getting back in touch with your femininity, your womanhood, the sacredness of it, the nurturing piece." For one participant, improving her health by trying to lose weight also

related to her ethnicity, as Kekino described a close kinship she developed with the other Latinas she met in Zumba classes a few years ago. She not only felt successful by being able to keep up with all the exercising, she was proud of the relationships with her fellow Latina class members. She stated, “I started doing more things with them, like meeting at restaurants on Mother’s Day, all of us Latinas, and talking about our children and being a part of them. I just felt real... a lot of energy.”

Genise and Sadie were proud to discuss the success of their recent weight loss in order to improve their health. Genise lost 50 lbs. over the past year and said, “I have totally changed my eating habits, and it's making me feel better inside!” Sadie discussed losing 105 lbs. all on her own over the past few years. She added how she now takes better care of herself and gives herself more attention, “If I want to feel pretty, I'm going to feel pretty. If I want to dress pretty, I'm going to dress pretty. I don't care how people look at me. I don't care if I'm plus size.”

Kekino and Tequila stated that they were currently involved in healthy life style programs. For Kekino, the program reminded her of Zumba classes that she used to be involved in. She said, “I was doing them real good. I was in the front, and I was following what those young girls were doing. I didn't miss a beat, and people didn't believe my age.” In her current program, she exercises daily to a DVD along with her husband and appeared proud to share her weekend routine with me. “On weekends I do it twice. It's 25 minutes. I do it twice, one in the morning, as soon as I get up, and then before I go to bed.” Tequila told me that she was in a transition phase in her life. Recovering from her workplace injury included being involved in a nutritional program and working towards feeling better all around. She mentioned how a friend recently

helped her feel better by fixing herself up. The friend helped Tequila style her hair, a new outfit was purchased, and Tequila stated, “I was just like feeling like all kinds of cute. Two hundred and fifty pounds and all!”

Some other participants described activities that they were involved in related to health and well-being that offered them a sense of accomplishment. Laurita described how she works out regularly and how difficult it is just to stay the size she is, due to her health issue. She also described a fitness competition at work in which she recently participated. To me, it sounded like a boot camp on steroids! First, she mentioned that some co-workers were surprised to see her sign up for it. Then, she stated, “I think a lot of them were really surprised that I could get through all the courses and do what was being asked.” She proudly added that this was the first time her company participated in the competition, and out of 50 companies, hers came in fourth. Lupita mentioned that she does not worry about losing weight now that she is older. She added that her doctor recently complimented her good health. She stated, “In my older and wiser years, it's all about making sure that I'm healthy by eating the fruits and the vegetables. And I take supplements and I walk.”

**Education and career.** Beth attributed her work as being “the way that I feel like I identify as a person.” As for successes, she mentioned having “little wins every day” as she hears positive feedback quite often from the people that she works for. She also described being awarded a vacation years ago after winning a work competition. For Beth, these accomplishments did not relate to her size, ethnicity or gender, they were results of her skills. BfloSldrGrl described her recent job promotion as an accomplishment. She added, though, “I know that the reason that I got promoted was



because I'm a Black female and I held a degree." She further stated, "The leadership team promoted me because I fit the diversity mold, but they never expected me to be successful." BfloSldrGrl noted that experiences such as this have been influential in her life:

I was shy, but I still found myself in these leadership roles, or these kind of moments that came up, that I felt like I had to step forward. It required courage, and that's one thing that I feel like I've honed pretty good over the years.

Though her work has awarded her many successes, she also described many challenges along the way which were mentioned in the Discrimination theme.

Genise described numerous education and career successes. "I got my degree in social work, and my Associate's degree in computer programming. I've gotten awards from different places." She also mentioned side jobs in which she has been successful. "I do have my chef's license. I did catering." She further described how she has helped relatives decorate their homes. According to Genise, none of these accomplishments were related to her size, ethnicity or gender—only to her talent. Lupita described how successful she has felt delivering presentations in both religious and secular settings:

I have seen people of color when they see me up there and they hear me speak a little bit about my experience and my educational background. I can see them—it's beautiful—I can see them straightening up. I can see them—the pride in their eyes, 'Look, she looks like me. You know, she's one of us and look what all she's done.'

Sasha experienced a big success in her life when she graduated from college. She stated, "I was usually the only African American in my class [K-12]. So I wanted to go to an

HBCU to kind of get out of that and to experience something different.” Sasha graduated with a degree majoring in English and a minor in Social Work. She originally thought she would go into teaching. However, she now finds herself in a human resources job and stated, “That’s actually kind of a mixture of everything I’ve wanted to do.” She gets to teach through conducting trainings and she also helps to “make the workplace a better place for everybody.” Star Gaze mentioned a number of times how proud she feels to be a social worker, “I’ve given a lot to help make things better for other people.” This accomplishment fulfilled a childhood dream of hers.

**Personal.** While Lupita mentioned being discriminated against due to her ethnicity, gender or size in other areas of her life, she described feeling very successful in her church activities. She stated, “I was invited to be a leader. My weight really didn’t ever seem to affect what I was doing. So in that respect, it was successful. And that’s being an overweight woman.” As for Sadie, a success that she described was very much related to her ethnicity, as she grew up speaking both English and Spanish. She mentioned the following:

There’s people that don’t speak English and they’ve asked for help, if I could please help interpret for them—order food, just different, different situations.

I think that’s a blessing to know how to speak English and know how to speak Spanish, and being able to help someone when they’re in need.

Sadie also described feeling proud about her size and health, as this allowed her to have the strength to lift beloved family members when they were ill. Star Gaze discussed education and career successes earlier. Yet, she appeared most proud when she described participating in the ROTC (Reserve Officers’ Training Corps) in her younger days. It

was important because her father was in the military. Under his influence, she and her brothers participated in sports and ROTC. She stated:

I did really good in ROTC with shooting the rifle. My brothers were in there, too, and I did good! So I learned a lot. I think maybe I was doing it just to let them know that just because I was a woman doesn't mean I can't do it.

With this particular success story, Star Gaze wanted to emphasize that her gender did not deter her from accomplishing something that she set her mind to.

Within the theme of Successes, the study participants appeared excited to share their experiences with me. One sub-theme that emerged, and was shared amongst all but one of the participants, was a discussion about being committed to their health. This involved a commitment to exercising, or eating healthy, or both. Other sub-themes that emerged related to career and educational successes. Finally, the participants described personal successes, which varied, but allowed the participants to voice events in their lives that have further positively influenced their identities.

### **Summary**

Chapter 4 examined the findings from the research which included one on one, in-depth interviews with ten fluffy women of color. Textural descriptive data collected from the interviews was the primary data source. Another important source of data included artifacts, which each participant brought with them to the interviews. The participants presented vivid and thoughtful descriptions of how these objects represented their identities. A secondary data source included text from the researcher's journal which contributed to the reflexivity of the interview process between the participants and the researcher. In regards to the researcher, Glesne (2016) stated, "Being attuned to your

emotions and tracking them throughout the research process assists in revealing not only subjectivities but also the various positionings or identity categories called into play” (p. 146). She further stated that this process could possibly lead to “more rigorous, useful, and meaningful work” (p. 146).

The major themes identified in the study that described the experiences that influenced the identities of fluffy women of color included: a) Personal, b) Family and Culture, c) Discrimination, and d) Successes. Within each of those themes, numerous sub-themes were revealed which further described the essence of the identities of the participants. Chapter 5 will discuss the overall conclusions of this research, including an interpretation of key findings, implications for practice or policy, future directions and final reflections.

## V. Conclusions

This concluding chapter includes a description of key findings revealed in this study, as well as implications for practice for the field of adult education, and future recommendations for research. Additionally, the potential impact of delimitations on transferability are discussed, along with the researcher's final reflections

In Chapter 1, the introduction of this study, I recalled an experience in which I was completely ignored by a White waiter at a restaurant while my White, slim, husband sat right next to me and was treated like a king. Yet, another experience in which I was singled out or discriminated against in some way, for some reason. In that setting, I wondered why the waiter ignored me and treated my husband so well. I felt, and still believe, that it was because of our differences, more specifically because of the intersectionality of my size, ethnicity, and gender. Like some of the women in this study, I did not know for which identity category I was being targeted. Was it my ethnicity? Was it my gender? Was it my size? Or was it a combination of all three? Perhaps, all of these experiences of feeling ignored, insulted, and discriminated against so many times over the years, are what finally led me to embark upon a research study that examined the identities of fluffy women of color through a lens of intersectionality. The research questions for this study included the following:

1. How do fluffy women of color perceive themselves in terms of their identity/ies?
2. How have family and culture influenced the development of their identity/ies?
3. What positive life experiences have fluffy women of color had, in relation to their body size, ethnicity and gender?

4. What experiences of marginalization or discrimination, if any, are described by fluffy women of color? How do they interpret such experiences, relative to their ethnicity, body size and gender?
5. How have fluffy women of color learned to cope with experiences of marginalization and discrimination, personally and socially?

In order to begin the research process, I conducted a literature review to investigate related studies. While there exists a history and a body of research to draw upon in regards to examining women's' identities surrounding body size, a few things stood out. Most of the literature related to body size involved research on primarily White women and/or college aged students (Cotter, Kelly, Mitchell, & Mazzeo, 2015; Donaghue & Clemitshaw, 2012; Esposito, 2011; Overstreet, Quinn, & Agocha, 2010; Puhl, Moss-Racusin, Schwartz & Brownell, 2008; Rakhkovskaya & Warren, 2014; Saguy & Ward, 2011; Warren, 2014).

While there is a rich body of research that discussed intersectionality (Cho, Crenshaw, & McCall, 2013; Cole, 2009; Crenshaw, 1993; Remedios & Snyder, 2015; Shields, 2008; Warner & Shields, 2013), it is very limited within the field of adult education and learning. Within this field, previous related studies focused on discrimination of women of color, and at times included discussions of embodied learning (Bridwell, 2012; Clark, 2001; Joaquin & Johnson-Bailey, 2015; Johnson-Bailey, 2015; Johnson-Bailey, 2010; Johnson-Bailey, Baumgartner, & Bowles, 2010; Nieves, 2012; Sheared, 1999). Also, it is only very recently that the intersectionality equation has begun to include the issue of size (Null, 2012; Toothman, 2014). To fill these gaps, this

study examined fluffy women of color between the ages of 25 - 65 years old and was conducted by a researcher who is a plus size woman of color.

A qualitative framework guided this study which held the interpretivist perspective that “reality is socially constructed” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 9). Semi-structured, in-depth interviews were used in order to lend the participants a voice in describing their own lived experiences as fluffy women of color. Further, a phenomenological research approach was utilized to examine the experiences of the participants in order to achieve “a unified vision of the essences of a phenomenon or experience” (Moustakas, 1993, p. 58). The data collection and analysis methodology included phenomenological steps such as: horizontalizing, listing meaning units, creating clusters or themes, developing textural descriptions of the experience, and integrating these descriptions into meanings or essences of the phenomenon (Moustakas, 1993).

### **Discussion and Interpretation of Key Findings**

Four major themes and a number of sub-themes related to the study’s research questions were revealed through data analysis, including: a) Personal, b) Family/Culture, c) Discrimination, and d) Successes. Further synthesis of the numerous themes and sub-themes point to key findings that more succinctly represent the lived experiences of the women in this study, fluffy women of color.

#### **The Word Fat**

*I’ve never called myself fat.*

*I like to think of myself as vivacious. ~ Beth*

None of the women in the study used the word fat to describe themselves, which differed from previous related research (Donaghue & Clemitshaw, 2012; Saguy & Ward,

2011) in which plus size women proudly identified as fat. This also stood out, as there exists, among scholars who examine size discrimination (Cameron & Russell, 2016; Fikkan & Rothblum, 2012; Rothblum & Solovay, 2009), a body of research labeled as fat studies and fat pedagogy which encourage the use of the term fat. Yet, in this study, the participants only used the word fat when referring to being insulted or made fun of by others, or when describing themselves in a negative manner. Truly, in this study, as in society, the term fat was often synonymous of being ugly (Brewis, Hruschka, & Wutich, 2011; Chrisler, 2012; Fikkan & Rothblum, 2012), which is not how the women in this study viewed themselves. This also appeared to align with the Jamaican study conducted by Pearce et al. (2014), who hypothesized that using the term fluffy instead of fat may have been a form of self-protection.

### **Committed to Health**

*I'm healthy, I'm strong, and*

*I've learned to accept who I am. ~ Sadie*

While discussing successes or achievements, nine of the ten participants enthusiastically voiced their own personal efforts towards improving or prioritizing their health. This finding spoke to the misperceptions that others have in viewing fluffy or plus size women as lazy or inactive (Barned & Lipps, 2014; Brewis, Hruschka, & Wutich, 2011). It was also noteworthy because the study did not focus on health or ask questions related to health. All but one participant spoke to me about their healthy eating habits, or being involved in nutritional programs, exercising regularly, and/or weight-loss programs for the primary purpose of improving their health. This finding was a bit surprising, as the women identified themselves as confident and attractive. One might



think they were quite satisfied with their physical state or health status. Yet, the majority discussed having made recent improvements towards their health or setting goals towards improving their health.

### **Discrimination**

*I'm judged by my size, I'm judged by my color,  
judged by being a woman, but that's the whole package.*

*I don't know how I survived it. ~ Star Gaze*

Similar to previous studies, every participant described experiences of discrimination in regards to their ethnicity, size, and/or gender in a variety of settings (Esposito, 2011; Fikkan & Rothblum, 2012; Gonzáles & Mejorado, 2010; Linder & Rodriguez, 2012; McHugh & Kasardo, 2012; Mohr & Purdie-Vaughns, 2015; Remedios & Snyder, 2015). Most notably, the participants mentioned the workplace as the setting where discrimination often occurred. Furthermore, six of the ten participants described experiences involving the intersection of their multiple marginalized identity categories (Bridwell, 2012; Crenshaw, 1993; Linder & Rodriguez, 2012; Purdie-Vaughns & Eibach, 2008; Remedios & Snyder, 2015; Shields, 2008; Warner & Shields, 2013). Within those experiences of intersectionality, several of the participants mentioned feeling uncertain as to which identity category(ies) was being targeted which has been previously mentioned by other scholars (Remedios & Snyder, 2015; Rice, 2014).

### **Gender Norms**

*Men were treated differently. They were valued more  
and their size really never came into play. ~ Lupita*

In the area of family and culture, there appeared to be clear differences in the messages that females and males received in regards to body size. According to most of the study participants, women and girls were often admonished for gaining weight, while men and boys were labeled strong and muscular. In some families, the body sizes of men and boys were never even discussed. The fact that the females were judged more harshly is in alignment with previous scholars discussions about gender and size oppression (Brewis, Hruschka, & Wutich, 2011; Donaghue & Clemitshaw, 2012; Fikkan & Rothblum, 2012; McHugh & Kasardo, 2012; Saguy & Ward, 2011).

### **Stereotypes**

*When I look at a commercial and I see plus size  
men or women, it's usually about like a  
diabetes commercial or something like that. ~ Sadie*

All of the participants described negative stereotypes as the manner in which plus size women of color are most often portrayed in the media, just as some scholars have described (Brewis, Hruschka, & Wutich, 2011; Burmeister & Carels, 2014; Fikkan & Rothblum, 2012). The participants described such portrayals as the underdog, the one who is laughed at, unsuccessful and/or victims. While discussing this topic, BfloSldrGrI even asked, “Do you think that’s, like fluffy women of color, we get relegated to helper status? Like a mammy?” Only a few positive role models were described by the participants in regards to people of color, such as Selena, Jennifer Lopez, the Obamas, and Serena Williams. As for plus size women of color, only Oprah and Octavia Spencer were mentioned. Additionally, all of the participants expressed an interest in seeing plus size women of color in more complex film roles and on more magazine covers.

Addressing this issue, it has only within the past few years that plus size models made headlines and graced the covers of mainstream popular magazines. Recently, plus size models, Ashley Graham was featured on the cover of Sports Illustrated magazine and Tess Holiday was on the cover of People Magazine according to Czerniawski (2016). However, these models are both White. Also, in 2017, Ashley Graham made the cover of the fashion iconic, Vogue magazine, which featured a seemingly ethnically diverse group of models, yet Graham was the only plus size model and it appeared that part of her body was being covered up to more closely resemble the thin models (Torgerson, 2017). In regards to television and film, Backstrom (2012) asserted the following:

Lifetime's Drop Dead Diva, which features a size-16 protagonist, and ABC Family's Huge, which takes place at a weight loss camp, have received positive reviews for showcasing obese people in nonsensational ways. The move to more sympathetic representations offsets some of the more mocking and sensational portrayals, yet weight as a problem is still central to the storylines. (p. 692)

The participants in this study made it pretty clear that their size was not as problematic to them, as it seems to be to society.

### **Inner Strength**

*I think that it's incredible to know who you are, and love who you are,  
and know that you are beautiful. To understand that there are  
many different aspects of beauty. But that growing from those experiences,  
becoming stronger from that. ~ Laurita*

In regards to coping with discrimination, only one participant spoke of formal learning that was beneficial to her. However, what is quite interesting is that almost all of

the participants spoke about being a strong woman or possessing an inner strength that helped them through difficult times in their lives, such as dealing with discrimination. The participants described this strength in different ways. For many, this characteristic was related to their spirituality, as one referred to herself as a “prayer warrior,” and another “a faith-filled woman.” In fact, many of the participants’ artifacts, which represented their identity, included items that related to their spiritual beliefs. For others, strength was a characteristic instilled in them by a caregiver or parent. For a couple of the participants, strength appeared to be a self-learned quality that developed over time along with the acquisition of wisdom. Such was the case of Genise who asserted that with all that she has gone through, someone would have to “run her over with a Mack truck” to try to keep her down. Each of the stories about the participants’ strength revealed more about their identity. Related to this finding, Tisdell (2008) examined the role of spirituality amongst adult educators in which participants revealed significant learning experiences that involved “the ongoing development of some aspect of identity” (p. 31). Tisdell stated that these learning experiences “were reported much more often by women and people of color” (p. 31). She summarized:

The spiritual part of those experiences was when they reclaimed aspects of the sacred in their own cultural or gender story, or found new power in reframing some of the cultural symbols, mythic stories, music, or metaphors that were part of their earlier life experience. (pp. 31-32)

She added that these experiences “facilitated healing from oppression of themselves and others” which helped these individuals find a “more integrated sense of identity (Tisdell, 2008, p. 32).

Below, Table 3 addresses the primary research questions of this study. While a number of the findings revealed the negative aspects of the lived experiences of fluffy women of color, such as facing discrimination and negative stereotypes, positive aspects of the participants' identities were also revealed. The criteria for participants to be involved in this research study called for women who viewed themselves as fluffy, which was described as being plus size, confident, and attractive as per Barned and Lipps (2014). While the women shared experiences related to those qualities, they further revealed even more details about their identities such as challenges and successes, which were often unique to each participant.

Table 3

*Research Questions Addressed*

Research Questions	Theme and Primary Examples
1. How do fluffy women of color perceive themselves?	Personal theme: strong, spiritual, confident, not fat
2. How have family and culture influenced their identities?	Family-Culture theme: different gender norms
3. What success or positive life experiences do they describe?	Successes theme: health, career, education
4. Have they experienced marginalization or discrimination?	Discrimination theme: workplace, stereotypes
5. How have they learned to cope with discrimination?	Discrimination theme: inner strength, spiritual

Recently, as my husband and I watched a television morning show, a segment about plus size fashion trends came on and introduced a group of plus size models. One by one, beautiful women came out dressed in lovely clothing. My husband made a remark that resonated deeply within me. Even though he is aware of the work towards my dissertation for the past few years, he surprised me by asking, “Why do they call them plus size? Why don’t they just call them women?” I thought about it for a bit, then agreed with him completely. I wondered why those women were labeled as plus size. We can see their body sizes. This made me wonder why had I used descriptors such as *fluffy* and *plus size* in this study. However, the answer is not that simple. While we are all women, the reality is that society does not yet view us as such. Far too often, society judges women, such as those in this study, by their size or by the color of their skin, or even judges them simply because they are women. As adult educators, we can change that. It is important to teach others about the ways in which fluffy women of color experience the world. While they may be viewed and treated that way, they are not a joke, not invisible, not without feelings, not less than—they are women. They are complicated, they have feelings, they have experienced successes, they have experienced pain and discrimination, they are confident, attractive, and they are women. That is the essence of a fluffy woman of color! On the next page, Figure 15 shows a word cloud that visually illustrates the essence of fluffy women of color, derived from the four major themes and sub-themes that the findings revealed.



## **Implications for Practice**

Adult educators are champions for causes such as social justice, equality and valuing diversity. They are also committed to life-long learning which encompasses professional training and development within the business and corporate world, government, academia, and community-based organizations. Because of this, it is important to point out that almost every participant in this study described experiencing at least one form of discrimination within the workplace. The only one who did not reveal such an experience was early in her career and did not have much work experiences from which to draw upon at the time of this study. Much of the time, the discrimination that the participants faced included the intersectionality associated with possessing multiple marginalized identities, although they were uncertain at times as to which identity category was the target of the maltreatment. The women in this study mentioned being overlooked for jobs because of their ethnicity or their size, being paid less than men, being treated harshly at their job because of their size or skin color, having to take on more than their share to try to prove themselves, and being excluded from certain projects for reasons unknown to them. Adult educators can create awareness about the possibility of this type of discrimination taking place in the workplace and help educate others about this and put a stop to it. Adult educators can also help by enforcing or creating policy changes regarding this issue. Outside of the workplace, the study participants mentioned experiences in personal and social situations in which they were insulted, ignored, and just plain tired of being the target of some form of marginalization, discrimination or micro-aggression. Though some were specifically told why they were discriminated against, others mentioned just having a feeling or being able to tell by how



the other person reacted to them or treated them. Sometimes it is just a feeling. Still, these voices need to be heard and their experiences need to be acknowledged. These women are intelligent, funny, kind and valuable human beings who contribute positively to our society. It is important to know how they are being treated by others and how they experience the world around them.

Adult educators have a vested interest in learning more about women such as the ones who participated in this study. If they have not already encountered them, they will. Fluffy women of color are engaged in all sectors of our communities and like to show in all kinds of adult education contexts, as evidenced by the diverse backgrounds, levels of education and careers of the women in this study. Just to review, Kekino is retired, but working in her second career for the government. Sasha is just beginning her career in the human resources field. Star Gaze proudly achieved her dream of being a social worker for many years. BfloSldrGrl is employed in the role of a mediator in her job and fights for the rights of others. Lupita worked in her community by offering parenting classes and practicing the ministry. A diverse group of women with diverse experiences, yet they held in common the experience of being a fluffy woman of color.

Not only is it necessary for the field of adult education to include in their curriculum the stories of fluffy women of color and discussions that focus on intersectionality, it is also imperative that the field denounce the discriminatory, unjust and disrespectful treatment of individuals because of their size, ethnicity and/or gender, especially when this may occur within adult education and training settings. No matter what setting, business, academic or social, it is not okay to make jokes about a person's size. It is not okay to treat a person disrespectfully because of the color of their skin, and

it is not okay to think less of a person because of their gender. Adult education examines the histories of marginalized groups and strives to create safe and welcoming learning spaces for these individuals. Fluffy women of color are part of these marginalized groups that have been overlooked. As stated previously, there exists some research about women of color within the field of adult education (Bridwell, 2012; Gonzáles & Mejorado, 2010; Joaquin & Johnson-Bailey, 2015; Johnson-Bailey, 2012; Johnson-Bailey, Baumgartner, & Bowles, 2010). Intersectionality has been briefly mentioned (Sheared, 1999). But if the field as a whole wants to truly embrace all individuals, adult educators will encourage critical, thoughtful, and respectful dialogue about the experiences of fluffy women of color, just as they do for other marginalized groups in society.

The women in this study described their identity in many ways, in addition to being strong and confident, they listed a number of talents and achievements that helped to define who they are. Yet, most of the literature about women of color and women of size primarily highlights the obstacles that they face. It is important to get the full picture of a person's identity. In addition, the study participants called out the media and advocated for more role models in society who are plus size women of color, including more complex movie roles and more magazine covers. Magazines, movies, and television have the ability to influence our perceptions of others in society. Guy (2007) stated, "in today's global, high-tech world, answers to the critical questions of life are conveyed increasingly through popular culture via the mass media" (p. 15). In a study of adult educators as participants, Tisdell and Thompson (2007) found that almost all of the participants in their research viewed the shows that they watched as a means of "helping

them see alternative narratives in their own lives or for others in their communities” (p. 660). In another example, participants noted how people of color were represented in entertainment media, “and how this has changed some degree over time” (p. 662). Even more noteworthy were the participants who “discussed the role of the media, not so much in completely changing their view of issues surrounding a marginalised group in society, but rather in understanding the complexity of what living as a marginalised ‘other’ is like” (p. 663). The field of adult education and learning is ripe with opportunities to promote awareness about the identities of fluffy women of color. While discussing the use of pop culture within the adult education setting, Guy (2007) described how critical thinking skills can be utilized to analyze issues related to race, class and gender while viewing excerpts of popular movies or television shows within the classroom setting. This would be an excellent manner in which to bring awareness of the social inequities of plus size women of color.

These women were truly strong and confident. They want their presence known. They want to be included. In a discussion about the future of adult learning, Hill (2008) described a “New Social Movement, called Convergence Movement” of which he stated, “It is about people’s dignity and the refusal to accept being erased from the social equation” (pp. 84-85). He further described how this movement:

Critically mobilizes the plurality of deconstructed identities in ways that enhance democracy and social inclusion for all people. It does not produce a culture of disappearance, but rather creates a culture of visibility through difference with a goal to recognize the right of all people to be different on their own terms. (pp. 85-86)

When society recognizes and includes fluffy women of color, they will no longer exist on the fringe. They may not even be identified as fluffy, or plus size, or a member of a particular ethnic group, but simply as women.

### **Future Recommendations for Research**

After conducting the first few interviews, I saw how the women in this study were really quite eager to share their experiences with me and let others know how they perceive their own identities. They spoke so openly and honestly with me. They shared such heartfelt and sometimes painful stories with me. Yet, they also shared joyful and triumphant stories. One thing stood out during the early part of the interview process and remained a constant throughout much of this research study. I noticed that the first three participants mentioned something about angels. I was particularly struck by this finding while chatting with one of the participants after she had answered all of the interview questions. While we exchanged a few more experiences with one another, I mentioned an interaction in which someone behaved unkindly towards me. That participant reminded me that “we (Latina women) should be like little angels on earth” and treat others better than they treat us. I then remembered that in two previous interviews, the participants had also brought up the subject of angels. At that point, I began to wonder if this project would become *The Dissertation of Angels*. This was especially surprising to me because I am usually pretty private about my spiritual thoughts and beliefs. Yet, as the interviews progressed, spirituality continued to play an important role in the lives of a number of participants. It was particularly discussed when they described how they have overcome challenging life events and how they responded to discrimination. While there currently exists some research in the field of adult education that addresses spirituality

(English & Cameron, 2016; Okpalaoka & Dillard, 2011; Nanton, 2009; Tisdell, 2008), future researchers may want to further examine how spirituality can be drawn upon in the adult education environment. Being mindful and respectful of the connection of mind, body and spirit can only serve to enhance and expand the quality of learning that takes place for individuals in the realm of adult education.

It would also be valuable for future studies in the field of adult education to examine the experiences of plus size individuals within the workplace, as many of the women in this study discussed experiences of discrimination while at work. While scholars in other academic genres have addressed this (Fikkan & Rothblum, 2012), it is important for those in adult education, as many of these educators have roles in leadership and training within businesses, academia, and the community. As such, they should be leaders in championing just and fair treatment of all individuals in the workplace, no matter their size, ethnicity or gender. More studies that involve examining intersectionality would also serve the field of adult education, as the women in this study mentioned feeling marginalized or experiences of discrimination due to the intersection of multiple identity categories, including age, ethnicity, size, and gender.

### **Potential Impact of Study Delimitations on Transferability**

While a couple of participants became aware of this study through my work connection, a couple of White fluffy women whom I met through my work connections also showed an interest in participating in this study. However, I narrowed down the criteria to women of color, as I hoped to examine the presence of intersectionality. Even within that distinction, I narrowed it down even further by only including Latina and African American women. The main reason was due to the fact that the CDC

distinguishes Hispanic and African American women among those who are considered overweight or obese more often than women of other ethnicities. Another reason was to keep the sample size small enough to conduct two, hour-long in-depth interviews with each of them. A further delimitation involved this study's use of the term fluffy. While it is true that some of my friends and I describe ourselves as fluffy, I also incorporated the description used in a couple of Jamaican studies (Barned & Lipps, 2014; Pearce et al., 2014), in which fluffy women were basically described as plus size, confident and attractive. Therefore, not just any plus size women could participate in this study, she had to consider herself to be a fluffy woman. This term may have been a detractor for some women. One study participant actually expressed a dislike of this term, yet it was after she consented. Still, she continued to participate in both of the interviews and the information she provided truly enriched the data. I believe that she, as well as the other participants, recognized that there are many ways that plus size or fluffy women of color describe themselves.

### **Final Reflections**

It should be no surprise that I felt a sense of passion for this study. While the entire research process was a learning experience for me, it was also somewhat therapeutic. With every participant, I found at least one story or one experience that I identified with because I had experienced something similar. In the following paragraphs, I share thoughts on my own reflexivity, as well as some personal experiences that I recalled while making this meaningful journey.

#### **Researcher Reflexivity**

While Moustakas (1993) discussed the relevance of the researcher having a

personal connection to the research, and in fact referred to participants as co-researchers, the use of a phenomenological approach also lends itself to questions about the issue of objectivity. How neutral could I really be, as I consider myself a fluffy woman of color? Did I share my truth or the participants' truths? Because of questions such as these, I truly tried to bracket my own personal thoughts and feelings about the identities of fluffy women of color. I approached each interview, most of which included meeting with a complete stranger, with an open mind and focused on being present to get a clear vision of their individual perspective. I used my researcher's journal to take notes of my own thoughts and reflections. While I may have talked too much a time or two, I usually drove away from each interview in awe of the richness captured from the deep sharing by the participants.

### **Personal Journey**

For most of my life, I have felt like an "other" and, as such, have been fascinated with issues concerning ethnicity, size, and gender. I remember comparing myself to my brother over the years, in that he never appeared to be as interested in those topics as I was. One time, he and I went out to dinner at a higher priced restaurant and I looked around and said, "We're the only Mexicans in here," as everyone I saw in the restaurant appeared to be White. My brother gave me a strange look and said, "Why do you even notice that?" I answered back to him, "How can you not?" I also used to wonder why my girlfriends in high school and college were asked out on dates, and I was almost never asked. We all hung out together. We all dressed nice. We were all smart, all pretty. I was a little shy than others, but shy girls were asked out too. I felt it was because I was very different from my girlfriends in two major ways: I was Latina (they were all White)

and I was bigger than all of them. Though I wore a size 14, the smallest size I have ever worn as an adult, all of my friends were all smaller, ranging mostly from sizes 3 to 10. Even into my thirties, when hanging out with my White girlfriends, it was rare that I was noticed by men. I was usually in the role of the *wingman*, or as I learned through my study, the “designated ugly fat friend” (Cartsonis, McG, Viola, & Sandel, 2015).

Feeling different was something that all of the women in the study described, and I found myself able to relate to many of their experiences. Several of the women mentioned times that people of their own race or ethnicity put them down or made fun of them because they were too light skinned or too dark skinned. Those stories reminded me of times that my fellow Latinx have called me “coconut” (brown on the outside, white on the inside), a derogatory term that Latinx call other Latinx who they claim *look* or *act* White. A number of the participants described being discriminated against within the workplace. Those situations reminded me of a time that I went on a job interview for a position of a pharmacy assistant. The location was a small, family-owned pharmacy. I had just graduated college with a minor in biology. I was so excited. During the interview, however, the owner/pharmacist burst my bubble by saying, “Well, as you can see (pointing behind the counter), it’s a little tight back there. So, I’m not sure this is going to work out.” It was obvious he thought I was too big to fit in that area. At that time in my life, though, I was too embarrassed to tell anybody about that experience believing once again that there was something wrong or different about me.

Even within the adult education setting, I have had some negative experiences primarily related to my size. As I was sitting in one of my first courses in the adult education program that I began four and half years ago, we engaged in a very simple



activity in order to promote team building. Working in a dyad, one partner spoke about a concern of theirs and the other partner simply listened. We were practicing thoughtful listening skills and were coached not to offer advice or interrupt the person speaking, other than the occasional, “hmm” or “I see.” When it was my turn to speak, I mentioned how concerned I was about not being able to exercise as much as usual. My schedule was so busy now, having recently begun my dissertation journey. My partner, while appearing to be listening very intently, looked straight into my eyes and stated, “Have you considered lap band surgery?” I was talking about exercise and this man suggested that I try weight loss surgery. I did not speak of a desire to lose weight, I spoke merely of exercising, which I have regularly done so for most of my adult life.

I was further hurt and offended while participating in an international field study program that took place in Italy. In a classroom of American and Italian doctoral students, we were asked to share our dissertation topics with one another. I joined a group with two other American women and two Italian women. I was so proud of myself for trying to state what my topic was in the best Italian words that I could find. After which, the two Italian women looked a bit confused, looked at each other, and then one of them responded in the best English words she could find and stated, “In Italy, we don’t have fat people. We don’t like fat people.” So much for reaching out to people who are different.

I remembered these stories because they reminded me of the similarities that I shared with many of the study participants. Lupita stated that she walks, she used to teach aerobics, she tries to eat healthy, but because of her size, people make negative assumptions about her health and fitness. People judge her because of the way she looks.

Genise and BfloSldrGrl described being put down by people of their own ethnicity. I could also relate to Laurita, who said that the biggest challenges that she has had in her life involved dating experiences. At one point, she even said, “I want what every woman wants. I want to get married someday.” I remembered a time when I wondered if any man would ever want to marry someone my size. When I was single, I felt very similar to Laurita. When you are single and interested in finding a partner, dating is a very important part of your life. One time, I wrote about such experiences for a class and described feeling marginalized within social settings. The professor wrote in the margins of my paper, “I don’t think this counts as being marginalized.” I disagreed because I have been judged negatively because of my size, just like some of the women in this study. I believe the participants were able to share their stories with me because I am one of them. I believed them and did not discount their perspectives. These women were important to me and because of that, it was important that I share their truths.

In one final example, I recall something that happened around the time that I applied to this adult education program that I will soon complete. After submitting my application, I also decided to look into getting a counselor’s license as I have a master’s degree in counseling. I submitted my transcript to the director of the program to get her perspective on whether or not my previous coursework might count towards the courses needed for a license. She was leaving for a vacation and suggested that I meet with someone else in her absence. I met with a slim, White, male professor. After reviewing my transcript, he stated that I would have to re-take 8 classes. I thought that to be ridiculous, as my master’s program primarily consisted of 12 classes. That would almost be like getting another master’s degree in the same subject. So, I told him that I had also

applied to a doctoral program and would wait to see how that turned out. His response was, “Oh, okay. And you know, if you don’t get in, that program that will let you re-apply.” I thought it was strange that he appeared to assume that I would not get into the doctoral program upon first try. Not long after that, the female director returned from vacation and had a chance to review my transcript. She emailed me that I had all the courses necessary to meet the criteria for a license. Hmmm... So, on paper, I met all the criteria. Yet in person, I was lacking 8 courses.

Personal experiences such as these and the ones shared by the women in this study create awareness, allow for opportunities to dialogue, and build connections. As an adult educator, I feel that I can make a difference. It is true that not knowing why we feel marginalized, or disliked or discriminated against can be difficult. However, voicing one’s truth appeared to be empowering and healing to the women in this study. It was equally as powerful an experience for me. In fact, the participants in this study inspired me to create positive changes in my life. I joined a nutritional program at their suggestion. I began reading a book that one of them suggested. I touched on my own inner work and examined my thoughts on spirituality. This study is not only important to the field of adult education, I believe it is also a call for all people to try to understand what it means to be different—a different size, a different color, and even a different gender. By educating others about our differences, we will also find similarities. Education and empathy can help us find ways to minimize or even put an end to marginalizing or discriminating “others” in society.

## **APPENDIX SECTION**

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## **APPENDIX A**

### **CONSENT FORM**

**Study Title:** Fluffy Women of Color: Examining the Identities of Plus Size Latina and African American Women through a Lens of Intersectionality

**Principal Investigator:** A. Natalie Hendrix

**Co-Investigator/Faculty Advisor:** Jovita M. Ross-Gordon

This consent form will give you the information you will need to understand why this research study is being done and why you are being invited to participate. It will also describe what you will need to do to participate as well as any known risks, inconveniences or discomforts that you may have while participating. We encourage you to ask questions at any time. If you decide to participate, you will be asked to sign this form and it will be a record of your agreement to participate. You will be given a copy of this form to keep.

#### **PURPOSE AND BACKGROUND**

You are invited to participate in a research study to learn more about the identities of plus size women of color, as there is currently very limited research about such women. The information gathered will be used to educate those in the field of adult education and others in order to advocate for diversity and size acceptance. You are being asked to participate because you can identify as either a Latina or African American women, are between the ages of 25-65, are plus size and believe yourself to be confident and attractive.

#### **PROCEDURES**

If you agree to be in this study, you will participate in the following:

- 2 one hour long in-depth interviews, approximately a month apart from each other.
- During the first interview, you will be asked a number of questions about your identity and various experiences that have helped shape you into the person that you are. You will also be asked to bring and describe an artifact, such as a memento, photo, or object that you feel represents who you are.
- The second interview will consist of only questions, including follow up from the first interview.

We will set up a convenient time and location to meet, such as a public office building or a quiet place in the community. The interview will be (audio-recorded) and I will also take notes.

#### **RISKS/DISCOMFORTS**

You will be asked to use a pseudonym instead of your name, and demographic questions including, your age, education, occupation and your clothing size. In the unlikely event

that some of the interview questions make you uncomfortable or upset, you are always free to decline to answer or to stop your participation at any time. Should you feel discomfort after participating and you are a Texas State University student, you may contact the University Health Services for counseling services at list 512-245-2208. They are located 601 University Dr., San Marcos, TX 78666. If you are not a Texas State University Student, you can call 2-1-1 for a listing or referrals of supportive services in your area of residence.

### **BENEFITS/ALTERNATIVES**

There will be no direct benefit to you from participating in this study. However, the information that you provide will educate others about the identities of plus size women of color, and contribute to advocacy efforts for diversity and size acceptance.

### **EXTENT OF CONFIDENTIALITY**

Reasonable efforts will be made to keep the personal information in your research record private and confidential. Any identifiable information obtained in connection with this study will remain confidential and will be disclosed only with your permission or as required by law. The members of the research team and the Texas State University Office of Research Compliance (ORC) may access the data. The ORC monitors research studies to protect the rights and welfare of research participants.

Your name will not be used in any written reports or publications which result from this research. Data will be kept for three years (per federal regulations) after the study is completed and then destroyed.

### **PAYMENT/COMPENSATION**

After completion of the second interview, you will receive a gift card in the amount of \$10.00 for your participation.

### **PARTICIPATION IS VOLUNTARY**

You do not have to be in this study if you do not want to. You may also refuse to answer any questions you do not want to answer. If you volunteer to be in this study, you may withdraw from it at any time without consequences of any kind or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled.

### **QUESTIONS**

If you have any questions or concerns about your participation in this study, you may contact the Principal Investigator, A. Natalie Hendrix at ####-####-#### or emailaddress@something.com.

This project 2017617 was approved by the Texas State IRB on March 21, 2017. Pertinent questions or concerns about the research, research participants' rights, and/or research-related injuries to participants should be directed to the IRB Chair, Dr. Jon Lasser 512-245-3413 – (lasser@txstate.edu) or to Monica Gonzales, IRB Regulatory Manager 512-245-2314 - (meg201@txstate.edu).

**DOCUMENTATION OF CONSENT**

I have read this form and decided that I will participate in the project described above. Its general purposes, the particulars of involvement and possible risks have been explained to my satisfaction. I understand I can withdraw at any time.

---

Printed Name of Study Participant

---

Signature of Study Participant/Date

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Signature of Person Obtaining Consent

**APPENDIX B**  
**RECRUITMENT EMAIL**

To: Potential participant's email addresses  
From: A. Natalie Hendrix  
BCC:  
Subject: Research Participation Invitation: Plus size Women of Color

This email message is an approved request for participation in research that has been approved or declared exempt by the Texas State Institutional Review Board (IRB).

In order to better understand the identities of fluffy women of color and promote diversity and size acceptance, I am interested in recruiting women of color who are plus size to participate in this research study. These plus size women must identify or view themselves as fluffy women, which is defined as plus size, confident and attractive. Is that you or someone you know? Also, for this study, women of color is limited to Latina and African American women. They must also be between 25-65 years old. Participation is voluntary and confidential. Participants will participate in two 1-hour interviews at a convenient time and place. A \$10 gift card will be given to participants for their time.

To participate in this research or ask questions about this research please contact me at:

A. Natalie Hendrix  
Phone number-###-###-####  
Email-emailaddress@something.com.

This project 2017617 was approved by the Texas State IRB on March 21, 2017. Pertinent questions or concerns about the research, research participants' rights, and/or research-related injuries to participants should be directed to the IRB chair, Dr. Jon Lasser 512-245-3413 - (lasser@txstate.edu) or to Monica Gonzales, IRB administrator 512-245-2314 - (meg201@txstate.edu).



## APPENDIX C

### INTERVIEW QUESTIONS FOR PARTICIPANTS

#### Initial Interview

*Thank you for meeting with me and agreeing to share some of your experiences with me.*

*This study seeks to examine the identities of fluffy women of color.*

1. If you were writing a book about your life, how would you describe yourself, as the main character, to the readers?
2. How has your culture and/or family members played a role in your thoughts about who you are?
  - a) In your culture/family, what are the messages you received about a woman's body size?
  - b) Do you believe men receive different messages about their size?
3. Tell me about a couple of memorable successes or challenges you have overcome, and if you feel they were influenced by your gender, size or ethnicity.
4. One of the descriptors of a fluffy woman is that she is a plus size woman who has a high level of confidence, please share an example or two that illustrates how you see yourself as a confident woman.
5. Another descriptor of a fluffy woman is that she perceives herself is attractive, talk to me about the times when you feel attractive.
  - a) How do others treat you when you feel this way?
6. Tell me about the artifact that you brought and how it represents who you are.

## **Second Interview**

7. What role do you think your size plays in how others respond to you?
  - a) Can you think of examples where others have responded to you either positively or negatively in response to your size?
8. If you have ever felt discriminated against based on your gender, size, or ethnicity, please tell me about one or more of your memorable experiences (You may include personal, social, work and educational settings).
9. Why do you feel you were treated that way and how did you learn to deal with situations like that?
10. Can you share some thoughts about the way fluffy women of color are portrayed in the media, such as magazines, movies or on social media?
  - a) How do those portrayals make you feel?
  - b) How do you think fluffy women of color should be portrayed in those various forms of media?
11. Since we last spoke, have you thought about any additional thoughts or experiences that you would like to share with me about your identity?
12. Please help me clarify what I heard you say during our first interview regarding...
13. I would like to hear what you think about some of the conclusions I have been thinking about from the first interview. First, can you tell me if ...
14. What is the most important thing for others to know about who you are, or your identity?

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