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BELLY EXPERIENCES:
AN AUTOETHNOGRAPHIC STUDY OF WOMEN SHARING THE BELLY

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ABSTRACT

Women are connected to each other. More than a sole emotional connection; women interpersonally relate to one another through an important physical attribute, their bellies. This project examines the physical belly experiences shared by women through their interpersonal relationships. A woman’s belly creates a safe haven for nine months of life, identifies her sexuality, has been artistically depicted, and experiences gain and loss. Autoethnography, a reflexive storytelling method of investigation that focuses on the self, provided a methodology to examine the belly experiences of life, sexuality, art and loss. By using this method, I reflected on my own belly experiences and the interpersonal relationships that have developed as a result. Employing this method, gave me a better understanding of why women interpersonally relate through their physical bellies. While each “belly experience” studied in this project is unique to the individual; it is the commonalities of the experience, the ability to empathize and understand as a woman that bonds women to each other.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to acknowledge my thesis committee chair, Dr. Katie Hatfield, for her tireless positive attitude and willingness to take an “outside of the box” thesis project and guide me through the final step of my master’s program. In addition, I would like to acknowledge the dedication and participation of my thesis committee readers, Drs. Jill Brown and Sheri Shuler. Thank you for your time and talent on this project.

DEDICATION

I would like to dedicate this paper to my co-author and most cherished belly experience, the baby boy growing in my belly. Many mothers journal throughout their first pregnancy; you helped me write my master’s thesis. As Dean Jensen once told me, “Sarah, fathers make their babies cute; mothers make them smart.” I hope this experience has made you smart.

To my loving and supportive husband, you have been so patient with the late nights, high and low emotions and crazy hormones.

To my Mutti, you have always taught me that my education is a lifetime priority.

To my dear friend Anna, you have been my motivator through five years of graduate school. Thank you for never letting me quit.
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CHAPTER I

Introduction

Big Bellies

All the women in my family
have big bellies,
So for as long as I can remember
I have been taught to hold myself in.
As a young girl
I wore a girdle,
It was convenient for
holding up stockings.
“That’s what women do,”
my mother said.
But my mother also hid
behind closet doors to dress,
Covered herself up
when I walked into her bedroom.
Never undressed in front of my father,
and once told me that only on TV
do women like sex.
Once on an airplane I remember
an older woman
floating down the aisle
jiggling loose hips
proclaiming to anyone
who’d listen at 4:00 AM
on a flight from Tennessee to JFK
that she never confined
her body in a girdle.
I learned that the
long legged girdle
discouraged over anxious dates
on steamy nights
in parked cars.
When a favorite boyfriend
 teased me mercilessly,
nicknamed me old ironsides,
When pantyhose at long last
became fashionable,
I tried to let it all hang out.
But since all the women
in my family
have big bellies,
I continue
to tighten my grip.
My body aches.

Poem by Norma Ketzis Bernstock
Women are connected to each other. More than a sole emotional connection; women interpersonally relate to one another through an important physical attribute, their bellies. The belly is one of the body parts a young child identifies early in their discovery of the physical self. “Point to your nose…find your belly,” a mother would encourage. Proudly, any child regardless of gender would lift their shirt and point to their protruding round belly. As the little girl matures into a teen and then continues into adulthood; her belly changes, changes names, has experiences and shares with other women along the way.

A woman’s belly creates a safe haven for nine months of life, identifies her sexuality, has been artistically depicted, and experiences gain and loss. More importantly, the female belly shares with others. This means that the experiences of a woman’s belly can be a mutual experience. One woman may be pregnant and sharing the joys of the life inside her belly. While the other woman, perhaps not pregnant, feels those same feelings of excitement in her own belly. These feelings go beyond a “gut instinct” per se; they are a connection that bond women relationally to each other. The interpersonal relationships that exist between women are complex and rooted in common experiences shared. Experiences of the physical belly continue to cultivate this type of relationship for the female gender.

**Belly Talk**

The names associated with the belly have embraced and rejected this identifying feature for women. Such belly terminologies include belly, stomach, tummy, waist, abdomen, trunk and core. Westernized cultures and the media have exploited their own belly terms by exaggeration, e.g., using the term *core* when referring to the yoga craze.
Phrases or “play on words” are embedded in our everyday language. Such expressions include: belly talk, belly laugh, fire in the belly, feel it in your gut, don’t have the stomach for it, kicked in the gut, gut instinct, beer belly and the belly of the beast. This clearly identifies how the belly and our culture are uniquely tied together.

What was once celebrated in Renaissance art with such work as Titian's *Venus of Urbino* now has been diluted to the popularization of tummy tucks and “mommy makeovers”. Equally aligned with the terminology are the associated experiences. “…body-related experiences seem to have important consequences for an individual’s total well-being, including both positive and negative indicators of physical and mental health” (Mercurio & Landry, 2008, p. 464). This is important because when a physical body part such as the belly experiences rejection and acceptance in society it has impact on the well being of the individual.

Americans also have a tendency to value knowledge of the sciences and rational thinking and dismiss any physical intuition or feelings. As a result of discrediting the body, Flinders (2002) concludes that people learn not to trust their bodies and then essentially become alienated from them. “…the normative ideal [of a woman] is of a body that is absolutely tight, contained, firm, in other words, a body that is protected against eruption from within, whose internal processes are under control” (Bordo, 1993, p. 190). Grogan and Wainwright (1996) argue that girls as young as eight years old recognize and internalize dominant cultural pressures to be thin. This societal opinion of beauty emotionally separates women from their bodies; they become desensitized from their bellies and stories. Our culture is teaching women to see their belly as a body part to be trimmed and confined instead of the “Renaissance view” of expression.
Art Embraces the Belly

Artists in the Renaissance era celebrated the real female form. What essentially makes us female was exaggerated and accepted. The breasts, full hips and bellies were depicted in their natural state and celebrated. Today, modern artists and society have abandoned this celebration as their interpretations of the female belly have changed. Interestingly, I think it is important to note that women’s bodies have not changed. We still have breast, full hips and bellies; but the artists today choose not to celebrate what is real. They idealize the minority female figure and popularize it as though it is the norm. This unattainable interpretation removes the beauty of the belly and replaces it with emaciated stomachs and abdomens with no story to share; they are empty. From the 14th to 17th centuries, Europe was revived with a period of Renaissance. Art pieces of this period such as Titian's *Venus of Urbino* (see Figure 1) displayed a freedom of expression with mind and body.

![Image of Venus of Urbino painting](image)

Figure 1. Image of *Venus of Urbino* painting

Venus, the woman in the painting is nude with a rather plump belly. She is not “sucking it in” or attempting to show off her abs; she simply looks at the viewer unconcerned with
her nudity and furthermore her body. Haughton (2004) notes the interpretation of beauty in Renaissance art is made to be known to be more intricate than a carbon copy representation of sexuality or of a person’s physical appearance. Instead, Renaissance art produced what was considered the period’s ideal beauty image, i.e., a plump belly.

Figure 2. Image of Lady with a Mirror painting

Figure 3. Image of Venus with a Mirror painting
Another art that embraces the belly is one of movement, belly dancing. Not only has the belly been idealized through painting but the art of “movement” has celebrated a fuller belly. The belly and art connect women through the dancing art referred to as “belly dancing”. As once an American display at the 1893 Chicago World’s Fair, this movement not only has a historical past but now has a modern flare. Now, this type of dance involving a belly has been popularized as a fun workout class at fitness clubs or even by musical artists, e.g., Shakira. Belly dancing has reclaimed the sexiness of women of the more rounded belly and reinvigorated a culture of “curves” which was once historically considered vulgar. One can only imagine the shock and awe that was created with belly dancing when first introduced to the United States in 1893 by Algerian and Syrian dancers. Carlton (1994) states that the celebration of a fleshy physique in belly dance is empowering because it competes with current societal truth of what is true beauty. This artistic movement is directly connected to identity. Movement and
choreography may function as story telling - a narrative of the body’s history, the individual body, and, by extension, the community and in some ways humanity itself.

Sachs (1963) states that belly dancing consists of rotating motions of the entire pelvis, which travelers describe as belly dances, posterior dances, or hip dances…frequently these arts may have only the purpose of sexual stimulation. But the original goal was magical: coitus movements, like all other sex motives, promote life and growth. Speaking to the promotion of life, Christ (1987) proposes that the fast shimmy of the hips signifies sexual delight, while the slower shiftetelli movements are a histrionic enactment of the moment of childbirth; hence the dramatic floor work that often accompanies this part of the dance, hearkening back to a time when women had total control over their womanly privileges and before male doctors took over as gynecologists.

As I have migrated into my adult life, I considered my thoughts and opinions about my body to be fairly liberal. Prior to my first exposure to a belly dancing performance, I discovered what Carlton (1994) refers to when movements, which primarily utilized the hips, stomach, and chest, were considered offensive within a period that dictated women’s bodies should be heavily clothed and tightly constrained.

In 2005, I found myself experiencing this art form for the first time. My initial motivation for attendance was to support a local fundraising cause. I had followed the trickling crowd into the backroom, and shuffled myself through the tables and chairs set in a communal style seating. Smells of brick oven waft in the air of the Pizza Shoppe’s

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2 The shiftetelli is the Greek and Turkish name for belly dance, but in Western belly dance culture it refers to a popular, slow rhythm. It is marked by an opening heavy beat on the hand drum and subsequent softer beats.
front end restaurant in the historic Benson neighborhood in Omaha, Neb. Nervously, I push back the funky paisley curtains and walk into low lit back room with a center stage. This area was referred to as the PS Collective, an extension of the Pizza Shoppe, hence “PS”. The atmosphere of this secret backroom was reminiscent of a sexy beatnik coffee house with an eclectic mix of soft furniture, tables and chairs.

Prior to the show, I casually scoped the room to see what other kind of attendees would be watching a belly dancing troupe. To my surprise, quite a large variety; men, women, 20-somes, 40-somes and one kid ran around in the back near the bathrooms. With such a variety of viewers, it made me feel less awkward about watching a bunch of women shake their bellies.

The backroom was full of people and small clouds of cigarette smoke like mini volcanoes scattered across the room. While sitting there with a slice of pizza and a Blue Moon beer, I began to build my expectations of what the show would entail. Would it be an exotic, tan Mediterranean like woman, perhaps like Jasmine from the Disney movie, Aladdin? I didn’t have much more time to brainstorm as the bright spot light hit the center of the stage. A full figured woman appeared in full belly dancing apparel made up of red fabric and gold chain that made noise as she approached the microphone. Her pale skin was covered with a lot of stage make-up and her bleach blonde hair made her appearance more theatrical rather than the “Jasmine picture” I had envisioned. She was the head of the performers from the Diva Soma Belly Dance Tribe. She was enthusiastic, despite her calm, soothing and engaging voice, as she explained the troupe, their activities and the art of belly dancing. I couldn’t help but notice her cartoonish facial expressions almost like a clown with all that make-up.
The music cued up and she started first swaying her hips back and forth clicking to the rhythmic beats. I felt embarrassed for her at first; such an exposed plump belly. I wondered if she was self conscious about her body. I knew I could never be that vulnerable in front of a crowd of strangers. I started feeling anxiety for her. “What if no one clapped?” “What if the judgmental whispers started?” Then the jingle bells wrapped around her belt chimed loudly as she shook harder. The crowd applauded and she graciously smiled. I felt relieved.

She was then joined on stage by her fellow troupe members for a group performance. The variety of body types was pretty amazing…long, short, full, fuller, athletic bellies all in sync. In fact, the skinny belly was my least favorite. She couldn’t move like the others could who had fuller hips and belly. Then one by one each broke off and had their own solos similar to when a lead singer steps back to let the drummer have the lime light. I clapped my ass off as I could never get in a swimsuit and shake it like that. It was so extremely feminine and sexy yet none of these women would have been put into the traditional category of what “popular sexy” is these days.

Belly dancing celebrates this expression of the connection between the body and each other. Women support each other through interpersonal relationships especially when body image can be negative through puberty and essential developmental periods. Further, to a woman’s detriment, Americans have developed norms about ideal physical sizes, attractiveness and appropriate uses of the body. Griffith (2004) asserts that people who do not fit these ideals may develop a negative relationship with their bodies. This ideology of a tight body is where a contradiction takes place in belly dancing. One must be in control or “tight” but at the same time loose and “wiggly” and at times out of
control. The belly of a belly dancer is far different than that of a calculated, restrained ballerina.

The central philosophy of belly dance practitioners is one of acceptance of women’s bodies and their differences. I walked back to my car feeling sexier that night. Swinging my hips a little bit more than usual, I was inspired by how they used their belly as a symbol of strength and empowerment. Their expression of positive performance made a difference in me.

**Media and Motherhood**

Interestingly, in the surge of popular culture, having a belly bump is now considered sexy and is often splashed on the covers of magazines. No more moo moos and shaming the belly as a protruding side effect of pregnancy. Celebrities have given this belly experience a positive boost as something that should be rightfully celebrated. In May 2009, pregnant celebrities such as Naomi Priestly participated in the second year of Pregnancy Awareness Month (PAM) founded by holistic lifestyle expert Anna Getty. Furthermore, as stated in a MSNBC article in 2006, motherhood is hot and celebrities make it even hotter. The celebrity endorsement of pregnancy started before 2009 when in 1991, Demi Moore notably graced the cover of *Vanity Fair* magazine with nothing on but her 7-month belly, a pair of earrings and an enormous diamond ring (see Figure 2).
According to Murphy (2007), the photographer, Annie Leibovitz, displayed the raw emotion of pregnancy to be a sexy one which attracted differing opinions. These opinions expressed discontentment with the sexualized nature of a mother to celebrations of female empowerment. As the Rosie the Riveter iconic image connected to American women in factories during World War I; the photograph of Moore gave sexual power to mothers. No longer was shame attached to a large belly and unforgiving stretch marks. Although critically, Moore’s photo doesn’t show the stretch marks or the sometimes often “fuzziness” that occurs on the belly. She is airbrushed and now the idealized pregnant woman.

According to Liang, Tracy, Taylor, Williams, Jordan and Miller (2002), while the concept of empowerment is complex, some scholars argue that, particularly for women, empowerment is a process that occurs through the establishment of relationships based on mutual empathy and support. This provides evidence that women utilize their interpersonal relationships to sustain themselves as they experience life changing events, e.g., pregnancy.
Celebrity mother and actress Angelina Jolie has also contributed to the deeper understanding of motherhood. Yes, she has made it fashionable but more importantly, Jolie has expanded the notion of what a family is which has a great deal of impact on society. The public link between motherhood and sexiness, which began with Moore and Madonna has taken a leap forward with Jolie, making room for a broader definition of motherhood, one that embraces the label of “mom” thus shifting society’s label of mothers as dowdy running nose wipers.

**Autoethnography as a Methodology**

One successful method of inquiry which allows us to unpack the stories of life experiences is ethnography. Ethnography as a method of investigation has been resilient for over 40 years and continues to answer the “why” and “how come” questions of the human condition. Disciplines such as, cultural studies, economics, social work, education, folklore, geography, history, linguistics, communication studies, performance studies and psychology have made use of ethnography as a legitimate method of investigation. As the go-to tool for most anthropologists and many other social scientists, ethnography links what people say to what they actually do. This kind of qualitative research avoids the common pitfalls that come from relying only on traditional methods such as experiments or self-reported data.

Authors of ethnographic work dive into their field experiences first hand to truly understand the group or subculture they are studying. While performing this investigative study, they often keep written journals for onsite documentation. These journals or field notes have traditionally shared a focus on “others” rather than their own personal development and role in the research process.
For this reason, I plan to make use of a branch of the social science work of ethnography called autoethnography that uses a reflexive storytelling method of investigation that focuses on the self. The emergence of autoethnography occurred during the postmodern era when it was made possible for critical theories to emerge and take hold in academic inquiry and to open up the possible range of research strategies. For example, feminist theory, and feminist research using multiple research techniques, has grown in reaction to the “male-oriented perspective that has predominated in the development of social science” (Neuman, 1994, p. 72). Because of this Ellis (2004) argues that feminist writers advocate for research that begins with one’s own experience.

Using this method, I will reflect on the role my belly in my interpersonal relationships with other women. According to Hayano (1979), autoethnography is a form of autobiographical personal narrative that explores the writer's experience of life. The methodological approach of autoethnography speaks to our basic understanding of the self through ‘storytelling’. “Stories are the way humans make sense of their worlds. Although Ellis (2004) acknowledges “stories are essential to human understanding and are not unique to autoethnography” (p. 32), autoethnography strives to give a voice to the voiceless through the telling of stories. How would we ever know about past generations and learn from their experiences as we are their direct decedents? We learn and grow from those who have come before us. Further, are lives are influenced and forever changed by the sharing of the stories of others. This is exactly what the authors of ethnography and autoenthnography accomplish by investigating a culture and then telling their story for them. Autoethnography tells one’s own story to also illuminate a culture. Otherwise, would their story even be told? Broadly speaking, autoethnography is an
“autobiographical genre of writing and research that displays multiple layers of consciousness, connecting the personal to the cultural” (Ellis & Bochner, 2000, p. 739). As I continue to investigate the interpersonal relationships of women and their “physical belly” connections, using autoethnography is an appropriate choice for my method as it humanizes my research through self focus and discovery.

The purpose of this project is to investigate how women interpersonally relate through their physical belly experiences. It seeks to answer the question: Why do women relate through their belly experiences? The next section of this project will focus on creating a more thorough understanding of the belly experience of “life”. While each gender has a physical belly, the value of the belly to a woman tells “her” story. These stories and experiences of the belly have morphed in vocabulary, given life, expressed sexuality, embraced art and nurtured a loss. The belly is not about having abs of steel or enforcing a low carbohydrate fad diet; it’s about the experience and the bonding that brings women together. This celebration has not always been a constant. When society began to stop celebrating the wiggle and jiggle of a happy body; women began to see themselves as an identified body part…my thighs are fat…my hips are too wide.

Mercurio and Landry (2008) shame society in leading women to this objectification of their bodies. This negative persona of the body only poisons the bond of what women have together. Women must continue to discover and rewrite their stories about their bellies through relationship building. In the face of modern culture and popular media, women need to continue to celebrate their belly empowerment.
Autoethnography allows us to begin to celebrate women’s belly stories in our disciplinary pursuits. In the next section, I will validate why autoethnography as a methodology is an appropriate choice for research.

The use of autoethnography for this project is an appropriate choice of methodology as I, a female researcher, investigate the interpersonal relationships of women and their physical belly experiences. In order to move knowledge forward and not simply interpret works of others, I need to be personal and play an active role.

“Autoethnographies are highly personalized accounts that draw upon the experience of the author/researcher for the purposes of extending sociological understanding” (Sparkes, 2000, p. 21). I challenge traditional scientific approaches, that this new method is valid and lends more weight to reflexivity/voice in research rather than a mere token paragraph in conventional texts. And although the development of physical belly experiences and interpersonal female relationships does not at this time have a documented place in theory and research, it is suggested here that inquiry into these stories as data and as method would offer another means by which to analyze the significance between the two.

Readers of this project will gain perspective by reflecting on my stories and at the same time applying the supporting research. While my stories are unique within this project, they specifically address the varied physical female belly experiences and the interpersonal relationships connected to them.

Autoethnography celebrates the methods of research grounded in lived experience and evocative modes of representation that seek to engage readers emotionally, aesthetically, ethically and politically. The emergence of autoethnography as a method of inquiry moves researchers’ “use of self-observation as part of the situation studied to self-
introspection or self-ethnography as a legitimate focus of study in and of itself” (Ellis, 1991, p. 30). And writing itself is a way of knowing; there are things I know about the belly that I have learned through writing.

Readers of autoethnographic research are able to put themselves in the place of others, within a culture of experience that expands their social awareness and empathy breaking down barriers of ignorance.

“The development of this kind [ethnographic memoirs] of reflexive writing is connected, according to Tedlock, to a shift in the 1970s from an emphasis on participant observation to the ‘observation of participation’ – where researchers observe the interaction they have with participants – and to an emphasis on the process of writing. This shift was inspired by the epistemological doubt associated with the crisis of representation and the changing composition of those who become ethnographers – with more women, working class, ethnic and racial groups, gay and lesbian, and third and fourth world scholars now represented” (Ellis, 2004, p. 50).

Autoethnography has opened doors for those who may have not had a voice in traditional methods of investigation. Rather than writing strictly about what the researcher observes; the research has the opportunity to write about their interaction with the research subject. The research itself is no longer a one sided experience; rather the experience is felt by both the researcher and the subject. This complexity only adds to the richness of the knowledge gained.

Methods

The stories I have chosen to focus on during this project emerged while brainstorming my research question. I made a list of all of the possible physical belly experiences I have had. Then, I began to categorize them within the liberal arts discipline, such as arts, humanities, etc. I chose the most significant stories that represent a shift in my life as I have experienced adulthood. Because the stories I am telling are memories and not necessarily a current experience or one I can immerse myself into with field notes
and active observations; I have utilized pictures, written communications, personal interviews and journaling.

The structure of an autoethnography varies widely from the formal style of a scientific publication to literary texts which can include poetics or even a video autoethnography, e.g., Jean Carломusto and Richard Fung’s (2009) insight on accounts of queer relationality. There are little structured regulations on how to write out an autoethnography as the content and meaning of the story is the most important rather than conventions of scholarly production. McIlveen (2008) states that rhetoric and method are incapable of being disentangled in autoethnography; the method itself ultimately requires rhetorical expression. An autoethnographer may use a combination of archival material, e.g., photographs, continuous self-observation and recording, e.g., daily journaling in a diary or by making connections through other sources of data, e.g., conversations or interviews with individuals who can support with evidence additional data or conclusions. The end goal of an autoethnography piece is to produce a meaningful account not just a self-absorbed rendering. Authenticity is the key and with the author’s raw emotion it should enable the reader to deeply grasp the experience and draw conclusions from the research.

Through my autoethnographic writing, I hope to accomplish what Ellis (2004) describes as exposing a vulnerable self that is moved by and may move through, refract, and resist cultural interpretations. And as I move backward and forward, inward and outward, distinctions between personal and cultural become blurred so that I may see clearly.
The purpose of this research is to provide evidence of a link between belly experiences of life, sexuality, art and loss for women and their sustained interpersonal relationships. By using autoethnography as a methodological choice I will be able to reflexively explore my own belly experiences as they help to influence and construct the relationships I have with these women.

In chapter two, I will tell the story of my belly button piercing experience during my freshman year of undergraduate college while attending a university in the Midwest. I went to my piercing appointment with a rowing teammate, Shannon, at an exotic piercing shop in the downtown area near campus. The owner himself pierced my 18-year old belly button. This experience helped form my sexual self through the simple act of piercing and adorning my belly.

In chapter three, I will tell the story about my first two months of pregnancy and the night I told the announcement to my mother, Holly. The five inch scar on her belly serves as a reminder of her seven-year journey to become pregnant. Her belly and that scar have become a part of my birth story, her miracle baby as she calls it. This brings relevance to my life as I cannot tell my story of my birth without including the crucial story of how my mother was given a chance to conceive.

In chapter four, I will tell the story about my best friend, Elaine, who experienced a miscarriage three weeks before my wedding; before her duties would begin as a bridesmaid. She has planned this pregnancy even down to the larger purchased dress which had to be altered significantly without a baby in her belly. The absence of this life in my dear friend’s belly has relevance in my life as we grieved her loss together and I began to truly trust in a plan not in my control.
These belly experiences are significant to me as they identify my journey of self-discovery through the female interpersonal relationships I share in my life. Therefore, in chapter five, I will discuss the implications of each belly experience and offer suggestions for future explorations concerning the belly experiences.
CHAPTER II

The Belly and Sexuality

Same state; different town, I didn’t go far to attend my undergraduate college. Freshman year and I was aching to display my new found adulthood. I joined activities and clubs, one of them was the rowing team. I really enjoyed the “crew mentality”; play hard and work hard. We practiced early but made sure to make time for late night gatherings, theme parties and formals. I quickly made friends with the other girls who lived in the same dorm as me which was convenient for carpooling since I had no car. Shannon was a local girl with a car and a laid back attitude.

Often scholars emphasize individual motivations and the most frequently cited are: desire to ornament one's body; fashion; enhancing one's individuality; desire to adjust to the milieu; being a member of a subculture; increasing sexual attractiveness; desire to commemorate an important moment: and friendship or love (Stirm, 2007; Morris, 2002; Seleman, 2003; Drews et al., 2000; Forbes, 2001). I had a tattoo at the time but that was with my mom’s permission. This time I wanted the belly button piercing because I could make the decision on my own and I thought it was a cool mature college thing to do. For the most part, I was labeled the “goody goody” Polly Anna type in high school; I was newly single from my high school sweetheart and ready to claim my sexy independence. I then expressed my desire for a belly button piercing one day; Shannon was all about it. “Let’s do it,” she said. “I know a lot of friends who have gone downtown to a piercing shop. It’s clean. Don’t worry.” Why not? I already had one tattoo that I talked my mom into while on a trip to Steamboat Springs, Colorado. But this time, I
didn’t need her permission and parental signature. I was 18 and had independence. We made appointments the next day.

As we made our way down the street, I was so nervous. I wasn’t exactly the prototype of the kind of person who gets a piercing. My plaid button down shirt and navy shorts screamed preppy freshman. We came to the big black door with a hand painted sign. The whole feeling was unnerving or maybe I was watching too many Law & Order marathons. My “creepy meter” was off the charts. Once inside, we took the steep steps upstairs to the shop. There were about six stations with dental patient chairs which reclined. Shannon and I were insistent on going together. A rough, old looking biker checked out appointment times and had us fill out the release forms. “Alright, let’s do this,” he said as he pulled his matte grey hair off his face into a messy ponytail.

**Shared Sexual Expression Rituals**

Although regardless of the piercing phenomenon, according to Dickson (2003), the sexual behavior of individuals’ changes over time, therefore, the current enthusiasm for body piercing is also likely to change over time. As for now a change has not occurred and the belly piercing ritual has morphed into a bonding effort, one that women share together. Rarely, would one induce self pain without a support system. Piercing is often experienced in a group as a way to display approval and support. In the traditional dyadic relationship of parent to child, it’s unlikely the child would receive approval or support from a parent to participate in a piercing ritual. Therefore, a peer friendship between females provides a more likely bond that gives the support of the decision. Interpersonal relationships offer a sense of confidentiality between two people; therefore
it is clear to understand, for example, why young women participate in this sexual expression ritual with a close friend while away from parental restraint.

He asked me to lift up my shirt. I was hesitant to show Ol’ Man River my little kid belly. It wasn’t a Britney Spears belly by any means. She had visible ab muscles and a large belly piercing which was almost always bedazzled in a gold chain. No, my belly just looked soft and innocent. Clearly, this piercing would make me more mature for college. I laid down into the reclining chair; the smell of cigarettes on his breath was nauseating. With his rubber gloved hands, he smeared orange iodine over my belly to clean the piercing area and dye my skin. A long piercing rod about the length of my forearm was forced through a fold of skin. One silver and blue jeweled ring a second later and it was done. I was pierced.

Shannon helped me up out of the chair and we proudly gawked at each other, perhaps even sucking in our bellies a little more than when we first entered the shop. With our orange stained bellies and red piercing marks; we took a picture together lifting our shirts to show the world our entrance into adulthood. Another piercing patron volunteered to take the picture for us. I left that day feeling like an adult; I made a choice and didn’t have to ask for permission. This was my belly. Was ownership over my own body the way to truly feel like I had matured? Koch, Roberts, Armstrong & Owen (2010) argues while seemingly common in the larger culture, individuals seek to express their need for uniqueness, even if that is simply a tattoo that differs in appearance from those of others. I found this argument to be true as I felt the need to make my body unique and by choosing my uniqueness, e.g., a piercing, I felt more ownership over my body.
Some consider piercing a deviant behavior or a simple show of independence from a young adult. Either extremity displays that piercing of the belly as an expression and more than a fashion statement. “…Body piercing might have meaning in terms of a corporeal expression of the self, rather than simply being a fashion item or a cultural deviance marker, particularly among women. The women who chose to be pierced showed other behaviors consistent with this theory of self-expression” (Skegg, Nada-Raja, Paul and Skegg, 2006, p. 53). This finding suggests that for some, body piercing may be more related to an emotional experience which is shared amongst interpersonal relationships.

Weeks went by with low cut jeans and first aid ointment. I cared for my new piece of art but never once wore a shirt that exposed my belly to the outside world, or in fact, rarely did anyone know that I even had my belly button pierced. I finally landed my first internship with a local advertising agency which required big girl pants, literally. No more below the belly pants. I came to discover that real women’s pants actually sit above
your hips. This whole discovery was mind boggling. Was I actually wearing what I referred to as “mom pants”?

I crossed over and had my first pair of real business professional pants. My internship tasks consisted of a lot of sitting and then popping up at a moment’s notice to answer the calls of my supervisor from the next office over. One distinct pop up and the pop down was quick. My new big girl pants tugged quite viciously at my big girl piercing. My belly was in torment and one of these things on my body was going to win either way. I wriggled my piercing free from the fabric and thought, “damn, that didn’t feel good”. That summer after being in the middle of my belly tug-o-war; the piercing surrendered. Or maybe I really became an adult and took my piercing out. Either way, still marking the existence of my first step into adulthood are two distinct holes. Though they now slightly closed up, they will be there forever; holes will always be on my belly.

Since the belly is in the lower half of one’s body, this part has a sexual connotation. With the popularity of piercing and tattooing, the belly has become even more sexual. Skegg et al. (2006) conclude that body piercing for a woman could be a possible indicator of sexual behavior. Even the evidence of a past piercing may document a moment of sexual discovery (see Figure 4). This conclusion correlates the sexual nature of the belly and the experience had by a woman.
While women have turned to adorning their bellies with jewels as a sign of potential maturity and sexuality, the next chapter will discuss how the belly can be sexualized by the creation of life.
CHAPTER III

The Belly and Life

Memorial Day weekend is not a traditional celebratory weekend for me that involves travel plans or elaborate social engagements. It’s an extra day off of work; an extended weekend that is usually full of guilt with undone tasks. This year was particularly quiet; just me, my husband and one incredible, mouthwatering steak salad. Adrian is our household grocery shopper so he is always adding “treats” to the cart and furthermore, the final bill. This trip included one glistening jug of margarita mix. As Adrian began the usual regime of salting the rims of the glasses, I said, “So, I have one more test left…should I take it?” “What?” he said. “You took a pregnancy test and did it without me?” “Well, yes, about a week ago…I thought it would be a nice surprise.”

Really, I was reaching pretty far since we only had been trying the ‘baby making’ for a month and it’s not like I was really late per se. But, oh well, I had PayFlex dollars to burn so I headed to my local drugstore and went for it.

Peeing on a plastic stick is not as natural for women as it may seem so I opted for the plastic cup method. We have been peeing in cups for years during annual exams, etc., so that skill was at a mastery level. Three minutes later alone in my apartment…negative. Alright, no biggie - one pink line and for sure only one. I never said anything to Adrian and tucked the extra test in the linen closet. Now, faced with a glass of liquid gold tequila to quench the weekend of relaxation, why not just be really sure. So, I marched off to our bathroom with plastic cup in hand. I almost felt ridiculous at my first attempt and the idea of going back a week later seemed wasteful but oh well, I had to pee anyway. Plastic cup ready to go and a little nervous this time I blundered my years of aiming skills and landed
a small stream on the floor. Being the instruction rule follower that I am I sacrificed my instinct to clean up pee on our grey tile floor and opted to complete the test first with accuracy. Dip, cap and wait three more minutes. Adrian set the kitchen timer (like we would forget to check). And the wait began as I disinfected the floor. With the smell of Clorox spray and anticipation looming, the microwave beeped and we proceeded to the bathroom counter. Adrian said, “Okay, lady you had the first round by yourself. I’m checking first.” I quickly responded in a casual attitude, “I know I am not pregnant.” He walked up the counter and sighed then turned around and said, “I think we’re pregnant.” Shocked and awed, I cupped my hands over my mouth and began to cry. He revealed the two very distinct pink lines. This was not the one line and perhaps that’s a second line. This was a damn that’s a second line for sure. Following a long hug and tears of joy, we shared a ‘what’s next moment’. Well, I wasn’t reaching for a margarita. Instead, I grabbed my purse off of the dining room table and headed back to the drugstore. Still slightly in denial, I needed more proof that something was making a home in my belly. Digital, two packs for the price of one, early results quicker…soon I was headed home with seven more tests. I placed each test one after another in an organized vertical system on the cheesy gold and cream swirled counter of our apartment bathroom, all positive. That evening, I enjoyed the warm feelings I felt with my partner, my love, my best friend. And of course, the steak salad…this time I skipped the margarita.

**Kinship of Pregnancy**

Most notably a woman’s belly separates itself from the male counterpart by its ability to sustain life for nine months. According to Peterson (1987), the way a woman has access to what it means to be a "true woman," or mother, is by becoming a mother.
This belly experience marks an incredible and significant moment for the belly and in turn bonds those who have shared this experience. The act of pregnancy enables those who have experienced this moment to pass on stories of their own birth, exchange anecdotal stories of pregnancy of their own or others and what to except ahead once parenthood arrives. This evidence from Oakley (1980) suggests that act of pregnancy and/or the ability to carry a child is an exclusive club to those who have had the experience.

I promptly made my first doctor’s appointment and to my surprise, they scheduled the appointment for nine weeks later. Nine weeks of enlarged breasts, saltine crackers, ginger snaps and diet ginger ale. I forfeited my morning cup of joe for a crappy nauseous feeling of hormonal overload. Anything cracker-like, slightly salty and full of carbs sounded great to me. Not very far along and my pregnant belly was looking fuller due to my cracker addiction and sudden craving for sleep and more sleep. Armed with only the knowledge of borrowed library books, I read one startling factoid. No lunchmeat?! I made a sudden halt in my casual reading. I love sandwiches and once the sour stomach feeling subsides, I was looking forward to going back to my deli subs and meals on the run. According to my book, lunchmeat can carry bacteria harmful to pregnant women due to our weakened immune systems causing birthing problems and even miscarriages. What now? Bring on the crackers.

The day had finally arrived and if given the green light at our doctor’s appointment, we planned to reveal the belly surprise to our family. “How can I help you? The cheerful, middle aged women in her official turquoise unformed shirt asked.” “I have my nine week visit”, I said in a whispery voice”. “Okay, yes you do. Please fill out these
forms and have a seat. We will be with you in a moment. Today, you will see Nurse Heidi. Next time, you will see the doctor.” We positioned ourselves on the coaches near the television in the waiting room as I thumbed through a parenting magazine. Skimming the articles and focusing more on the other patients, I was mesmerized by the varying belly sizes. Little ones, low ones, protruding belly buttons. Some of the other mothers looked like their water would break any moment. What did they think of me? I don’t even look pregnant. Maybe I should stick out my belly so I fit into this club? I thought to myself.

Regardless of the depth of relationship, women relate to other women through pregnancy. I would draw upon an analogy of buying a home comparatively to a pregnancy. It takes time and effort to find a home. Along the way, much advice is given about interest rates, neighborhoods, school districts, etc. Modern day scientific advancements have provided pregnancy opportunities to same gender partners, infertile couples and parents choosing to be single. Pregnancy, like home buying, is fair game to receive opinions from others. Even those who don’t give advice will reminisce about their own home buying experience or even the future home they would like to own one day. But, more importantly, pregnancy like home buying doesn’t have to be experienced to be discussed. Apartment renters may describe their future home and plans. Therefore, pregnancy has the ability to bond with those yet able to have this particular belly experience.

If you are unable to conceive or make the choice not to, experiences such as open adoptions have been substituted for this belly experience. Many adoptive mothers and
birth mothers will bond together through the pregnancy and share along the way. That way both “mothers” feel as though they are participating.

**Pregnancy Storytelling**

One by one, the waiting room emptied as I impatiently waited to hear my name. At times, I thought perhaps I hadn’t listened hard enough and missed my chance to walk through the doorway with a nurse carrying a clipboard. “Sarah.” I popped up quickly so she would see me and not move on to the next patient. As I followed her to the scale, Adrian dutifully took my purse and a step back. Why would I add more weight? “Okay, follow me this way, the nurse instructed.” We stepped into a small, modern decorated examination room. “Please change into this gown, opening at the front.” Following a large blood draw, cup peeing and some poking by nurse’s assistant, Nurse Heidi arrived. Feet in the stirrups and positioned for spread eagle, I managed to sit up for a cordial handshake and introductions. I was focused on one burning question. “So, Heidi, I read something about no lunchmeat during pregnancy is that true?” She stopped and examined my concerned face. “Lunchmeat is okay from mass produced commercial places such as sandwich shops and restaurants. Just promise me you will avoid the gas station sandwiches.” Adrian laughed. Yes, my second documented tears of joy during this belly journey was for lunchmeat. Promptly following our appointment, I directed Adrian to my favorite sub shop. I had been avoiding my love of sandwiches for nine weeks and I was ‘cheesed-out’.

That evening, we began our on the road show announcement with the parents. Our mission - one night; four households. After my father’s and my father-in-law’s, we continued our pilgrimage to my mother’s house.
Females relate to each other because of the ability to give life within their own body not necessarily requiring them to have the experience per se. Biologically, every woman has a mother, and their own “birth story” is a familiar one whether negative or positive. It may be retold to future generations or become a story of reflection as the daughter becomes a mother herself. “The flow of information in the stories of pregnancy follows such a generational structure primarily for romantic or theological discourse” (Peterson, 1987, p. 43). This means most women share their own stories with an equal generational counterpart. The focus is less on the accuracy of the story but the act of sharing. The concept of the information flow described by Peterson (1987) brings more justification to the concept of an interpersonal relationship growing through pregnancy storytelling.

Announcing our pregnancy to my mom was such a surreal experience. I morphed from her daughter to a fellow mother with one quick look of surprise as the words left my mouth. As tears filled her eyes, she said, “Now, I have another person to worry about.” My mother went on a seven year journey to become pregnant. She lovingly refers to the five inch scar on her belly as her “smiley face”, the result of a laparoscopic procedure to diagnosis her endometriosis (see Figure 5).
“Now, my baby is having a baby,” she said so proudly. As mom went on to share her story, I listened to the rhythmic way she builds suspense when storytelling. She sat across from me a tape recorder separated mother and daughter but her determination to tell “her” story kept the room warm like two friends in common conversation. I hit the record button.

She continued on…okay, I still remember the day I went into the doctor’s office to take a pregnancy test. The at-home tests were not great back then. I went home; didn’t even wait for the results but I remember getting a phone call from the doctor himself at 6:30 p.m. that evening. When I answered the phone, I could feel my heart pounding as he was going to tell me one way or another but I thought it was strange he called me. As a slow smile warmed her olive skin, she shined. I saw myself in her grinning face; I saw my eight pregnancy tests all lined up in a row. She continued, “He said I was pregnant and then I’ll always remember he said, “God bless you.” “He was pretty Catholic”, my mom chuckled. I just started crying and funny I don’t recall my plan on how I was going to tell your dad as much as my plan to tell your grandparents. I wrote a letter and made it from the baby. I even printed it with backwards letter and said how excited my mommy and daddy were for my arrival. I mailed it and they were shocked.

She paused. “I am so shocked,” she smiled again. “Little Sarah, my Sarah Marie, is having a baby.”

This belly experience provides a sense of belonging that gives women both a feeling of being valued by others and a sense of congruency with others. Just as the belly
and life have a direct impact on female interpersonal relationships; so too does the belly and loss. In chapter four, I will explore the belly and loss.
CHAPTER IV

The Belly and Loss

December marked the halfway point before my summer wedding in June. Obsessed with the details and planning, I had turned into a crazy bridal Santa makin’ a list and checkin’ it twice. My big priority this month: get those damn bridesmaids to order their dresses to ensure prompt delivery with time to spare.

Elaine, my dear friend from college, made me a little nervous as she was my only out-of-towner. Her dress order was crucial as I felt pretty confident that most of the locals would get theirs on time. She has the color, order number, web address…check it off the list. “Elaine, have you ordered your dress?” “Yes Woots (her college nickname for me), and I was able to buy the bigger size I wanted.” “Why a bigger size?” She began to explain how she and her husband, Herbie, were trying for their second child and she knew if successful, she would be showing at the wedding. “But, don’t worry, not too pregnant…I will be there!” she joked.

Elaine’s first pregnancy came as a surprise only because she had anticipated some problems associated with her diabetes. To their surprise, they were able to get pregnant right away and she gave birth to a healthy baby boy. Her doctor knew that she wanted more children and encouraged them to consider having them sooner than later to avoid any future complications.

Woot....

Just wanted to let you know, I ordered my dress (moo moo size) and I love it! It is really cute and love the color (they had your color in my size.....meant to be:)!!!) She told me to watch after Jan 1 for discontinuations on dresses b/c that’s when the new stuff comes out, but no news as of yet on that! How are things with you guys? Man I miss you.....every Thursday night. Herbie and I both miss you:(! Wish I was there to help with things or chat or hug! Love you to pieces! XO...me

Can't wait for JUNE!
It’s now June and that checklist is dwindled down to practically nothing and at this point…getting married was the priority; not the list. E-mail communications amongst family, friends and those involved with the festivities had become an hourly occurrence. One morning, I received my usual “check-in/how’s your sanity e-mail” from Elaine or what I thought it would be.

Hey Woot....
Just wanted to let you know that we have a little bit of sad news. We were going to announce this weekend that we were pregnant to our family & friends. We went in on Tuesday for the ultrasound and found out that we lost the baby. We are very sad right now, but also realize that God has a plan and it just wasn't meant to be. I have one egg that stopped growing in my uterus and possibly another in my right tube so I have to go into the cancer center today and take some chemo related drugs through a few shots and iv drips to help rid my body of the bad tissue and make sure that whatever is in my tube doesn't burst and cause more problems. They said after 2 months I should be free of the medication and ready to start to try to get pregnant again. So, I am just looking forward instead of back and excited to start to try again. I just wanted you guys to know what was going on and know that you will be praying for us! We love you and hopefully sometime this fall we can share some good news again! Just wanted you girls to know what was going on! Love you!

XOXO,
Elaine

I froze and reread and reread. Did she not want to talk on the phone? I couldn’t go to her house. I was at such a loss and unsure how to help my best friend with her loss. It was three weeks before the wedding and I felt so selfish and helpless. I stalked my e-mail for days hoping for a reply from Elaine and five days later she responded.

Hello my best and dearest girlfriends,

I just want you all to know HOW MUCH all of your calls, messages, and emails have meant to me. I haven't really been ready to talk much so I know I haven't returned them but I just want you to know that it means everything to have good friends who can share in your sorrow and pray. The weight of that has never been felt more....how blessed am I to have something happen to me to show me how lucky and blessed I am to have amazing believers in my life to lift me up.
I felt like shit. I hadn’t even tried to call Elaine. I sent one e-mail. I should have gotten on that plane. The guilt of thinking that I was the one friend who didn’t reach out the most was making me feel sick. Was I that self absorbed? I didn’t know how to respond. I didn’t know what to say. I know what to say when someone dies and while someone inside Elaine died; this was much too different.

I am so happy to be into a new week and be beyond the nightmare that seemed to be last. I always thought that one of my worst nightmares...biggest fears would be for the ultrasound tech to pull up my belly on the screen and take a deep breath in. With our first it was the looooongest 5 minutes of my life every time they pulled him up I would hold my breath and wait for them to say all looks good....or to hear that blissful bump bump of his heart beat. Which then turned into some of the happiest moments, listening to his sweet beat and knowing that he was ok. Now, what I feared most in this case has happened, I knew as soon as she pulled things up on the screen it wasn't going to be ok, and it wasn't. I guess I thought I would just die....lose it and not be able to cope, but with God's grace I am still going. Looking positively at the chance I still have to be a mother to one amazing little boy and hopefully more kiddos soon. They are so encouraging at my doctors office that it will happen again soon for me. What a blessing that I still have the option, and that something worse didn't happen leaving me without that. I do get a rush of sadness thinking about things I had planned....I got out my maternity clothes and Herbie and I pulled out all the baby stuff and moved Andy into his big boy room. All these things though, are just going to wait until we can hopefully try again and in the scheme of things, a few more months to wait isn't that long.

Why would the doctors ever let a mother see a motionless baby in their belly? That seems so cruel to me. It’s hard to think that she can be this strong but she has to be. When will she grieve? Elaine is always that “sunny side” up personality but has she dealt with this pain? Or will it come later? Maybe feeling numb is her way of grieving. It was difficult to negotiate this new tension between my traditional role as an “advice giver” and what she may have really needed – a listener; someone to simply care. When in college together, I coached her through the first tampon use while others teased. I gave advice when she had bad relationships and good ones too. I watched her fall in love with her now husband. These were all experiences I had. This was different as I was confused.
between being the advice giver to my friend while also trying to understand this experience myself. Even though at the time, I couldn’t relate to the exact situation of pregnancy and then her loss of a baby; I could appreciate the significance as a woman. You don’t have to experience pregnancy to know how joyful a woman feels and the extreme emptiness after a loss. Coping strategies are the skills an individual uses to deal with stressful situations by adding to or taking away the impact of those situations (Cook & Heppner, 1997; Segrin & Menees, 1996). Individuals use coping strategies to minimize, avoid, or tolerate a stressor (Dumont & Provost, 1999). There is something innate about helping her cope that didn’t automatically mean I had to be a mother myself. She needed her female friends for comfort.

Physically, I am doing ok. The drugs they gave me were hard on me for a few days but I doing better now, just bleeding a lot. I am in for blood work every single Thursday until my HCG is down to 0. Hopefully, a few weeks. Then I need to have 2 periods and can start over again. So...we'll just enjoy the summer and wait it out. I have one busy 2 year old who is very good at occupying my time:)

What drugs? How much bleeding? I don’t even think you can wear a tampon for this. I kept on thinking…how did she know she lost the baby? Was it absorbed into her system? Did her body involuntarily abort it? What’s HCG? My inability to understand Elaine’s miscarriage was more of an inability to understand pregnancy. I thought to myself, was the medical terminology easier to hold onto than the emotional pain of wondering why did this happen to me? I thought it would be inappropriate to ask her to explain HCG so I let it go. I wonder if lil’ Andy knows what his mom is going through. Will he remember? Did they try to explain it to him?

Anyways, the night before I went in for my ultrasound I was doing my devos and wrote this out on a note card.....

"I trust in you, O Lord;
I say, you are my God
My times are in your hands"
Psalm 31:14-15

When I got home I saw it sitting on my night stand and I am working on digesting the simple words of it in relation to this moment in my life. This is a moment, I will look back and it will just be a small dot on the time line of our life and of our family’s growth, and we are growing from it. There are much more difficult things in life to deal with and understand than this, and this is just the card I have been dealt in this moment.

How can she be so positive? It’s hard not to be mad. There are a million people a day having babies and perfectly healthy babies. Some moms don’t even deserve it. They abuse the gift they have been given. All the while, my dear friend is trying so hard to have another baby to love unconditionally.

I love you all so much; I will try to get back to you soon. I miss you and wish more than anything that I was closer so we could just hang for an afternoon. BUT knowing that you're praying for me is in a way even better. Thank you.....I know this was sort of dramatic....but thanks for dealing with me!

XO, Elaine

I should have gotten on a plane to see her.

**Process of Loss**

The nature of an interpersonal relationship allows for many shared joyous experiences as well as to encounter emotional and stressful situations. When exposed to an intense emotion such as a miscarriage, women may find themselves unable to cope with their emotional distress. McCreiglit (2005), argues that emotion should be seen as a resource rather than a weakness. With this in mind, it takes time and much support to sort out the emotions as the grieving mother has had few direct life experiences or actual times with the deceased to review, remember, and cherish. The only memory the mother holds onto is the feeling she once had in her belly.
Now, that I know the feeling that Elaine felt in her belly, it helps me understand her loss. I’m at the point in my pregnancy where “counting kicks” gives the mother and the doctor an idea of the baby’s activity and well being. I need those kicks hourly to feel good about what is going on in my belly. If I don’t feel a kick for some time; I stop, focus and wait. Elaine never got another kick. Maybe she couldn’t feel the baby that early in terms of kicks. But, she knew there was something there. Being pregnant has been the most self aware and selfless thing my body has ever experienced. In an instance, you loan your physical self to the goal of growing another person. The societal way of pushing yourself or adding one more thing to the daily “to do list” becomes obsolete. It doesn’t matter if you don’t get that one thing done. You have a much bigger responsibility. Who gives a shit if that laundry sits on the floor; you need to rest. This concept was hard to understand at first since I pride myself on multi-tasking.

And the heart beat? I could listen for hours. I now know what Elaine meant when she wrote about listening to his sweet beat and knowing that he was ok. Knowing that sound now, makes me feel closer to Elaine. At the time I didn’t know the significance it would play in my life now.

According to Plater (1997), 15%–20% of pregnancies end in miscarriage with about three quarters occurring before the 12th week of the pregnancy. This loss of a life in the belly is important to reflect on as it demonstrates that the belly can bring joy and sadness to a woman’s life. A belly experience of loss requires a support system of interpersonal relationships to assist the grieving mother through the stages of healing. Women share this loss of life from the belly as this is a shared fear of any women wanting to experience motherhood.
“…the overall trend…supports the commonsense expectation that a woman’s grief is relatively more intense than a man’s following a miscarriage because she carried the pregnancy biologically, has a greater psychological attachment as a result, and, therefore, experiences the loss more powerfully” (Brier, 2008, p. 456).

I was so relieved to hear from her and yet so unsatisfied that I couldn’t grieve with her in person. She called a week later. I had so much to say and yet it didn’t seem like enough. So, I listened. “Today, I made a painful trip to the alterations shop. It was so embarrassing. The seamstress scolded me for buying such a large dress for my frame. I had to explain to a complete stranger that I lost a baby and it has to be taken in to fit my belly with no baby”.

“Loss, understood as a process of bereavement, grief, and mourning, most immediately affects our bodily experience in our world…” (Dubose, 1997, p. 367). A woman’s belly is seen as a container to be emptied and filled emotionally and physically. Moreover, a pregnant belly is viewed as a self-contained capsule, or better yet, a self-inhabited capsule. Dubose (1997) defines bereavement, or the action of immediate severance, as something that takes place outside the body [belly]; grief, the emotional response to the loss, takes place inside the body [belly]; and mourning, the process of molding the loss into our ongoing life, takes place inside the body [belly] as it reacts to the outside world.

Friday, the day of the rehearsal, my anticipation for her arrival was more than my nerves could take. Late, of course, her infectious laughter could be heard from the foyer of the church. Like a little girl running to greet a playmate, I bolted to the back of the church in my dress heels. She looked great, very beautiful, older…almost a look of distinction and maturity despite the missing glow of a growing baby. I hugged her so tight. For those
who didn’t know what this greeting really meant; it didn’t matter. I looked at her, our
eyes welling with tears and mouthed, “I’m so sorry”. It was so simple and felt so right.
For weeks I struggled to find that perfect something to say and in three words I told her
exactly how I felt. With our bellies touching in an embrace, I wanted her to give me that
pain she felt. I wanted her to be all better. She looked at me; smiled a little and we both
noticed that we had created quite the dramatic scene. “It’s good to see you too,” she said
warmly.

This devastating loss requires the support of an interpersonal relationship within
the sisterhood of women. Women grieve together; this is not a singular experience. A loss
in the belly is a loss for all. The unthinkable becomes a reality and the once expecting
mother reverts to a childlike persona that needs another woman to mother them through
the tragedy. There is not a prescribed way to recover from an experience such as this one.
According to Brier (2008), there is no publicly acknowledged person to bury or
established rituals to structure mourning and gain support, and, often, relatively few
opportunities are present to express thoughts and feelings about the loss due to the
secrecy that often accompanies the early stages of pregnancy.

A belly experience of loss, such as a miscarriage, is a very difficult experience to
understand and manage without the support of one’s interpersonal relationships. This
kind of loss is incomparable to any other type of grief and to date a minimal amount of
research has been conducted on this experience.
Six months later in November, Elaine called with a secret to share. She was pregnant again and couldn’t wait to tell me. “It’s still pretty early so keep this hush, hush, okay?” Her voice was a mix of excitement and hesitation. In July 2010, Elaine and Herbie welcomed a 2nd healthy baby boy.
CHAPTER V

Discussion

While each “belly experience” studied in this project is unique to the individual; it is the commonalities of the experience, the ability to empathize and understand as a woman that bonds women to each other. A study by DeCapua, Berkowitz and Boxer (2006) suggests that from a functional perspective, there is striking evidence that interactional talk prevails among adult women’s conversation, regardless of the intended transactional nature inherent in the contexts, despite the degree of friendship/intimacy, and across regions. Women want to tell “their” story and the primary underlying aim of interpersonal relationships is alignment through personal disclosures. By sharing “her” story, a woman is able to bond and create interpersonal relationships with other women. This chapter includes implications of the belly experiences described in previous chapters, a discussion of the value of the belly and suggestions for future research endeavors.
Implications

The belly and sexuality.

Figure 10. Photograph of self with seven month pregnancy belly

As my pregnant belly stretches and takes shape for the life inside me, the holes are easier to see and remind me almost a decade later that the true experience of adulthood was perhaps the removing of the piercing. Sexual expression rituals of the belly such as piercing bond females emotionally within their interpersonal relationships. These rituals are outward, physical experiences visible to others.

My pregnant belly communicates something completely different than my hidden belly piercing. Friends, family or strangers see my belly and know that I had sex to get this baby. This belly says more about my sexuality than my piercing ever did. My piercing might have suggested sexual freedom of expression but it does not mean that I was sexually active. A protruding belly with a baby means yes, I am sexual. But it is not just being sexuality active. The pregnant body communicates a sexier self; breasts immediately begin to grow and the bottom becomes much fuller.
De Vignemont (2007) refers to the sense of ownership of your body by its link to one’s own actions. But it is the action of pregnancy, that changes my body and I have ownership over this body, although at times, I understand my body is in existence for the growth of another inside my belly.

**The belly and life.**

The belly and life is one of the most powerful and emotionally charged experiences. Regardless of emotional connection and/or relationship, every woman has a mother; a belly which they started from. The experience of pregnancy spawns and inspires others to tell their story. This sharing experience allows for a bond to be created from a mutually shared experience, specifically pregnancy. The act of sharing allows us to be vulnerable, excited and educated. When we share a personal experience, we open ourselves to another person creating a vulnerable space where a lot of trust comes into play. It is exciting to share our story as a point of pride, accomplishment or even strife. And most importantly, when we have a sharing experience, we learn from each other and become educated from the other person’s experience. This is why I have had random strangers tell me that their sister or cousin is pregnant. Or why we have the random strangers touch and reach our protruding bellies. They feel a part of this experience because it makes them remember their own. I remember my first random belly touch by a complete stranger in a bagel shop. I am often asked how I feel about random belly touches and it is hard not to respond without including this story. I have only had one random stranger touch and it was pretty early in my pregnancy. I was just starting to show in my first trimester and still wearing my regular clothes so maybe I was trying to stick my belly out so people thought pregnant and not the chubby girl. While waiting in
line in my pregnancy pose (belly out; hands on hips), this woman came up to me and said, “Oh, you’re having a baby. What an exciting time.” Just as I was ready to respond and give my “stats”. What are “stats”? It’s the due date, how I am feeling and no we don’t know the gender yet. She reached out and gave the belly a rub. I think we were both unsatisfied. At that time, my belly felt more wiggling and less hard. Slightly embarrassed she pulled away and probably wondered if I was even pregnant. I thought I would always feel violated when the time would come; instead I let the touch happen and the stranger then introduced me to her daughter. It is the act of sharing that makes this belly experience an important one to female interpersonal relationships. Now seven months pregnant, I welcome my next random touch especially since my first was not what I expected. Touch away – I actually have a belly now!

The media and the influence of the Hollywood affiliates have embraced the belly and helped to redefine this belly experience. Demi Moore said yes to the cover of Vanity Fair and took ownership of the image of her pregnant belly. She was not hiding her belly in drapes of clothing. Celebrity images can be damaging to the self worth of a woman’s body image but in this case, images of pregnant Hollywood have successfully made motherhood a celebrated experience. Women alike can see these images and accept their own weight gain, enlarged breasts and protruding bellies. We have affirmed our own real beauty through this belly experience. Although, it is important to remember that the magazine covers are airbrushed and their baby bump is the only acceptable “fat belly” in the media.
The belly and loss.

As the other belly experiences in this project can be seen as “controllable” or an experience triggered by one’s actions; the experience of loss is much different. Pregnancy seems inundated with plans. Did you plan the nursery yet? Do you plan to send the baby to daycare? Do you plan to take time off after the baby arrives? Loss in the belly nulls these plans. It is funny that all the planning questions can be annoying but what if no one asked me because my plans had to stop. Elaine planned like everyone else. She planned to wear the larger sized bridesmaid dress. She planned to move her son to his big boy bed and planned to soon pull out her maternity clothes. And then her plans changed. The absence of this life in my dear friend’s belly has relevance in my life as we grieved together and I began to truly trust in a plan not in my control.

Value of the Belly to the Larger Culture

The value of the belly to the larger culture is an important one in terms of its expression of self. Through the belly experiences of art and sexuality, I have demonstrated that the belly can be used to define one’s individuality, independence, maturity, confidence and identity. Through the belly experiences of life and loss, this project has focused on the value of the physical belly in growing and sustaining life that is so very unique to the female body and psyche. I was amazed by the amount of self-disclosure I was willing to share as well as receive when other women knew I was pregnant. Goffman (1974) suggests social conversation includes personal disclosures and sharing, often in the form of narratives that match others’ narratives. This only further emphasizes my experience of most women I interact with want to “talk” babies and pregnancies. My narrative of pregnancy mirrors or rather is reflective of their own
experience or a shared experience, such as, “my sister is also expecting soon”. Brown and Yule (1983) argues that for women, social conversation often takes on many of the attributes that can be characterized as interactional while at the same time being transactional.

**Value of My Belly**

Plain and simple; everyone has a story to share. But, more than the importance of having to tell your own story, is listening to others tell their stories. It is the act of the sharing experience which makes my life richer. Beyond the belly experiences that I have shared in the previous chapters, I have had the enjoyment of sharing more with others about this topic. Ironically, sharing my project has prompted even more exchange of stories with the women in my life. Prior to the selection of this topic, I was not pregnant nor were there any plans to be. Interestingly, this project has completely morphed into a true emersion as I am inundated with real evidence that women will share with complete strangers based on the commonality of a shared belly experience. In my case, it is my belly experience of life. I see the smile on their faces as they share their own experiences with me. It is their reflection and my ability to relate that bonds. This project has been so touching to me as I have been witness to a sisterhood that exists within this experience. And I have been equally as close to women who have yet to experience a pregnancy. They are seeing pregnancy through my eyes. What an amazing connection to share!

Emmert (1985) suggests the goal of a liberal arts education is intended to liberate, prepare students to make decisions and foster understanding. I can confidently say that this project has accomplished the intent of the liberal arts education. This project affords me the experience of exploring the unique intersections of history, communications,
beauty, art, enjoyment, sensory-emotional values and perception through shared belly experiences.

**Directions for Future Research**

There are several directions for future research within the focus of women and their physical bellies. It has become evident that in the beginning this study provides insight into the physical experience of the belly but suggests there a direct line of inquiry that could explore physical loss of the belly. Directions for further research may not be as positive as the belly experiences I investigated. There may be a darker side to the belly experience where an experience is tied to a feeling or emotion a woman would like to shed and forget.

For instance, even more so today than before, the election of bariatric surgery has potential to shape the belly experience for those individuals. While this project explored the loss of a child, a further look into patient elected belly surgeries or tummy tucks would allow for understanding the notion of elected loss and its significance for a bariatric patient. Research into this particular procedure would further the loss notion in terms of physical loss and emotional loss. What happens when a woman chooses to “lose” her stomach and shed her heavy identity?

Second, future research could address the popularization of “mommy makeovers”. Pregnancy can be physically hard on a woman’s body but patient elected mommy makeovers have now lifted breasts, eliminated stretch marks and liposuction the belly. Further research could be conducted to see how the erasing of the physical signs of this belly experience has impacted her connection to the belly experience itself.
Conclusion

This project included a discussion and justification of autoethnography as a method of inquiry, collected and analyzed research connecting the notion of physical belly experiences to interpersonal relationships amongst women and suggestions for future research endeavors. In chapter two, I told the story of my belly button piercing experience during my freshman year. In chapter three, I told the story about my first two months of pregnancy and the night I told the announced to my mother, Holly. In chapter four, I told the story about my best friend, Elaine, who experienced a miscarriage three weeks before my wedding. Finally, in chapter five, I discussed the implications of each belly experience and recommendations for future research. These belly experiences I have identified are significant to me as they identify my journey of self-discovery through the female interpersonal relationships I share in my life.

The belly will continue to tell its story and it is important that we listen. As women, do we embrace our physical selves? As Bernstock’s poem alludes to in chapter one, women have big bellies. “Big” in the sense that they are full of stories – the stories of our lives – stories that, when shared, have the power to shape, change, influence and grow. Reflecting on this experience and project, all of these women for whom I relate to interpersonally are my sisters. As Bernstocks suggests, all the women in “my family” have bellies as well. For far too long, we have been told to girdle ourselves by the media, hide our sexuality and at times are ashamed of our bellies. By sharing, discovering our own power and by unlatching these girdles, we can truly embrace our identity. All the women in “my family” have bellies.
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