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## “Can You Believe They Think I’m Intimidating?” An Exploration of Identity in Tall Women

Elizabeth Joy Fuller

*University of South Florida*, [fullere@mail.usf.edu](mailto:fullere@mail.usf.edu)

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“Can You Believe They Think I’m Intimidating?”

An Exploration of Identity in Tall Women

by

Elizabeth Joy Fuller

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of  
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Major Professor: Laurel Graham, Ph.D.  
Sara Green, Ph.D.  
Jennifer Friedman, Ph.D.

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## **ABSTRACT**

In the United States today, there is a dominant cultural narrative telling us that tallness is desirable and enjoyed by those who experience it. Much of the existing research on height correlates tallness with promotions, higher salaries, and general happiness. However, this research does not take into account the limitations of some of the previous research which tends to accept tall people's vocabulary of motives at face value as the totality of their experience as a tall person. In particular, tall women tend to have much more to say about their lives as tall women than simply that it has afforded them many advantages. Drawing from interviews with ten women who were of a height 5'11" or taller, I utilize feminist standpoint epistemology to investigate how the experiences of tall women can often differ from the dominant cultural narrative of tallness. My findings indicate that tall women are frequently the subject of unwanted height-related comments that draw attention to their tallness, creating and reproducing a state of self-consciousness related to their height. This self-consciousness is reinforced by social infrastructure, heteronormative gender expectations, and othering in the form of harassment and bullying. The tall women in my study learned to negotiate and avoid their height in situations that caused them discomfort, yet eventually accepted their height as a part of their identity after overcoming adversity in their childhood and youth. My research shows that the experiences of tall women are significantly broader than contemporary research discusses, and that height has a much deeper impact on self-perception than has previously been acknowledged.

## INTRODUCTION

Tall girls and women experience contradictory and shifting feelings about their height that have not been examined sociologically. On one side, tallness is a trait that for both men and women is given much value, and a tall person has a distinct advantage over others in many situations (Boyson, Pryor, and Butler 1999; Bogaert and McCreary 2011; Chu and Geary 2005; Firmin, Hoffman, Firmin, Lee, and Vorobyov 2009). But on the other side, tallness can present challenges that others may not understand. Tall girls and women may experience challenges that men do not experience or do not experience as frequently (Bogaert and McCreary 2011; Pope, Phillips, and Olivardia 2000; Roberts and Arefi-Afshar 2007; Betz, Mintz, and Speakmon 1994). Feminist scholarship links tallness to perceptions of masculinity, which is reflected in tall women being understood as more masculine. Where men are portrayed as having powerful bodies, women are often portrayed as having dysfunctional bodies, or bodies that lack power. Tallness presents an interesting dilemma in the construction and production of femininity, because tallness is traditionally associated with power, prestige, able-bodied vitality, and most importantly, masculinity (Connell 2002).

In this study, I examine how tall women internalize their height through interactions with both other people and their environment. These interactions can begin from a young age, and can affect how tall women perceive themselves to the point where their height becomes a minor bodily stigma (Ellis 1998), or, a feature which is perceived negatively. Though much of the



current research on height discusses the correlation of tallness and success (Boyson, Pryor, and Butler 1999; Bogaert and McCreary 2011; Chu and Geary 2005; Firmin, Hoffman, Firmin, Lee, and Vorobyov 2009), it rarely considers the experiences of tall women specifically concerning how their height affects their daily lives. By asking the participants to describe what they've experienced throughout their life course, I can learn more about the layers of cultural narratives that I think have often remained the hidden secrets shared among tall women but seldom revealed to outsiders.

People who are not tall often assume tallness to be purely an asset for both men and women. However, even in childhood experiences, we can see that tallness means something different for girls than it does for boys (Pope, Phillips, and Olivardia 2000). For instance, girls who are categorized as above average in height for their age group will sometimes be prescribed hormonal treatments to stunt their growth, something almost never seen in the treatment of tall boys (Pyett, Rayner, Venn, Bruinsma, Werther, and Lumley 2005; Lever, Frederick, Laird, Sadeghi-Azar 2007). Young boys are given more positive treatment than girls are for being tall because height is often culturally considered a masculine trait. Though studies on tallness indicate that tallness is advantageous, the pathologization of height for tall girls and the overarching gender narrative of tallness being associated with masculinity presents conflicting cultural narratives concerning height in women. If being tall is an advantageous trait, then why do girls receive medical treatment to stunt their growth at a young age? The studies on growth hormones suggest that there is a powerful cultural reason for girls to avoid becoming tall, which contradicts with the cultural narrative of tallness as a purely beneficial trait.

A cultural narrative is a story that circulates widely throughout a society, being retold to the point where it becomes communal knowledge or knowledge that appears to be inherent

(Loseke 2007). One dominant cultural narrative of tallness is that tallness is desirable, and is enjoyed by those who experience it (Boyson, Pryor, and Butler 1999). This cultural narrative of tallness is not without support when applied to women, as quantitative research shows that tall women tend to succeed more often in the job market and report being satisfied with their height (Lindeman and Sundvik 1994; Chu and Geary 2005). However, the data from studies like Chu and Geary (2005), and Lindeman and Sundvik (1994) are normally collected via survey, and are limited by the vocabulary of the researcher designing the survey.

It is important to note that the layers of discourse concerning height do not conceal one hidden, universally true meaning of tallness; rather, there are competing discourses, emotions, and vocabularies of motive (Mills 1940). Utilizing methodologies such as in-depth interviews, grounded theory, and feminist standpoint theory allows me to anchor my participants' opinions in experiences, and to analyze how those opinions become much more complex and shifting than they might first appear on a survey. There are multiple discourses for "telling" a story about being tall that relate to the gender of the narrator, the presumed subject matter of the conversation, and the audience the narrator is engaging with. A tall woman who participates in a study about "tallness and work benefits" will communicate their height perceptions in a different manner than a tall woman who is discussing tallness within a community of tall women.

As a tall woman, myself, I have a set of insights that encourages me to look deeper. In the rush to determine whether tallness is a good or bad thing for women, I believe that researchers have neglected the multiplicity of perspectives that tall women may have about their height and that my lived experience has led me to perceive personally. Furthermore, the research showing that doctors aid young girls in slowing or stunting their growth so that they do not

become “too tall” suggests that more is going on here than we might see on the surface of some of the body image literature.

There is something interesting to be learned here that has not been explored before. How does an individual navigate among these competing stories of tallness? There are two forms of discourse present which form the main contradiction for narratives of tallness, and tall women are caught in the discursive cyclone. What do tall women make of the simultaneous belief that tallness is a desirable and undesirable attribute in women? How do tall women themselves deal with these contradictions in daily life? How do they assign meaning and emotion to their bodies in different stages of life and in different situations/contexts?

The relationship between tall women and height is an underexplored topic. I will be drawing upon research on tallness in general (including research on tallness and masculinity), but also research on body size, minor bodily stigma, and bodily advantage. These questions will be approached for a specific population of tall women. Women 5’11” or taller in the United States of America are in the top 1% of the height distribution in women’s heights, so for the purposes of this project, a “tall woman” is metrically defined as being 5’11” or taller (Ogden, Fryar, Carroll, and Flegal 2004). Setting 5’11” as the minimum height requirement means that my participants were all culturally and statistically classified as “tall.” In doing so, I am better able to understand to what extent contradictions of tallness intermingle with body image and with experiences navigating social situations. My interest lies in the intersection of height, bodies, and feminine identities, and in how tall women handle their height in day-to-day situations and interactions with other people.

In this paper, I first discuss the existing literature of height-related research, weight-related research, gender, and disability studies, with specific attention to Ellis’s concept of minor

bodily stigma and the management of stigmatized identities. Then, I present my data analysis, focusing on how unsolicited commentary on tallness in interactions violates Goffman's concept of civil inattention (Goffman 1971), leading tall women to perceive their height differently than the dominant cultural narrative of tallness and success would suggest. My analysis includes a variety of topics, with emphasis on gender conformation, heteronormative dating expectations, able-bodied athleticism associations, the consumption of tallness, and the reclamation of "tall" as a non-stigmatized identity. Finally, I discuss the implications of including tall women's experiences in height research and how our understanding of tallness changes once we acknowledge the differences between the cultural narrative of successful tallness and actual lived experiences.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

My research seeks to address the cultural contradictions circulating around tallness in women in the United States. Little research has been conducted concerning tall women in general, and of that research only a small portion of the studies are qualitatively oriented. Much of the existing research about tall women is quantitative research, where height is an independent variable that is examined in relation to other variables without addressing the experiences or emotionality of the participant. I employ a qualitative symbolic interactionist perspective to study embodiment and identity in tall women, where I focus on my participants' interactions with their height. This permits me to consider topics that would be difficult to capture in survey research, such as the emotionality of tall women and the perception of evolving identity and self-perception. By conversing with my participants about their thoughts, feelings, and interactions regarding their height, I can understand the differences between the perception of tall women in our society, and how the tall women learn to perceive themselves.

### **Tallness over the Life Course**

According to the Center for Disease Control and the group National Health Statistics, growth charts have been used by physicians to analyze growth patterns in young children to isolate any problematic health concerns. Girls typically experience rapid growth over a ten-year span from the ages of 2-12, then slow down throughout puberty and adolescence before coming to a full stop at ages 16-18 (See Appendix B). Boys, on the other hand, do not typically begin going through growth spurts until they hit puberty, resulting in disproportionate height growth

patterns between boys and girls (See Appendix C). Historically, the implications for tall women have become medicalized concerns. Pyett et al. (2005) conducted a follow up study of women who received hormone treatments from a young age to try and alter their growing patterns to be of a more acceptable height (Pyett, Rayner, Bruinsma, Werther, and Lumley 2005). Tall women in the thirty-four-year span of 1959 and 1993 were diagnosed as being “too tall” from an early age because their height varied from the predicted average of a child’s gender and height group to the extremes of the bell curve. The medical field labeled such height in young women as being harmful for their growth, and assigned the hormonal treatments to prevent them from suffering from “gigantism (Pyett et al. 2005).”

My study on tall women’s identity is important because even as recently as the 1990’s, people have felt so strongly against tallness in women that they were willing to risk the well-being of young girls by subjecting them to hormonal treatments. This phenomenon of cultural attitudes toward tallness becomes a formative part of how women create and shape their identities as “tall.” Being labeled as tall becomes synonymous with being different or “not normal.” Women who are labeled as tall during formative times in their lives (such as in adolescence) begin to orient their identities around that status. When tallness becomes associated with “outsider,” tall girls can begin to have negative relationships with their height because it sets them apart from other people (Farman 2011).

### **Bodies in Feminist Literature**

To examine the interaction between gender, bodies, and identity, it is important to ground the discussion in the feminist literature on gender and bodies. Feminist writings are critical of cultural conceptualizations that are considered common knowledge, and explore possibilities that

give a different perspective. I use feminist theories to unpack the meanings and implications of body size in women.

It is generally accepted within sociology that gender is not inherent to the individual and is instead a social construction, meaning that the differences we identify between men and women result from interacting in the social world (Crawley, Foley, and Sheehan 2007; Lorber 1994; Shilling 1993; Connell 2002; Butler 2011; West and Zimmerman 1987). Several key gender theorists formulate the argument for the constructivist perspective of how gender is produced, portrayed, and propagated, and sociologists have studied the socially constructed concepts of masculinity and femininity. Gender is a complex topic that is observed through interaction over the course of a lifetime, and is enacted in daily life (West and Zimmerman 1987). People learn gender identity by watching other people do gender, and they learn to conform to cultural expectations of gender. Since gender is formed not through the body but through interaction, our concepts of “masculine” and “feminine” are socially constructed. Judith Butler, an iconic theorist of gender, proposed a theory of performativity where gender, in addition to not being inherent and biologically situated within the body, is also an action that comes to be real because it is performed repeatedly (Butler 2011). Because tall women cannot alter their height to appear more feminine and must live with the actualities of their bodily experience, tallness presents challenges to the construction of femininity for some women. As we discussed in the introduction, tall women create a contradiction in gendered language because their bodies are not technically exclusively feminine. The masculine trait of height is at odds with the feminine identity, which separates tall women from traditional gendered expectations of femininity.

There are many different discourses for discussing femininity and normalizing bodies (Budgeon 2003). Larkin and Pines (1979) use studies of obesity to discuss how non-normative bodies are required to take up less space, and are punished if they do not. They found that the more non-normative (more obese) the participant's body was, the more likely they were to be treated negatively due to their size. Obese studies show that overweight women develop defense mechanisms for handling interactions with others that may result in them belittling their own bodies (Fiske 1980). These mechanisms are known as apologetic behaviors, where the person with the non-normative body is made to feel negative emotions such as shame and guilt about their appearance (Betz, Mintz, and Speakmon 1994). While men with non-normative bodies do exhibit many similar emotions when confronted, women are far more likely to be subjected to ill-treatment due to the overarching cultural narratives of femininity and dysfunctional bodies (Budgeon 2003; Larkin and Pines).

For women, tallness can be understood in relation to obesity because the size of the body relegates the appropriateness of the space it takes up. Women who are "too big" for the spaces they inhabit, such as fat women, are not attributed the same type of femininity that thinner women are because they are violating beauty and gender norms (Forth 2014; Larkin and Pines 1979). The ability or inability to alter body size connects closely to the moral condemnation of fat bodies compared to the curiosity and minor stigma conferred upon tall bodies. However, not all obesity literature can be related to tallness. Instead, I draw also from thinness literature to discuss how privileged identities such as thinness and tallness can still be internalized negatively through interaction. As discussed in Beggan and DeAngelis' 2015 study on the contradiction between the hypervisible privilege of being thin and internalized self-consciousness from perceived othering, thin women learn to strategically manage other's focus on their bodies.



Thinness, like tallness is a privileged attribute that has many benefits associated with it, both within and outside of the workplace. Hypervisibility is the concept where the body is constantly on display, and individuals who possess certain traits must be aware of these traits when out in public (Gailey 2014). Gailey introduces the concept of hyper(in)visibility to discuss how overweight and obese women must always be aware of how their body size violates conventional beauty norms, and feel shame for the state of their body. Hyper(in)visibility focuses on the ways in which fat women are ignored and “morally condemned” for their body size (hyperinvisible), and yet the body is constantly on display for anyone to comment on (hypervisible). Beggan and DeAngelis (2015) use Gailey’s abstraction of hyper(in)visibility to discuss how thin women must always be aware of their thinness due to their conformation to appropriate body size and subsequent possession of a privileged identity. Unlike thin or fat women, tall women who violate the appropriate size for being feminine cannot be invisible because their height is socially celebrated and exoticized, instead of being marginalized with shame.

### **Interactionist Perspectives On Tall Women’s Efforts To Normalize Their Bodies**

Symbolic Interactionism posits that the formation of the self is a fluid process that is always ongoing and is always affected by the context of the interaction. Bodies become part of the “definition of the situation” that people consider during interaction. Bodies carry symbolic meanings which may be intended or unintended by the person living in those bodies. We manipulate symbols to adapt to situations and minimize discord quite often. Our bodies can have symbolic meanings that may or may not be intended gestures to others. For example, a tall woman may appear to be more masculine and aggressive due to her height when in fact she does not intend to act more masculine or aggressive in the situation. This potential for bodies to

convey “unintentional gestures” suggests that people with non-normative bodies have a lot of interactional work to do in normalizing their bodies and in manipulating the meanings other people “read” from their bodies. The literature on dramaturgy, stigma, and disability all figure into this interactionist literature on body normalization.

Firmin, Hoffman, Firmin, and Vbrobyov’s (2012) study on the social dynamics of college women’s heights showed that the definition of “tall” varied by situation. Any perceived knowledge of tallness, like many other traits that are featured on the body, was dependent on the participant’s height *and* on the situation where their height was discussed, which suggests the importance of audience in discussing height. For a tall woman, tallness comes to be defined and understood through interacting with shorter people where her tallness is an oddity. The tallness of women is also dependent on social context and place. In Finland, for example, the average height of a woman is 5’7,” while the average height of Finnish men is 6’1” (Lindeman and Sundvik 1994). The average heights of residents of Finland are substantially taller than the average heights of residents of the United States, and the gap in height averages between Finnish women and men is larger than it is in the United States. Women who are 5’8” and taller in the United States are, in some contexts, considered to be fairly tall, but compared to Finnish women, they would seem to be more average sized, with women 5’11” and taller being considered somewhat tall as opposed to very tall (Lindeman and Sundvik 1994).

### **Dramaturgy, Stigma, Disability, and Emotion Literatures**

In studying how tall women form and perform identity, it is necessary to first discuss the literature concerning the how selves deliver a believable performance. In Erving Goffman’s 1959 book *The Presentation of Self in Every Day Life*, he advocates studying micro-level, face-

to-face interactions as a means of answering macro-level sociological queries. Goffman also discusses stigma in his 1963 book *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity*. He argues that there are three types of stigma which all result in a trait of an individual turning people away from them, or eliciting different treatment (Goffman 1963). I focus on Goffman's concept of physical stigma because it focuses on physical traits rather than mental features, emotions, or group membership. Goffman argues that people with stigmatized identities engage in something he calls "disidentifiers" where they act out certain behaviors in order to diverge themselves from the stigmatized identity (Goffman 1963:43-4).

Some forms of difference are more difficult to dis-identify from than others. Carolyn Ellis amends Erving Goffman's concept of stigma to some ideas about minor bodily stigma, where perceived physical imperfections become the topic of discussion between strangers, and there is a fear of standing out and being rejected due to a feature of the body. A minor bodily stigma is one that is involuntarily attributed to the person, difficult to hide and perceived by the self and/or by others as undesirable (Ellis 1998:524). One of the markers for a minor bodily stigma is that the perceived physical imperfection is rarely discrediting by itself. Instead, the meaning that is attached to it by the holder and by the conversant based on their own personal histories causes emotional distress within interactional spaces (Ellis 1998:524). Furthermore, as Green (2007) argues, the *perception* of stigma or of holding a stigmatized identity can lead to the degradation of mental health (Green et al. 2007:338) due to feelings of not being valued as a part of a community.

Tallness for women can be stigmatized as the cause of uncomfortable situations in which tall women are confronted by their height in conversations not of their choosing (Farman 2011). Since tallness is a trait that has previously been established as preferred body type, many people

often assume it is socially acceptable to address tall women's height during interactions. However, as Homan (2012) argues, dissatisfaction over seemingly positive traits of the body can lead to the development of avoidance techniques for garnering unwanted attention. Tall women have extreme difficulty in distancing themselves from their height due to the visibility of their bodies, and are unable to contort their bodies to an "appropriately dainty" body size, no matter how hard they may try. While unable to change their height, tall women still sometimes feel morally responsible for attempting to conform to feminine body size expectations.

The literature on people with disabilities also informs this project. Hues and Patterson (1997) discuss how disability is a product of social organization instead of an inherent corporeal pathology. Bodies that are impaired in some way are made disabled by the social infrastructure they reside in. Social environments are structured to benefit able-bodied people while systematically excluding people with disabilities, whether intentionally or unintentionally. The consumer culture of the United States reinforces this standardization of bodies by structuring certain bodily norms into the consumer economy, and this presents difficulties for non-normative bodies. There is a similarity between disabled bodies and stigmatized able bodies, in this case tall women's bodies. Both are unable to participate in the consumption of certain things deemed essential for dignity or status for various groups. For example, for many tall high school girls of modest financial means are unable to participate in the consumption of fashionable clothing because affordable retailers do not carry clothing with extra length in the arm, torso, and leg. Clothing companies market their products by mass producing the most commonly sold sizes; since tall women are a small percentage of the population, clothing is rarely made to accommodate. Having to wear pants that are too short or a shirt that is not long enough to cover

the body as intended can be a source of distress that could lead to feelings of being stigmatized (Feather et al. 1996).

Arlie Hochschild's research on emotion work is applicable to tall women's management of emotions because of the psychological cost of handling interactions with other people. Tall women engage in surface acting when interacting with others in order to hide emotions of irritation, annoyance, and frustration in relation to their tallness (Farman 2011). Cahill discusses how wheelchair users learn to handle the emotions of other people around them in addition to their own when it comes to their disability. In the article, Cahill reflects on wheelchair users' desire to move freely in public spaces, which is tempered by the fear of having to manage other people's embarrassment of their body. Each new social situation provides potential opportunities for embarrassing moments, where the disabled person (or tall woman) is required to handle the emotions of the other person and reassure them that their reaction is socially acceptable. Tall women experience social situations in similar ways to wheelchair users because they must be aware of potential conversations about their height. Learning to manage other people's emotions related to one's appearance is something tall women must do as well.

## **Policing**

However, as we have discussed previously, the experiences of tall women become almost punitive in nature. Policing is a concept introduced by Michele Foucault (1977) in his book Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison, where certain behaviors and actions considered to be nonconforming are disciplined ("normalized") by one's peers in an attempt to assert normalcy and belonging. This concept can be extended to the punishment received by nonconforming bodies, such as those of overweight individuals. As Bordo (1993) suggests, fatness (as a type of

nonconforming body) is a moral transgression conveying that one lacks the will to discipline their own body into docility. The association with fatness as morally transgressive takes the form of interactions and social infrastructure. Many physical public places were not built to accommodate non-normative bodies, such as those with disabilities, and reinforce otherness by creating feelings of discomfort within “normal” space (Hues and Patterson 1997). As we saw in the previous chapter, tall women are often confronted with their otherness when attempting to navigate “normal” spaces, such as being unable to comfortably sit in compact cars, to find appropriately fitting clothing, or even to shower comfortably in a hotel. This sense of otherness, this alienation, is a byproduct of a social infrastructure shaped to accommodate average-type bodies.

## METHODS

For this project, I interviewed ten women ranging in height from 5'11 to 6'3 (see Table 1). I operationalized tallness by limiting “tall” to women who are 5'11” or taller, rather than relying on self-identification. My interviews were semi-structured with open-ended questions (See Appendix A) that were conducted in public locations most comfortable to the participant, usually at the campus library or in the area surrounding one of the local restaurants on campus. Most of the interviews lasted from an hour and a half to two hours, though none were shorter than one hour. I chose to do interviews in order to address some of the shortcomings of survey research, where the language of the researcher limits the responses of the participant. Much of the contemporary literature on tallness does not take into account the wealth of information lived experiences can provide. As a tall woman myself, I became concerned in my readings on height studies with the lack of engagement with the issues tall women face every day. Discussions of height and promotions, job success, and higher wages do provide interesting statistical information, but where was the literature about shoulder-height showers and awkward class photos? Where was the critical analysis of being bullied for being tall, or for developing chronic back pain from attempting to “fit in” by slouching? Utilizing my own feminist standpoint epistemology, I realized that my participants needed to tell their stories without being limited by a questionnaire in order to circumvent the vocabularies of motive that circulate in our culture. By using open ended interview questions I enabled the participant to make their own interpretations, and in doing so, I had access to data that would never have occurred to me originally. A qualitative approach is best suited for studying tall women and identity because it enabled me to

discover why tall women experience the world the way they do, as well as their ways of meaning making.

Creswell (2012) discusses how qualitative methods are best suited for research that requires a complex and detailed understanding of a topic. Qualitative methods such as in-person interviewing empower individuals to be able to tell their experiences through stories (Best 2003; Creswell 2012; Neuman 2006). Qualitative research also takes into account the environment that the participant resides in, and relies on the participant's definitions of meanings rather than the academic definitions (Silverman and Marvasti 2008; Denzin and Lincoln 2008). Amy Best (2003) argues the critical importance of context when interacting with participants. In her work on constructing whiteness, Best and her participants each relied on their internalized definitions of race in order to have a conversation about what it meant to be white. My participants and I relied on our internalized definitions of what it means to be tall to discuss the formation of height as a characteristic of one's identity (Best 2003).

All interviews were recorded to capture the full conversation for later review (Marshall 2002). This allowed me to listen carefully to participants, providing a more accurate analysis (Mero-Jafie 2011). I transcribed each interview after it was completed (Davidson 2009) with a total number of 126 pages of typed transcriptions, and coded the transcription for emergent concepts and themes (Alvesson 2011, Bereska 2003). I coded my transcriptions by noting the number of occurrences of a particular topic, such as childhood experiences or difficulties finding clothing, and categorized my interview transcriptions according to the most common topics. Quotes were drawn from each participants' interview and were put into these categories, creating a more streamlined transcriptions sheet of roughly 36 pages. Since I transcribed and coded after each interview, I was able to alter specific questions and follow the data, giving me a clearer



understanding of what was important to my participants. Changing my interview questions to reflect prior interview topics enabled me to explore topics that I may not have considered important in my initial set of questions, such as the physical pain my participants reported in relation to their height. This expanded my understanding of tall women's experiences without excluding areas that had not originally occurred to me.

### **The Utility of Feminist Standpoint Theory and Grounded Theory**

In this study, I utilized a phenomenological approach, where the ways in which my participants make meaning became relevant to my analysis of their experience (Schutz 1967). I also utilized grounded theory in order to access a fuller understanding of femininity and tallness. Grounded theory avoids the constraints of traditional scientific method and its process of hypothesizing before gathering data (Charmaz 2001). Theories emerge from the data, and to the goal is to find an explanation for how and *why* something is happening rather than individually testing potential answers.

When studying tall women, it is important to focus on how they interpret their height instead of making assumptions from an academic theoretical standpoint. Feminist standpoint theory is the most practical way to address how height becomes identity because it relies on women's lived experiences and does its best not reproduce the relations of ruling (Smith 1996). Academia during the time Smith was formulating her ideas was even more male dominated than today, and academic research was focused on the theoretical rather than on lived experiences (Smith 2005:206).

My own experiences as a tall woman have led to my interest in this research. When confronted with literature about bodies and size, tallness in women is rarely mentioned or

unpacked to discover deeper meanings. While my own biases as a tall person can affect my opinion about research on tallness, it also gives me an advantage as a member of the group being studied. I used feminist standpoint theory to address how height has affected the lives of tall women including myself. Standpoint epistemology is a methodology and a type of critical theory in feminist research that is situated within lived experiences of people (Harding 2004). Standpoint theory emerged as a political response to positivist epistemologies arguing for a rational, objective researcher whose unbiasedness arises from distancing oneself from the research, and posits that it's impossible to be objective, or to remove oneself from the research being conducted. However, in standpoint theory, a researcher's interest in a particular topic stems from their own lived experiences. Having intimate knowledge of a subject provides perspective on research that cannot be accessed by a person who does not share the same kinds of lived experiences with participants. Utilizing standpoint theory as a theoretical approach brought power to my analysis because a shared lived experience of tallness and femininity with my participants evoked more applicable data than an objective empirical approach would.

As a tall woman researcher, I noticed that my participants felt more comfortable discussing their height with me because I empathized with their experiences and shared many of the same internalized emotions regarding our heights I was an insider within the group, making me less likely to perpetuate cultural understandings of tallness due to lack of experiences with height. My height facilitated data collection because it enabled me to access the private space behind the stage where women present their attitudes about height in normative discursive language. In this space, my participants were able to confide their fears and anxieties about being tall that normally are hid behind a smiling façade. They trusted me to validate their thoughts and emotions as they discussed the diverse ways in which their height affected their lives, and gave

me access at length to the interpretive and practical work of living as a tall woman. In sum, as both an insider and the researcher, I needed to treat my participants as the experts of what it is like to be tall while simultaneously consulting my own lived experiences of being labeled a tall woman.

### **Participants**

Out of my ten participants (See Table 1), there were seven white women, two Latinas, and one black woman. The responses from the three women of color in my study, unfortunately, did not contain enough race-related content to engage in a discussion of race, ethnicity, and tallness beyond the inclusion of race as a demographic feature. Though I had originally made provisions for transgender women to participate in my study, all of my participants identified as cisgender women, though sexualities were more diverse. Six of my participants were single, and the remaining four were either married or in a committed relationship. My participants' ages ranged from 18 years old to 72 years old.

**Table 1: Participant Demographics**

Pseudonym	Actual Height	Race/ Ethnicity	Sexual Orientation	Relationship Status	Age
Anna	6’0	Latina/Cuban	Bisexual	Single	26
Becky	6’0	White	Heterosexual	Single	18
Bela	6’1	Black	Heterosexual	Single	30-40
Charlie	6’3	White	Lesbian	Married	24
Donna	6’0	Latina/Dominican	LGBT	Single	24
Ellen	6’2	White	Heterosexual	Married	72
Joanna	6’2	White	Heterosexual	Single	23
Jody	6’3	White	Heterosexual	Married	45
Pamela	5’11	White	Heterosexual	Single	21
Tessa	6’3	White	Lesbian	In a relationship	21

**Ethical Concerns**

Before I began my research, I obtained Institutional Review Board approval (IRB ID: Pro00027447). To protect the identities of my participants, I assigned each of them a pseudonym that in no way identified them. Participants’ names have been kept in a private file for my access only. Furthermore, I did not share interview information with any participants. All interview information is confidential. Transcriptions and audio recordings from interviews is kept in a locked file within a secure location.

## **Informed Consent**

Each of my participants went through a process of giving informed consent that consisted of a form detailing the specificities of the study requirements including the nature of the study, risks, inconveniences, discomforts, and other important information, and a verbal conversation in which I discussed the importance of informed consent and explained any words or information that potential participants did not understand. Participants were encouraged to talk to family and friends before deciding to take part in this research study. Signed informed consent forms are kept in a locked file in a secure location.

## **FINDINGS**

My analysis begins by addressing the research correlating tallness, beauty, and success, and the ways in which the experiences of my participants contradict this dominant cultural narrative of tallness. One of the key themes of this analysis that emerges continuously is the internalization of interactions, where polite social etiquette is ignored in order to address my participants' height. Aside from being unsure of how to respond or interact in such awkward scenarios, my participants discussed how their feelings of discomfort became internalized and negatively associated with their height, creating a new layer of depth in understanding how tallness affects self-perspective. In this analysis, I discuss disability, gender, sexuality, bullying, consumption, and identity making and remaking in relation to how my participants learned to navigate tallness in their lives.

### **Ascribed Status: The Benefits of Height**

Thinness, often considered to be a contemporary beauty standard (Hamermesh 2011), can be considered the embodiment of a cultural ideal and is a social accomplishment symbolizing an individual's self-control and work ethic (Rhode 2011). In this case, the cultural ideal being represented is that of a small, healthy body. To be thin is to be desirable because of the beauty standards associated with it and the benefits that come from occupying a privileged status (van Amsterdam 2013). Tallness, unlike thinness, cannot be considered as a social accomplishment because it is not an achieved status. Instead, since height is in part biological (Allen et al. 2010), we can recognize tallness as an ascribed status, or a status that is conferred on the body in both

social and environmental interactions, which the person in question cannot physically change (Budgeon 2003). However, there are benefits to being ascribed the status of “tall.” Tallness has often been shown in research to correlate positively with success (Jackson and Ervin 1992). Tallness, which is also seen as able-bodied (Davis 1997), can also be considered a cultural ideal for physical appearance, and can even be regarded as an achievement of success.

Many of my participants reported that, while their height was beneficial to a certain extent, they still had to deal with assumptions about their body from other people. Donna (6’0) found that her height was equated with strength in the workplace, and as such was given the responsibility of completing more physical labor by herself than her other female coworkers were. “I have to go to the loading dock to receive the new shipments at my job, and the guys just assume I can handle the cargo by myself... They always assume I’m super buff. If I were one of the pretty little petite girls, they would do it for me!” Donna felt frustrated by the different standard she was held to due to her height and the assumption that she was very strong because she was tall.

Anna (6’0) held similar views to Donna concerning the able-bodiedness of height. “As a kid, I loved being asked to help with the heavy lifting...they saw my tallness as strength... I wish the adults had realized I wasn’t, you know, as strong as they thought, though, because I did long-term damage to my back from all the shit they had me doing.” For Anna, her height has proved to cause her difficulties in an able-bodied world. “I can’t walk for long periods of time without my back hurting, and standing for more than thirty minutes makes me want to cry. People don’t realize how much weight your body is carrying due to your height because you don’t look as fat, but it takes a really heavy toll.” Charlie, a 6’3 woman, discussed how people around her expected her to have more endurance. “I just want to fucking sit down for a minute,” she said

while describing an interaction on the bus. “Yeah, I know there’s someone else who needs my seat, but my hips are killing me from walking home from work.” Charlie lived four miles away from her workplace, and would walk half the distance to an appropriate bus stop.

As discussed previously, height as a research variable is often correlated to success in the workplace (Chu & Gary 2005). Many participants discussed the benefits their unusual height brought them in the workplace. Tessa (6’3), focused particularly on the social power her height brought her. “When I’m at work,” she reported, “customers are always assholes, and when I see one coming, I make sure to stand up slowly to intimidate them into leaving me alone. They were willing to argue with a tiny girl sitting at the register, but seeing how tall I actually am shuts them up pretty quick.” Another participant, Jody (6’3), also discussed height and power relations within the workplace. Unlike Tessa, however, Jody’s experiences revolved around her coworkers and peers rather than interactions with customers.

I have noticed in my work, that, that height gives me a lot of power.

When I have to do presentations, my supervisors feel they’re not in power. [*Pauses*]. I would stand up and they could feel the dynamics shifting as they saw my height. It changed how they treated me, which has helped me get a lot of positions.

Budgeon’s (2003) identification of height as an ascribed status for the body, then, is somewhat at odds with the experiences of tall women. While these women occupy a privileged ascribed status because of their height, they experience discomfort and even disagree about the extent to which their height benefits them. Quantitative studies often focus on the correlation



between height and success, yet do not factor in the experiences and interaction that height affects for tall people. “I think people see height in terms of usefulness,” pronounced Donna (6’0) during our conversation about romantic partners. “When you need me to get something, it’s awesome that I’m tall... when it comes to dating, though, I’m suddenly the least desirable person around.”

The benefits of tallness as an ascribed status can also be related to the ways in which height has been associated with authority (Boyson, Pryer, and Butler 1999). As adults, the association of height with able-bodiedness and powerful bodies causes an almost imperceptible, unacknowledged change in how people interact with the taller person. While this has been shown to be a benefit for adults, tall children have expectations placed on them that they might not be ready to handle. Jody (6’2) said, “As a younger child, I was definitely treated differently by teachers. I was expected to understand more because I looked older.” Jody had worked briefly as an elementary school teacher, and admitted that she found herself stereotyping her taller students too, despite her own experiences as a tall girl. Jody found that from a young age her daughter, Tessa (6’3), used her height to her advantage during classroom disputes. “Tessa also experienced the expectations of being tall and mature...She was always the mediator when people started fighting. She would *literally* put herself between two people [*gestures at blocking someone with her arms*] to stop conflict.” Donna (6’0) had an experience that could be classified as traumatic on her very first day of school.

[In] kindergarten, I walked in the door and my teacher told me that the 5th grade classroom was down the hallway. It was my first day of school, and my teacher sent me away from her classroom because

I looked too old...I've never forgotten how awful I felt that this nice lady was sending me away... I was freaking five! People always think you're older than you are.

### **On Goffman, Stigma, and Unsolicited Commentary**

Goffman's concept of facework is important in understanding our willingness to participate in a social system without questioning the values we endorse (Goffman 1956). Facework involves maintaining a portrayal of self through politeness, or through the observation of unspoken rules of etiquette we adhere to in interactions. Hirschauer (2005) expands on Goffman's concept of facework with his contemporary theory of "civil inattention," which is the etiquette we normally use to maintain and sustain one another's faces. As described by Cary (1978), Goffman's concept of civil inattention is "the fundamental rule governing gaze among unacquainted persons," or, the unspoken rule that initiating an interaction must be consented on by all parties. However, tall women often do not have the luxury of avoiding interactions concerning their height.

The civil inattention that Goffman originally proposed is violated in tall women's interactions, and usually occurs during unsolicited comments concerning their height. Bela (6'1) often struggled with how to appropriately respond to these types of comments.

People constantly made comments about my height. It's a harmless statement, yeah, but it's a statement about your body. It's not a compliment, so you can't say thank you, but it isn't a personal attack, either. What do you say to that?

Pugh (2009) understands differences in interaction to be of three types: personal, social, and interactional. Personal differences include traits that stand out, or enduring characteristics. Bodily stigma (Goffman 1963) falls into this first category of personal differences, and both shapes and is shaped by the content of social interaction. For women, who are expected to take up less space than men (Yamamiya, Cash, Melnyk, Posovac, and Posovac 2005; Butler 2011), excessive height is a trait that visibly stands out. Since tallness is a trait that has previously been established as preferred body type, many people often assume it is socially acceptable to address tall women's height during interactions. However, as Homan (2012) argues, dissatisfaction over seemingly positive traits of the body can lead to the development of avoidance techniques for garnering unwanted attention. Goffman (1963) uses the term "dis-identifiers" (1963) to describe how people separate themselves from their stigmatized identity. Tall women have extreme difficulty in distancing themselves from their height, though, due to the visibility of their bodies.

Tall women can sometimes forget about their height until their tallness is brought to their attention. Nash (2012) discusses the concept of self-conscious bodies, and the ways in which the definitions of a situation change when attention is paid toward the body. Ellen (6'2) talked about the ways in which her height didn't matter until someone else reminded her of it. "Every person I interact with is shorter than me," she said. "I don't ever really think about my height around other people unless someone is being really obnoxious about how tall I am." Tessa (6'3) also discussed how she "didn't really notice [her] height till someone [pointed] it out." This attention to tall women's height can make them uncomfortable in seemingly positive interactions.

Social interactions about positive traits such as height can lead to well-intentioned comments being construed as negative remarks. Carolyn Ellis (1998) draws attention to this

phenomenon with her concept of minor bodily stigma, which is the negative internalization of interactions concerning specific traits of the body (Ellis 1998:517). While Ellis mainly focuses on “undesirable traits” (Ellis 1998:524), her concept of minor bodily stigma still applies to tall women because they internalize interactions about a trait they perceive as negative. Ellis continues on to describe how bodily traits are stigmatized “depending on the context in which [they occur] (524).” For tall women, this stigmatization occurs during unsolicited comments about their height. Donna (6’0) describes her discomfort with inane comments about her height as being frustrating. “I hate it when people randomly tell you you’re tall, and act like you didn’t know it already...it pisses me off, and I feel so uncomfortable!”

Many of my participants attributed their distress concerning their height to comments they experienced in interaction with others over the years, which possibly suggests that repetitive comments about their tallness begin to create a stigma concerning their height. This stigma for tall women can include feeling uncomfortable possibly due to an internalization of remarks made by other people, including unsolicited comments from strangers. Donna mentioned how the comments she received were often repetitive across almost all interactions. “You know, [I] just [get asked] the generic ones that people always ask when they see a living skyscraper.”

Some comments were construed more negatively than others. Jody, a 45-year-old woman who grew up during the 1970’s and 1980’s, reported that questions intended as a complement caused her great distress. “It made me feel so stereotypical, when, like, when people asked me if I was a model...I wanted to rip out my hair and scream, ‘No, I’m not a stereotype! Don’t push this on me because I’m tall!’”

Tall women begin to anticipate the anxiety and discomfort that is normally felt when their height is given undue attention in an interaction without their initiation. For Jody, her height and

the resulting comments repeatedly made her aware of her body to the point where she considered herself a “freak.” Jody’s mother, Ellen, described how 60 years ago, she was constantly picked on for being tall. “I was a freak in my generation...normal girls were 5’2”-5’3”, and I ended up being 6’2” at 16-years old....I will never be okay with being tall [because of how they treated me]. I hate it, I have always hated it.” Jody confided that she had never seen Ellen’s bare legs, because her mother was so ashamed of how long they were. Ellen’s feelings toward her long legs stemmed from the bullying she experienced during her formative years in junior high. The literature supports the conclusion that comments bringing the body and tallness to the forefront of one’s attention tend to change self-perception due to constant feedback from these interactions (Larkin and Pines 1979; Butler 2011).

When tall women draw attention to the discomfort they experience in relation to their height in interactions, they are often dismissed, and they lose voice and validity due to their ownership of a privileged status. In encounters with people shorter than themselves, my participants were routinely confronted with envy for their height. Pamela (5’11) described an interaction where her shorter friend complained about her own height in comparison to Pamela’s while ignoring the issues Pamela experienced:

My short friend will complain about her height, and I’m like, have you ever had to struggle? You can buy clothes, you can fit on airplanes, and you don’t have to scrunch down! ...My friends complain about not being tall, and I don’t empathize at all. You’re not that tall, you don’t have my problems.

Pamela's height was a source of frustration for her when confronted with complaints from shorter women. When her friends tried to empathize with her by comparing their own height related issues to hers, she became irritated because she felt that they didn't relate to her at all. By saying, "you're not that tall," Pamela was differentiating her issues as a tall woman from those of an average sized woman. By refusing to acknowledge the potential problems excessive height can cause, the well-intentioned comment of Pamela's friend was internalized as a negative interaction. Other participants also reported a disconnection between compliments received from shorter people and their internal emotional reactions. "I don't like people drawing attention to it. I know I'm tall, thank you," said participant Bela (6'1) in response to our conversation about comments from strangers. "I know they're not trying to be mean and they mean it as a compliment, but they don't know the struggle to find clothing. They don't understand how much easier they have it." Tessa (6'3) was often confronted with comments about how she stood out in crowds, and how "they aren't intended to be mean, but it's just annoying." She, among many of the participants, experienced comments that affected how she perceived her height in interactional situations.

### **Heteronormative Dating Practices**

In popular depictions of heterosexual couples, there is often a distinct size difference between the man and the woman in the relationship, where the man is portrayed as being taller, broader, and more muscular, while the woman is presented as being much smaller and embodies, as Anna (6'0) described, "dainty or delicate" femininity. As we discussed earlier, tallness is sometimes associated with being more masculine, which is to say, powerful able-bodiedness (Davis 1997). Many of my heterosexual participants found it difficult to conform themselves to

being the stereotypical feminine partner in their relationships when their romantic partner was shorter than themselves, and also experienced much difficulty with finding appropriately tall partners. Joanna (6'2) described her difficulties with dating shorter men. "I feel weird being the tall one. Like, uncomfortable being taller than my male date. I guess I have a preconception that he should be taller than me." For Joanna, the expectation that she needed to be shorter than her date made her feel uncomfortable possibly entering into a relationship with a man who did not meet her minimum height requirement.

Becky also voiced her concerns with her height in relationships. "I can't see myself dating someone who is shorter than me," she complained. "I just, I don't want to be the tall one in my relationship!" Being "the tall one" in their relationship was a continuously reappearing phrase in the interviews, as well as the fear of being rejected as the height difference increased. Anna (6'0) discussed her difficulties with growth spurts and how they affected her relationship with her then-boyfriend, Dean.

In high school, I had dated this guy named [Dean], and we went through loads of issues because of height. When we started dating, he was taller than me, then I got another growth spurt and he was shorter than me. He kept waiting for his growth spurt, waiting, waiting... never came. So I was taller than him after that. And he had BIG issues with it. He never wanted to get onto his tippy toes to kiss me, and he would throw a hissy fit if I wore heels. That shit did not fly in our relationship.

Dean's reluctance to acknowledge Anna's superior height is an example of how tallness in women can be perceived as threatening to men's masculinity (Farman 2011). Dean was unable to reconcile his feelings toward Anna with her new taller height, and ended the relationship shortly afterward.

Ellen (6'2) also experienced rapid growth spurts (six inches in two years) while in a relationship that changed how she perceived her partner, who had been the same height as herself before she began her growth spurts. "[It] made me uncomfortable to be so much taller than him at sixteen, so I broke up with him," Ellen said. "It was like dating a little brother. After that, I *never* wanted to date someone shorter than me." Ellen's comment about her adolescent relationship indicates an interesting intersection with masculinity and maturity, in that her partner seemed much younger once he was shorter than her. As suggested by Pugh (2009:57), larger children are assumed to be older and more mature. For a heterosexual teenage boy to be shorter than his romantic partner, then, is to suggest that he might be younger and less experienced than her.

Other participants were made uncomfortable by sexualized comments or interactions where their height was pointed out by heterosexual, cis-gendered men. Jody described an interaction in her twenties where outings with her friends to dance clubs were interrupted by groups of men commenting on her height. "Guys would walk up [next] to me and say awful, crude things to their friends, like, 'take my picture!' because of how tall I was. They didn't have a camera or anything, they just wanted to make a joke." Jody struggled with the harassment she received for her height, and the ways in which her interactions portrayed her as "an Amazon freak." "It was so awful, like I was a trophy-- not a good one where someone loves me and thinks I'm special. It made me want to stop going out altogether!" Donna described a recent



interaction where an older man made a comment about her height and desirability as a wife. “He said, ‘Where were you thirty years ago when I was looking for a big woman to marry?’ And I felt so uncomfortable!” Donna remarked, “Do I play it cool and say, you know, ‘I wasn’t born yet!’ Do I get really offended and tell him to fuck off?” Donna struggled to navigate this type of situation often, and admitted that “creepy situations like that” put her on edge in her interactions.

### **Queer Dating Practices**

Of the ten participants, Charlie, Donna, and Tessa all self-identified as being on the LGBTQ+ spectrum. In comparison to the heterosexual participants, these three participants appeared much more confident and comfortable with their height. Charlie and Tessa both described their romantic partners as being much shorter than themselves, but stated that their height caused no problems in their relationships. “She loves reaching up to kiss me, and has no problem being the big spoon when we cuddle,” Charlie said. “She lets me act like a tiny person, and makes me feel normal in uncomfortable situations.” Charlie’s desire to “act like a tiny person” suggested that her romantic partner provided a haven from Charlie’s height, where her tallness was not of concern. In the example of being “the little spoon,” she expounded on how her girlfriend allowed her to defy size norms (such as being the “big spoon” because Charlie is taller) in their private space, thus giving her respite from her height. Charlie continued to describe scenarios where her partner would act as a barrier to uncomfortable situations regarding her height, and would actively work to assure her that her height was normal. “She just tells me my height is beautiful, and that she wouldn’t change anything about me. I guess I just feel natural around her, and can forget that I’m tall.”

Another participant, Tessa, also described how her height played a role in her relationship. Upon meeting her partner's extended family, she was the recipient of multiple queries about if she had succeeded in finding any suitably tall male partners. "They asked me about my dating prospects and if I ever have trouble finding a man tall enough for me. [My partner's conservative grandma] started telling me to hang out with the basketball team, and I couldn't tell her I was already dating her 5'3" granddaughter!" The heteronormative assumption of her partner's family that Tessa could not find an adequately suitable partner prompted irritation rather than self-consciousness. Tessa and Charlie, who both identified as lesbians, had no issues with having a shorter partner. Donna, on the other hand, was uncomfortable with dating shorter men, though she identified as non-heterosexual. This is indicative of the ways in which heteronormativity pervades expectations of femininity and the body (Dwyer 2009).

### **Sports, Athleticism, and Able-Bodied Tallness**

Tallness is often understood as being synonymous with able-bodiedness (Firmin et al. 2009). This theme often appeared during interviews when my participants reported the types of comments they received about their height in unsolicited interactions. Common comments which all of my participants experienced were inquiries about their participation in sports including, but not limited to, basketball, volleyball, football, soccer, and track. Most of my participants stated they had little to no athletic skill, citing reasons such as poor balance, lack of hand-eye coordination, and even a simple dislike of strenuous activity. Jody (6'3) described her initial response to questions about sports. "I hate those questions!" She continued in a mocking voice. "Are you tall? Do you play basketball? It's like, no, do you want the other team to win? I'm terrible with sports!"

Another participant, Bela (6'1) indicated how her tallness was assumed to be able bodied. "I'm not a sporty person... I'm not athletic at all! ...There's an assumption that you are because you're tall, or that you should be good at it." Athleticism is presupposed for tall women in interactions because their body size is associated with powerful, masculine bodies, therefore implying that they are skilled at sports. This can be seen in professional sports where tallness benefits the athletes, such as basketball and volleyball.

While a number of my participants did play sports during their secondary education years, the degree to which they excelled at their chosen sports varied. Joanna (6'2) participated in many sporting events up until her junior year of high school, when academics took precedence in preparation for college. However, she still receives comments about her height and athleticism to this day.

All the freaking time, I still get asked that question. It's like, no, I don't play sports. Why are you assuming I play sports? The first time I got asked that question, I asked them why they thought I was good at sports. Just because you're tall doesn't make you a good athlete!

This fascination with tall women's bodies and athleticism is by no means a new phenomenon. Ellen (6'2), a 70-year-old woman who shared the resentment of the other participants regarding sport-related questions, explained how she has been handling these types of questions throughout her life. "Even today," she described, "people ask me if I played basketball when I was younger. I hate sports! ...I tripped over shadows. It's a question I've been

asked all my life.” Ellen often avoided answering sports-related questions in her interactions, utilizing humor or deflective comments to extricate herself from uncomfortable situations.

### **Height Management Techniques**

To cope with unsolicited and unwelcome commentary, Becky (6’0), along with many other participants, often received comments on her height that made her feel uncomfortable and utilized management techniques such as humor to hide her discomfort. “I would laugh at them, but it wasn’t fun,” she admitted. Becky explained how she had learned to use techniques such as humor in order to avoid addressing the violation of civil inattention committed by the person commenting unsolicited on her height, and to distance herself from the internal emotions that this attention to her body created. Donna reported that she dealt with inappropriate comments and uncomfortable situations by reorienting the situation to, “put a humor spin on it... It’s not my job to berate myself for being tall.” In doing so, Donna suggested that the use of humor allowed her to move past any awkwardness the interaction caused. Similarly to Donna, Joanna (6’2) discussed how her management technique has lessened the impact comments about height have on her self-perception. “It doesn’t bother me anymore, and I’ve developed a sense of humor around it,” she said. “People are going to make fun of tall people, and that’s just how it is. If you can’t deal with it, you have to leave.”

In addition to conversational management, tall women engage in physical techniques to cope with unwanted attention to their height (Farman 2011). Some of these techniques include attempting to minimize height by abstaining from purchasing certain types of clothing, adapting certain body habits (such as slouching and limiting movement), and avoiding situations where they have often been confronted with their height. “I appreciate fashion, but I’ve never seen

flared Capri's," complained Pamela. "[The pants] couldn't be rolled up, which is what I normally do with short pants. It's too bad, though, because they made my hips look really nice." Gordon et al. (2010) discussed how the use of coping mechanisms can develop negative and harmful body habits that have long reaching, internal effects, such as the back problems Charlie experienced as an adult, and many other participants experienced that they attributed to slouching during their adolescence.

### **Environmental Othering**

The environment of social interactions also affects how tall women perceive themselves, and their corresponding emotions concerning their height. Public spaces, for example, can make tall women uncomfortable by bringing to their awareness the ways in which their body does not conform to feminine expectations. Pamela (5'11) discussed how restroom mirrors in public spaces like movie theaters serve as a reminder for how tall she is.

I don't like using school mirrors or movie theater mirrors, because I swear to god, I [can't] see anything above my collarbones... It kills your good mood pretty quick. Full length mirrors are awful [because they distort your image]... I don't like feeling that awkward!

Similar to the problems presented by average mirror heights, navigating restroom stalls proved frustrating for many of my participants. Charlie (6'3) described how her experiences with short bathrooms stalls resulted in her having to crouch over in her stall to avoid making eye contact with others. Charlie was vehemently opposed to public spaces that were uncomfortable

for her body, such as airplanes. Even for average sized people, airplanes can be uncomfortable due to compact seats with limited leg room, and an unfortunate lack of personal space. As a tall woman, Charlie described how the limited leg room of economy class seats would often cause her to lose circulation in her legs during the flight because of how her knees would be “scrunched” into the seat. “Don’t get me started on fucking airplanes!” She exclaimed, slapping her hand onto the table. “Even now, I pay extra for the damn exit row because of the leg room, and it still isn’t enough!” Charlie paid a higher price in order to pick out a seat that would be less uncomfortable during the flight, which is indicative of the materialist difficulties that are experienced by non-conforming bodies.

Though many people can experience discomfort in being in unfamiliar public places, non-average people have their otherness reinforced when they are confronted with inaccessible spaces (Gabel, Cohen, Kotel, and Pearson 2013). As Gabel et al. argue, being made to feel “out of space” serves to keep non-normative, non-conforming bodies “in their place” as second class citizens (Gabel et. al 2013:78). Even private spaces can serve as a reminder of tall women’s otherness and their inability to conform to standardized products. Two participants, Pamela and Charlie, described how personal spaces, such as their own cars, can recreate the environmental effect of othering, sometimes to the extent of being painful. “My height makes getting into my car difficult,” Pamela admitted. “I have this tiny car, and my knees are bent, they touch the steering wheel when I drive, and my head constantly smacks into the door frame.” Her frustration with her car extends to most other compact vehicles, which have low head room, small seats, and narrow spaces for legs. “Products are definitely not made with tall people in mind!”

## **Gender and Femininity**

Gender plays an interesting role in interactions for tall women, as they experience conflict in performing both femininity and tallness at the same time regarding self-perception and interaction with their environment. Donna (6'0) admitted that, to her, "femininity is like the elephant in the room next to my giraffe." Judith Butler's (2011) work on gender and performativity describes how gender is something that must be reenacted on a daily basis, both within interaction and by one's self. Hively and El-Alayi (2014) and Ezzel (2009) further Butler's concept of gender performativity by discussing how we conform the body to fit into gendered discourse. Tall women often attempt to avoid transgressing the height barrier that separates the performances of femininity and masculinity by striving to conform to expectations of womanhood that limit the body. Charlie (6'3) remarked on how she shaped her motions to fit others' expectations of femininity.

I always have to remember not to move. When I'm excited, I can't fling my arms around. When I'm angry, I have to limit how I pace, because women don't walk like that. I can't just spin around, I can't jump at concerts, I can't ever move comfortably... I feel like I always have to fucking apologize for moving like a tall person!

Charlie expressed concern for how often she had to change her behaviors in order to fit in. Her conceptualization of feminine behavior included tucking her arms against her sides when in a crowd, crossing her legs to take up less space while sitting, and moderating her movement to appear more in control. Donna (6'0) describes how frustrated she feels when her identity as a

woman and as a tall person clash. “It bothers me that there’s such a stigma for women, tall women,” she described. “I guess you have to act super cute and be girly in order to be normal.” Donna compared tall women to characters from popular literature such as Xena (the title character in the TV show *Xena: Warrior Princess*), Wonder Woman (a superhero in DC Comics), and literary archetypes such as the Amazonian women of ancient Greek mythology (Stuller 2010). Characters such as these are examples of how tallness for women is often portrayed as a very desirable trait, but this supposed desirability disconnects with the lived experiences of actual tall women.

### **Clothing and Consumption of Femininity**

Several participants described the ways in which they felt their height was an obstacle to being feminine. The most prominent of these was how clothing such as footwear became part of performing a tall, feminine woman. “I never wear high heels,” Bela (6’1) declares, gesturing at her comfortable dress flats. “I don’t want to be any taller!” Bela’s attitude toward hyperfeminine footwear such as high heels was shared by many of the participants, with the reasoning varying from the limited availability of appropriate shoes, to the discomfort of wearing them for long periods of time, and to the risk of violating the height barrier between femininity and masculinity even more than they currently do. Bela also described how the unavailability of comfortable, appropriately fitting clothing limited her outfit options. “You don’t feel very feminine when you’re forced to wear men’s clothes...” She said with a sigh.

Clothing is one of many factors that make tall women feel uncomfortable in their own bodies. The limited availability of extra-length clothing in the mainstream market hinders tall women from achieving their desired aesthetic, and the lack of appropriately fitting clothing produces an othering effect, where tall women feel ostracized by the necessity of wearing more



masculine clothes, rendering them less able to feel as feminine as their shorter counterparts (Feather et al. 1996). “As a tall woman, it’s really hard to be cute because no regular stores cater to tall people,” Jody (6’3) stated. My participants discussed at length the difficulties they encountered in finding clothing that met their fairly simple criteria of being the correct length, fitting well, easy to find, and a reasonable price. According to the participants, most boutique stores do not have extra-long or tall products available for women, much to their dismay. “I looked at the tag, and it said one size fits all– or, should I say, one size fits average,” Anna (6’0) said while discussing the issues she experiences with the length of her dresses. Becky (6’0) reported how rare it was to find clothing she liked, since the few products made for tall women sold out so quickly. “I hate it,” she confided. “It’s not just having to walk around and try things, but I can never find jeans that are long enough! My inseam is a 36, and those sell out really quickly.” Many of my participants experienced negative emotions regarding the limited selection of products specifically for tall women. Donna described her experiences with shopping for clothing during her middle and high school years. “I remember crying when trying to fit into my clothes.... my shirt didn’t feel long enough and I definitely don’t want my stomach to show... Length is important, but what are you going to do?” Donna admitted to sometimes feeling helpless when it came to clothing, and that she often had to compromise with her appearance in order to be somewhat comfortable in her outfits. “As long as it’s not really weird looking, I just deal with it.” Bela (6’1) described how she had to choose between wearing clothes that she liked and clothes that fit her well when shopping for new items. “I ended up buying men’s jeans all the time. I have a 36” inseam, and they’re so boxy around the hips. They don’t look good, but they at least cover my ankles. My shirts are too short in the torso, and too short in the arms.” Bela

continued to explain that she feared wearing clothing that was too short because it could subject her to ridicule in public.

Ellen also experienced a significant fear of wearing clothing that was visibly too short. “I would be laughed at if I walked down the street with pants like that,” she reported. “But as an adult, I made my own clothes just so that I had something I could be comfortable in!” Ellen, a woman in her seventies, managed her discomfort with finding comfortable clothing that met her length criteria by creating garments herself, as opposed to relying on retail stores to provide them. Her skill with sewing allowed her to craft what she needed, unlike many of my younger participants who had no seamstress knowledge. Tessa (6’3) described her annoyance with finding tall clothing, but admitted that she was more successful at it than other tall women due to her smaller clothing size. “Most standard sized clothing caters to an average sized body,” Tessa explained. “It makes me so annoyed! The tall clothing also only comes in very small sizes. That’s not a problem for me, but I hate that other tall women struggle with it.” Though Tessa had problems with finding clothes she liked, she recognized the difficulties larger tall women experienced with finding outfits.

Several of my participants also had difficulties with adhering to feminine ideals of fashion because the clothing sold in most stores does not accommodate longer body proportions. Tessa (6’3) had difficulties with deciding how to perform femininity when there were no clothes available to aid her gender performance. “Should I adhere to feminine norms since my body breaks so many rules?” She argued. “Or should I just not care?” Her awareness of how her clothes did not conform to her body types sometimes made her uncomfortable and served as a constant reminder of how her tallness could prevent her from being “normal.” Charlie (6’3) described how emotional shopping for school clothing was, and how her parent’s expectations of

her led to her disconnect with any desire to buy clothing. “Mom called me her difficult shopper while I was growing up,” Charlie admitted. “And it hurt, because it’s not my fault it didn’t fucking fit. I’m not wearing it if it doesn’t fucking fit!”

Family members became a critical part of how tall women perceived their bodies during shopping trips. Smaller family members could not relate to the struggles that tall women experienced with clothes, and sometimes unknowingly belittled them for the choices they made. “My sister is 5’4”, and she wears like, a size 6,” Pamela said in regards to shopping with her family. “I feel so uncoordinated and big next to her... She got whatever she wanted, and I was stuck in the guy’s clothing that fit.” For Pamela, her sister’s insensitivity to her shopping struggles was a cause for resentment. Feelings of being “too big” in situations tall women become aware of their height was a common theme that often emerged during shopping trips. Participants like Charlie expressed how, “family members who aren’t tall often have difficulties understanding what stresses tall women out while doing normal, easy activities.”

Pamela also described how uncomfortable shopping with shorter friends could be, as they did not understand why tall women might feel awkward or “too large” in stores catering to average or shorter than average sized women. “When we went to go buy dresses together, my friends would complain about how long the dresses were. I walked out in one dress, and the dress was a full foot and a half off the floor. It was the same dress!” She said with a snort. “It makes me feel a little insecure.”

As tall clothing is not readily available in accessible retail stores, tall women often experience discrimination by having to pay more for clothing that fits, as compared to the average sized women. Clothes catering specifically to tall women are exponentially more expensive online, rendering many tall women who are low income or of modest income unable

to easily purchase comfortably sized clothing. Bela (6'1) explained her frustrations with finding clothing online due to the pricing issues. "I have shopped online for tall women's clothing, but the prices are gouged so badly!" She reported. "The websites were started by tall women, and they know how it is; they're definitely taking advantage of how desperate we are." Bela went on to describe the clothing issues she's encountered, such as skirts being priced at \$80 and above simply for the extra three inches of material at the bottom. Jody also described how difficult it is to purchase clothing marketed to tall women. "It's gotten better now, with things like the maxi shirts, because they're cheap. I get so frustrated when I buy tall clothing, because they add so much to the price! I saw a pair of jeans on LongTallSally.com that were amazing, but they were \$117! I can't even begin to afford clothing that fits." Jody had to make fiscal decisions regarding the purchase of one high-quality pair of pants, or multiple cheaper pairs in order to have enough clothing to wear. After our conversation, I went to the website she had described to review the prices on items. The jeans she had described from the website were a fairly accurate representation of the pricing range for their products, where the cheapest item (a semi-professional shirt) began at \$55 dollars, and many items were well over \$100. Using Ellen's example of finding a suitable pair of jeans, many retailers can provide average sized jeans at prices ranging from \$15 to \$50, depending on the brand name and quality of the fabric. This type of price discrimination and non-availability of suitable clothing is also experienced by people with physical disabilities, as their non-normative bodies may make it difficult to fit into average sized clothing (Betty, Martin, and Miller 1979; Thorén 1996). While more affordable clothing can be adapted to fit non-normative bodies, this also takes time, effort, and usually some money. Most often, choices must be made between compromises and comfort.

## **Family Environment**

As with many things, tallness, as opposed to height, is socially constructed (Shilling 2012). In the literature review, we discussed how height (a numeric value describing the length of the human body) is different than tallness, where one's tallness depends on the cultural values of other people in interactions, and one's internalized views of their own tallness. It also depends upon social context. As a point of primary socialization for children, family can serve as a place of comfort, safety, and community (DeVault 1999). The families of tall women can provide a relatively normalizing environment for their height, especially when other family members are at, near, or supersede tall women's height.

"We're all tall.... I felt normal," described Becky (6'0). "Sometimes I forget I'm tall around my family....I'm the short one in comparison." For Becky, whose brother and parents were significantly taller than she, family provided a space where her height did not designate her as a "freak;" rather, she could enjoy a respite from having to interact with her tallness because she was no longer the tallest person in the room. Much to her delight, Joanna (6'2) found her height to be negated in the presence of her family members, many of whom were of similar or greater heights. "Growing up, my brother and I felt the most comfortable being around my family, because we were all tall," she explained. "It just felt normal." Joanna described the heights of her various family members, culminating with her uncle, who towered over her at 6'7". "When I'm next to him, I feel so short, and it feels great! ...You can definitely tell where I got my giant genes." Here we can see how tallness is situational and depends on environmental factors and social context. When Joanna is out in public, she feels like she is "a walking skyscraper." However, when she is surrounded by family members who are at a similar height,

her tallness (or shortness, as compared to her uncle) lessens as an obstacle to maneuver around, and she can be more comfortable with her body.

For other participants, though, tallness was not a common gene within their immediate family. For some participants, like Bela, tallness is a selectively appearing trait, leaving her the tallest member of her family. “I’m about as tall as my great-grandmother was,” reported Bela after disclosing the heights of her shorter family members. “It seems like the height skips generations.” Other participants, like Donna (6’0), attributed their height to a specific side of their family. Donna, who lived in a single parent household, towered over her mother and sister, both of whom are 5’8 or below. “Well, I definitely get my height from the Dominican side of my family,” Donna explained. “My aunts are really, really tall.” Due to language barriers, Donna had difficulty interacting with her paternal family members, and was unable to find solidarity with their tallness. Instead, she spent the majority of her time with her shorter family, and learned to manage the alienating emotions of “always being the tall one left out.” Donna shrugged her shoulders. “I guess I’m the only one who got the freak gene.”

### **Navigating Tallness in Childhood**

However, once tall girls begin to leave their family environment where their tallness is accepted and are placed in same-age classrooms with average-sized children, they begin to learn that tallness is not taken-for-granted embodiment for other people. Though tallness, as we previously discussed, can be understood as a positive trait, children value conformation over individuality, because to conform is to be accepted. In Allison Pugh’s 2009 book, Longing and Belonging: Parents, Children, and Consumer Culture, children care more about being accepted into the in-group circle of their peers as opposed to seeking prestige. Pugh’s adapts Arlie

Hochschild's idea of the "economy of gratitude" to discuss how children decide as a group which traits are desirable, and which children are "worthy of belonging" to the in-group in her concept, the "economy of dignity" (Pugh 2009:6). Acceptance into the in-group is based on the possession of these desired traits. While adults often view tallness as an attractive, privileged, desirable trait, it can symbolize difference and otherness to children, as a tall person is physically incapable of conforming to the group. I adapt Pugh's conceptualization of the economy of dignity to discuss how children normalize average height by abnormalizing atypical height. In this study, my participants described how their above average tallness resulted in them having difficulties as children

When children leave the safety of their family environments for the first time, they begin to learn the more intricate norms that shape how we interact with others and with ourselves. Outside of the comfort of their homes, tall girls begin to learn the differences between their own height and what is understood as average. School classrooms tend to cluster children of the similar ages in order to foster peer relationships and friendships. As such, many of my participants quickly realized that their tallness is atypical in comparison to their peers. Unfortunately, many of my participants learned early in life to associate their height with negativity due to the treatment they experienced from other children. "[B]ack in elementary school, when I was the tallest one...I got made fun of all the time for my height," informed Joanna (6'2). Her experiences were commonly expressed among other participants, who often identified the behaviors of other children as bullying. As we discussed in the literature review, bullying is a form of peer-sanctioning also known as policing, a term popularized by Michele Foucault (1977) in his book, Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison. Policing can begin at a young age for tall girls, during the time when they begin to leave their area of primary

socialization among their families (where their height is usually normalized) and enter into broader areas of socialization, where they begin to view their height as an abnormality, or, as Donna described, “freakish.”

Many of my participants, such as Pamela (5’11), reported being treated poorly by peers during their primary and secondary education years, and experienced harassment concerning their height throughout this developmental period. Ellen (6’2) described how the bullying she received from others began as jeers and name-calling, and escalated to the point of causing extreme mental and emotional distress.

[During my growth spurts] is when all the names started. You know, slim, stretch, string bean, you know... You have to remember, this was 60 years ago, and the normal girls were 5’2-5’3... I dreaded going to school. I never talked to anyone, never made any friends, and it’s because I felt so uncomfortable.

Jody (6’3), Ellen’s daughter, grew up knowing firsthand how her mother’s experiences with being bullied had changed how she viewed her height. Both Jody and her daughter (Ellen’s granddaughter), Tessa, had heard Ellen’s stories about her treatment at the hands of her peers. “My mom [Ellen] was really tall, too, and she was bullied really badly because of her height. To this day, I haven’t seen my mom’s legs,” Jody observed. “She always covers them because people were so cruel to her...She hates being tall.” According to Jody, one of the ways classmates had tormented Ellen had been by calling her long legs “freakish.” While Ellen’s



experiences marked an earlier era in American society, the stories of other participants were dishearteningly similar despite the fifty year age gap.

One of the consequences of bullying and negative treatment according to Wexler (2006) is an “us versus them” mentality of in-groups and out-groups, where those in the in-group are able to bond via their inclusion, and those in the out-group feel excluded and isolated, creating feelings of alienation and otherness (Miller 2010; Canales 2000). Tall women begin to feel isolated and alone because of the harassment they receive, leading to the internalization of their emotions regarding their height. This negative and belittling attitude toward tallness from average sized children can understandably lead to social anxiety.

Pugh (2009) described how children can experience primary social anxiety during their interactions with other children in their attempts to be a part of the in-group (Pugh 2009:57). Children gain social skills as they work hard not to be unaware or awkward. One of the interactions that Pugh observed from her time at the Sojourner Truth afterschool program in Oakland was how taller children (both male and female) were treated as being older, even though they had not yet had the time to develop the social skills necessary to interact with older children outside of their peer group (2009:57). Bela (6'1) described how her teachers treated her as an older student, and had high expectations of her due to her height. “When I was in preschool, I was really tall and I looked older than the other students,” Bela explained. The expectation that tall children will have the same social skills as those of older children can begin to cause anxiety during interactions, due to the likelihood of committing a faux pas in conversation. Charlie (6'3) also commented on how uncomfortable her memories were of elementary school due to her height.

I hated those years! Even though I was one of the youngest kids in the classroom, my teachers always thought I was the oldest. After getting several reprimands on my report card, my mom had to sit down with my teacher and explain that I didn't act like an older kid because I *wasn't* an older kid...I was so awkward, I didn't make a lot of friends because I didn't know how to act around them... I mean, I learned how to act. [*Laughs*] Now, I know how to act, but it sucked back then.

The anxiety Charlie felt from her interactions with both her teachers and her peers began to have long lasting consequences. Here we see can Cooley's concept of the Looking Glass Self in how tall women learn to gauge the reactions of people in their environment which then shape how they perceive their height. Lundgren (2004), a contemporary scholar of the works of Cooley and Mead, discusses how our self-conceptualization develops based on the treatment we receive from others. When tall girls are bullied and poorly treated by shorter children, their conceptualization of their height begins to reflect the attitudes of their abusers. Though she feels fairly average-sized when by herself, Donna (6'0) admitted to wondering how other people perceive her due to her height.

You know, I don't really know what's going through someone else's mind when they see me. I wish I could see myself through their eyes, you know? Sometimes I'll see girls-- like you, you're taller than me by a couple inches, and I'll see girls who are like, significantly large, and I'm like, damn, do I really look like that?

School pictures were a source of distress for all participants, as their position in the back center of each photograph served to reinforce their bodily self-perception. Donna (6'0) reported, "When I was five or six, I was in the safety patrol, and in our group photo, I was almost a foot taller than the other kids... The picture makes me so uncomfortable." Many participants admitted that being able to see the height difference between themselves and other people made them hyperaware of their tallness. "I hate having to see how I compare with other people," Donna admitted. "It's body dysmorphia."

Some of my participants struggled with how they were perceived by their peers after learning that others thought them to be intimidating. Similarly to how Poran (2006) suggested that young Black girls employ both emotional and bodily management in order to avoid being seen as "angry Black women," the tall women in my study experienced deep emotions over how others perceived them, particularly over being perceived in potentially negative ways. One common perception of tall women is that they are intimidating due to their body size. Joanna (6'2) described an interaction with her current friends where she learned that they had initially thought her to be intimidating upon first meeting her. "I hate when people think I'm mean just because I'm tall... We aren't intimidating," she explained. "We're friendly giants....I don't care how tall you are, you just need to be a nice person!" Joanna needed time to manage her emotions after her friends had informed her of their initial perceptions, and she left the conversation to contemplate it. "That really hurt, you know. Intimidating? Once you get to know me, I wouldn't hurt a fly!"

Some participants, such as Becky (6'0), sometimes encountered people who were intimidated because of her height to the point where she finally developed defense mechanisms in order to navigate uncomfortable situations. "Intimidating. Can you believe they think I'm

intimidating? I, you know, I have to keep a blank face on. You know, blank face, fast walking speed, and stand tall.” For Becky, standing tall worked to metaphorically “stiffen her spine,” or to give her the courage to remove herself from the space where her height was not welcomed. “I just feel like if I were shorter, I would be a lot more approachable.”

### **Ideal Height and Tall Women’s Identities**

Goffman’s conceptualization of stigmatized identities is critical for understanding how a positive trait, such as tallness, can become so negatively internalized (Goffman 1967). In our prior conversation about gender, we examined how tall women are unable to contort their bodies to an “appropriately dainty” body size, no matter how hard they may try. Goffman describes the process of diverging the self from stigmatized identities as utilizing “dis-identifiers (1963),” or finding techniques to separate oneself from the stigmatized identity.

While unable to change their height, tall women still sometimes feel morally responsible for attempting to conform to feminine body size expectations. Unlike shorter women, however, tall women cannot remove their excess height at the end of the day by removing their high heels. Many of my participants attempted to distance themselves from their tallness by engaging in techniques such as slouching in order to appear less intimidating and more acceptably tall. Donna described how her discomfort with her body size as a teenager led to back pain as she grew up. “My posture is terrible because I hated being tall when growing up.” As we can see from Donna’s statement, slouching began as a conscious defense mechanism to avoid appearing as intimidating and tall, and later resulted in her “terrible posture.” Many participants, including Bela (6’1) and Charlie (6’3), also engaged in slouching during their teenage years. However,

these two participants in particular described how their body posture was due to the treatment they received from other students, and that slouching was a way of trying to conform. “I still slouched vividly though, and I think it was due to low self-esteem,” said Bela. “It was mostly from talking to other kids. Kids can be awful, you know?” Bela, like Donna, attributed her current posture to ill treatment at the hands of her peers. Charlie described how her mental health began to deteriorate because of the bullying she experienced, and how it affected her outside of the school environment. “You try to make yourself something you’re not. You slouch to make yourself shorter, you scrunch when you sit, you sleep curled into a ball to avoid being too big for the bed,” Charlie described. “Your body isn’t made for that kind of treatment.” Some participants, similarly to Charlie, began to internalize a narrative of blame and responsibility for their inability to change their height, usually by citing their family genetics as the culprit that removed their choice to be tall or not tall. “I’m just tall,” Charlie said quietly. “I’m just tall. I didn’t do anything, I’m just tall.”

Upon being asked to numerically define her ideal height, every participant who said she wanted to be shorter than her current height identified her ideal height as being a minimum of two inches shorter than her current stature [Chart 1 and Table 2]. As Becky (6’0) described, “My ideal height [5’9] is taller than average--because I like being tall, but it’s not *overly* tall, do you know what I mean?” Becky, like several other participants, was reluctant to distance herself from her identity as a tall woman, but was still more than willing to lose enough of her height to make her less visibly tall. Other participants, like Ellen (6’2), desired an ideal height that would reduce other negative reactions to them. “My ideal height would be 5’10, because it’s not tall,” Ellen explained, “and you’re not so tall that people will fear you.”

Table 2: Height Measurements of Participants: Metric and Imperial Systems

Participants	Actual Height	Ideal Height
Anna	6'0" (182.9 cm)	5'10" (177.8 cm)
Bela	6'1" (185.5 cm)	5'9" (175.3 cm)
Becky	6'0" (182.9 cm)	5'9" (175.3 cm)
Charlie	6'3" (190.5 cm)	6'5" (195.6 cm)
Donna	6'0" (182.9 cm)	5'9" (175.3 cm)
Ellen	6'2" (188 cm)	5'10" (177.8 cm)
Joanna	6'2" (188 cm)	6'2" (188 cm)
Jody	6'3" (190.5 cm)	5'10" (177.8 cm)
Pamela	5'11" (180.3 cm)	5'8" (172.3 cm)
Tessa	6'3" (190.5 cm)	6'3" (190.5 cm)

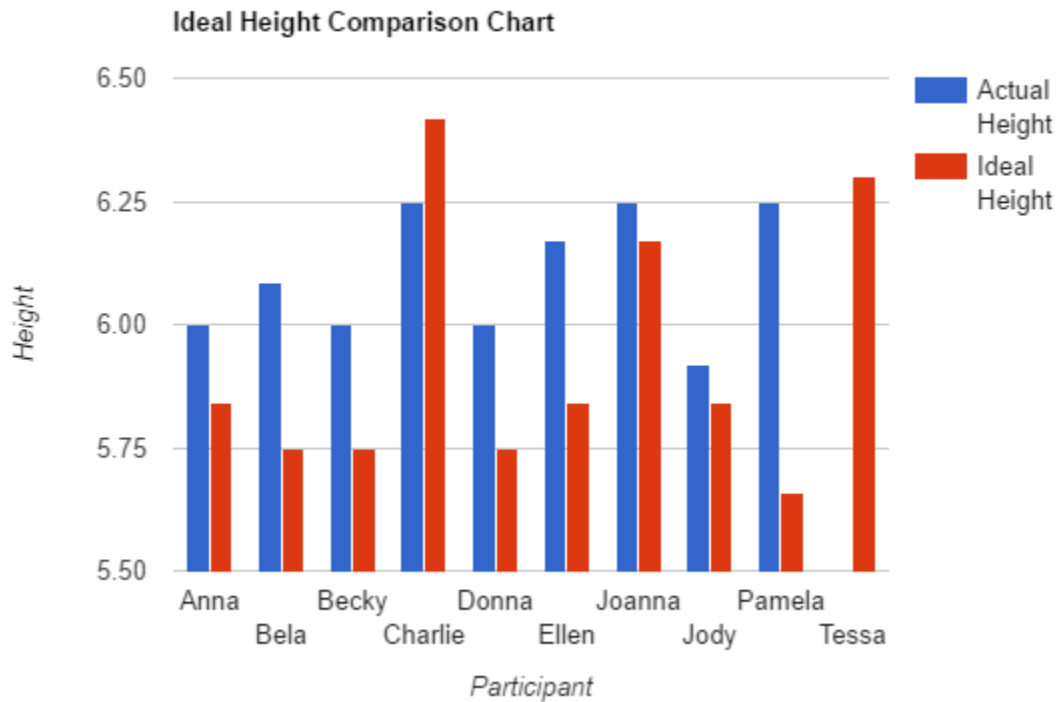


Figure 1: Trends in Ideal Height Compared to Actual Height

As we can see in Chart 1, three participants deviated from the rest by stating that they would prefer to remain the same height, or become even taller. Their reasoning behind this decision was in part due to the effects height had on their identity during developmental periods. Tessa (6'3) and Joanna (6'2) both stated that they would prefer to remain the same height that they currently were. "I would pick the same height, every time. I've overcome a lot of adversity," explained Joanna. Tessa described how her height had been critical to the development of personality, and that any potential changes to it would prevent her from becoming who she is today. "My height is part of my experiences, and my personality is definitely attuned around my height." The only participant who expressed any desire to become taller was Charlie (6'3), who claimed that the only way she knew to act was as a tall woman. "Honestly, I would prefer to be 6'5. I'm already a freak, so I might as well just go even bigger. I know how to be tall, and I would never understand not being tall."

Though it may seem as though the participants in my study only felt negatively about their tallness, each participant had something positive to say about their height. As Charlie described previously, being tall eventually becomes part of a tall woman's identity as she begins to challenge the internalized stigma of her height. "Being tall is part of my identity," Bela explained. "I own it now, but I spent my whole life hating it." Bela went on to say that the turning point for accepting her height was when she realized that "I'm not going to shrink any time soon," and that her height had "become part of who I am as a person." This reclamation of identity is prevalent in disability literature, particularly in the works of Hughes, Russell, and Patterson (2005), which discusses how disabled people do not want to change or escape how they are, but instead begin to grow proud of their disability. Similarly to how Campbell and

Oliver (1996) conceptualized how disabled people gain feelings of power and validation, the tall women in my study began to accept their height as they matured into adults. Donna (6'0) joked that she had “grown to like her height,” and that she feels more positively toward her tallness than she had as a child. Participants such as Tessa (6'3) described how their height made them unique from other women, while Becky expressed that she receives comfort from her tallness, stating, “I’ll always have my height. I’m taller than other people, and I can’t ever change that.”

Finally, community and support are important aspects of reclaiming an identity, such as how Deaf people have created a space for safety, power and pride in the Deaf community (Rose and Kiger 1995:522). Many of my participants described how their relationship with their height improved once they began to make other friends who experienced similar issues with tallness. “In my theater group, there’s a group of tall women whom I hang out with, and it’s so wonderful!” Jody (6'2) told me excitedly. “I can actually wear heels when we spend time together! We’re the Amazons!” Jody’s experiences as a thespian changed drastically once she had other tall women to support her. Joanna (6'2), who experienced cruel treatment at the hands of her peers as a child, explained how the “turning point” for liking her tallness came when a new group of students transferred to her school. “In fifth grade, there were a couple kids who transferred to our class, and we became, like, the tall pack. Once I was around people who were as tall as me, I felt like I started to fit in more. It made me feel better!”

While not all participants had access to physical interactions with other tall women, some participants, such as Anna (6'0), reported utilizing online communities to find rapport. When discussing the group for tall women, or “tallettes,” she found on the website Reddit, Anna described how the knowledge of their existence made her own height easier to manage. “It makes me super happy to know that other chicks have the same problems I do. I love seeing



another tallette out in the wild, because somehow they always look gorgeous and graceful and I imagine I do as well.”

## DISCUSSION

In the beginning of this study, we examined how the current literature and research on tall women quantitatively analyzes the benefits of height in correlation to success in the workplace. This success is often measured in likelihood of promotion, increased pay, and authority markers. Colloquially, tallness is commonly expressed as a desirable trait, and that those who are tall should express gratitude for their height. In this study, we defined height as an ascribed status because height is a physical feature of the body that is outside of the individual's control. While some of my participants did acknowledge the benefits of their height in the workplace, their personal experiences as tall women told a far different story.

I drew upon Goffman's concept of civil inattention to discuss how the violation of interactional etiquette recreated tallness as a stigmatized identity for my participants. All of them reported being on the receiving end of unsolicited comments concerning their height in multiple interactions. The constant attention toward their tallness in repetitive interactions with both friends, family, and strangers began to make my participants self-conscious of their bodies. They experienced discomfort when their tallness was mentioned in conversation, culminating in an immense dislike for their height during their formative years.

Many of my participants admitted to being bullied for their height as children. As we examined earlier, the socialization process of in-groups and out-groups that children utilize serve to alienate and ostracize tall women for having abnormal bodies and being unable to physical fit in. The degrees of bullying varied among participants, but many experienced long lasting traumatic effects from treatment by their peers. The ostracization, or othering, experienced by

my participants during their primary and secondary school years regarding their height became a source of anxiety, leading my participants to continuously associate their height with negativity.

Most of the women in my study experienced distress concerning their ability to conform to feminine gender norms, as they defined the ideal female body as being petite and dainty. This inability to be feminine was a recurring theme in discussions concerning dating and relationships, and multiple participants described the difficulties they experienced in finding an acceptably sized partner. Obtaining clothing also became problematic for my participants due to the lack of affordable garments made to fit their elongated body sizes.

### **Limitations and Further Research**

My study had several limitations constricting the generalizability of my findings. To begin, the sample size of this study (N=10) was far too small to generalize to the larger population of tall women in the United States. My method for finding participants consisted of convenience sampling and relying on word of mouth to find participants. The utilization of snowball sampling limits the type of participants I might find to those whom frequent the campus I advertised at, and any recommendations that were given by prior participants. Another limitation of my study was the lack of racial analysis. While three of my ten participants were people of color, our conversations did not include enough data on race to justify including it as a part of my analysis. Whether this is due to how the questions in the interview guide were structured, or the discomfort my participants of color might have felt in divulging their experiences of race in relation to tallness to myself as a white interviewer, I could not say. However, future studies could include how race and ethnicity affect the experiences of tall women.

This study provided a cross-sectional glimpse of a small group of tall women in a very particular area of Florida. Opportunities for further research in this field could include conducting a longitudinal qualitative study concerning how emotions and attitudes toward height change as tall girls mature into adults, doing an in-depth analysis of the relationship between race and tallness for women, or even expanding it to include the experiences of other people regarding how their height compares to that of tall women. For instance, earlier in this thesis we discussed how we associate tallness with strength and masculinity, and shortness with daintiness and femininity. My arguments within this paper focused on how tall women violate the gender binary of masculinity and femininity, yet are completely devoid of any discussion regarding short men. This was deliberately done both to limit the amount of data that could be studied during the duration of a Master's program, and to enable me to study the experiences of tall women in depth so as to better understand them. However, one of the next steps in height- and gender-related research is to examine others who violate gender norms. Men who feel emasculated due to short stature may experience many of the same internalized emotions of shame and anxiety that the tall women in my study felt when confronted with their heights; in some ways, the actual size of the person in question is less important than how that person perceives themselves. This question of height and gender relations can also be extended to discuss the experiences of transgender individuals for whom height could interfere with or enhance their performances of the self, as well as possibly affected their self-perception. Height plays an important factor in many parts of daily life, both when it is recognized and when it is not.

Intergenerational research could also be a valuable application for this thesis. Given that three of my participants were related, yet separated by a generation each, this study showed the

potential for examining how parents understand and interact with their child's height in different ways. To give an example of the disparities between a parent's and a child's awareness of the body, my mother was not aware of how often my own height (6'3) was brought to the foreground of conversations until I pointed it out to her during my time as an undergraduate student. Though she was present through most height-related discussions throughout my childhood, the focus on my height never seemed out of the ordinary until I confessed to being discomfited by those situations. Since then, her awareness of my height in interactional settings has grown, helping her to realize our different understandings of being a tall woman.

Intergenerational research also takes into account how the acceptance of tall women has changed over time, with tall women raising tall children and teaching their children how to adapt to their height. With Ellen, Jody, and Tessa, we saw a lessening of the effects of tallness on each subsequent generation, with Ellen being most negatively affected by her tallness, and Tessa being least negatively affected by height. There are multiple factors that could explain why their attitudes toward height changed per generation, and each warrants further study.

In this study, I have attempted to show how tallness, often understood as being purely beneficial and an extreme advantage in the job market, personal lives (and even in something as mundane as the dating scene), can still become stigmatized through interactions with social infrastructure and other people. There is more research to be done concerning minor bodily stigma, a topic that we have only lightly touched on. Furthermore, it is important to note the need for more discussion concerning the *work* that tall people do. From adjusting body posture to be less immediately visible, to spending hours scouring clothing stores for appropriately-sized garments, to fending off dozens of inquiries concerning tallness, tall women devote large amounts of time over the course of their lives to managing their height, which can become a full-

time occupation. Though comfort concerning tallness can increase throughout tall women's lives, the work required by that height does not decrease, and more research is needed to understand how tall women organize their lives around the efforts of being tall.

## CONCLUSION

In this paper, we first discussed the existing literature and research of height, weight, gender, disability studies, and the management of stigmatized identities. Then, we discussed how the unsolicited commentary on tallness in interactions violates Goffman's concept of civil inattention (Goffman 1971), leading tall women to internalize feelings of anxiety and discomfort to the point where they perceive their height differently than the dominant cultural narrative of tallness and success would suggest. In the analysis, we discussed a variety of topics, with emphasis on gender conformation, heteronormative dating expectations, able-bodied athleticism associations, the consumption of tallness, and the reclamation of "tall" as a non-stigmatized identity. Finally, we discussed the implications of including tall women's experiences in height research and how our understanding of tallness changes once we acknowledge the differences between the cultural narrative of successful tallness and actual lived experiences.

I hope that this research will contribute to the existing literature by expanding what is currently known about tall women and how they navigate their height. There is a need for more research in this field because none of the current qualitative research can be generalized beyond small subsections of tall women in the United States, and there is not enough research on the experiences of tall women. This is important because tall women are often assumed to be happy and satisfied with their height, while their feelings and experiences are ignored in favor of the overarching narrative of beneficial tallness. While tall women have learned to positively discuss their height and appear to embrace it, tallness can present challenges for women which men may

not experience due to the gendered expectations of femininity. This research contributes to the understandings of embodiment and femininity in the identities of tall women.



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## **APPENDIX A: INTERVIEW QUESTIONS**

How do you think that your height has affected your life?

Tell me about some of the challenges you've faced recently because of your height?

How were these challenges different in your younger years?

What are some experiences you have had with your height?

Has your height impacted you differently during various times in your life? (i.e. childhood, adolescence, young adult, college, etc.)

In what kinds of situations is height good?

What are some advantages of being a tall woman?

What are some disadvantages of being a tall woman?

What do you like about your height?

What do you not like about your height?

What do you think your height says about you?

When people ever say anything about your height during interactions that bothers you?

Have you ever been talking to someone about height where something they said or did bothered you? How did you feel? What did you do?

What do you wish you could do in that situation?

What do you wish you had done differently?

Tell me about the last time your height made you feel uncomfortable (i.e. in a class, at a party, in a store, at home)

How did you cope with that?

Do you sometimes work to avoid that feeling? How?

Can you tell me a story of how your height has affected you?

Is there anything you want to talk about that I have not asked about?

Do you have any questions for me?

## APPENDIX B: IRB APPROVAL LETTER



RESEARCH INTEGRITY AND COMPLIANCE  
Institutional Review Boards, FWA No. 00001669  
12901 Bruce B. Downs Blvd., MDC035 • Tampa, FL 33612-4799  
(813) 974-5638 • FAX (813) 974-7091

September 21, 2016

Elizabeth Fuller  
Sociology  
Tampa, FL 33612

RE: **Expedited Approval for Initial Review**  
IRB#: Pro00027447  
Title: Contradictions of Tallness:  
An Exploration of Identity in Tall Women

**Study Approval Period: 9/21/2016 to 9/21/2017**

Dear Ms. Fuller:

On 9/21/2016, the Institutional Review Board (IRB) reviewed and **APPROVED** the above application and all documents contained within, including those outlined below.

**Approved Item(s):**

**Protocol Document(s):**

[Protocol Guidelines Version 1 09/08/16](#)

**Consent/Assent Document(s)\*:**

[Informed Consent 2016.pdf](#)

\*Please use only the official IRB stamped informed consent/assent document(s) found under the "Attachments" tab. Please note, these consent/assent document(s) are only valid during the approval period indicated at the top of the form(s).

It was the determination of the IRB that your study qualified for expedited review which includes activities that (1) present no more than minimal risk to human subjects, and (2) involve only procedures listed in one or more of the categories outlined below. The IRB may review research through the expedited review procedure authorized by 45CFR46.110. The research proposed in this study is categorized under the following expedited review category:

- (6) Collection of data from voice, video, digital, or image recordings made for research purposes.
- (7) Research on individual or group characteristics or behavior (including, but not limited to, research on perception, cognition, motivation, identity, language, communication, cultural beliefs or practices, and social behavior) or research employing survey, interview, oral history, focus group, program evaluation, human factors evaluation, or quality assurance methodologies.

As the principal investigator of this study, it is your responsibility to conduct this study in accordance with IRB policies and procedures and as approved by the IRB. Any changes to the approved research must be submitted to the IRB for review and approval via an amendment. Additionally, all unanticipated problems must be reported to the USF IRB within five (5) calendar days.

We appreciate your dedication to the ethical conduct of human subject research at the University of South Florida and your continued commitment to human research protections. If you have any questions regarding this matter, please call 813-974-5638.

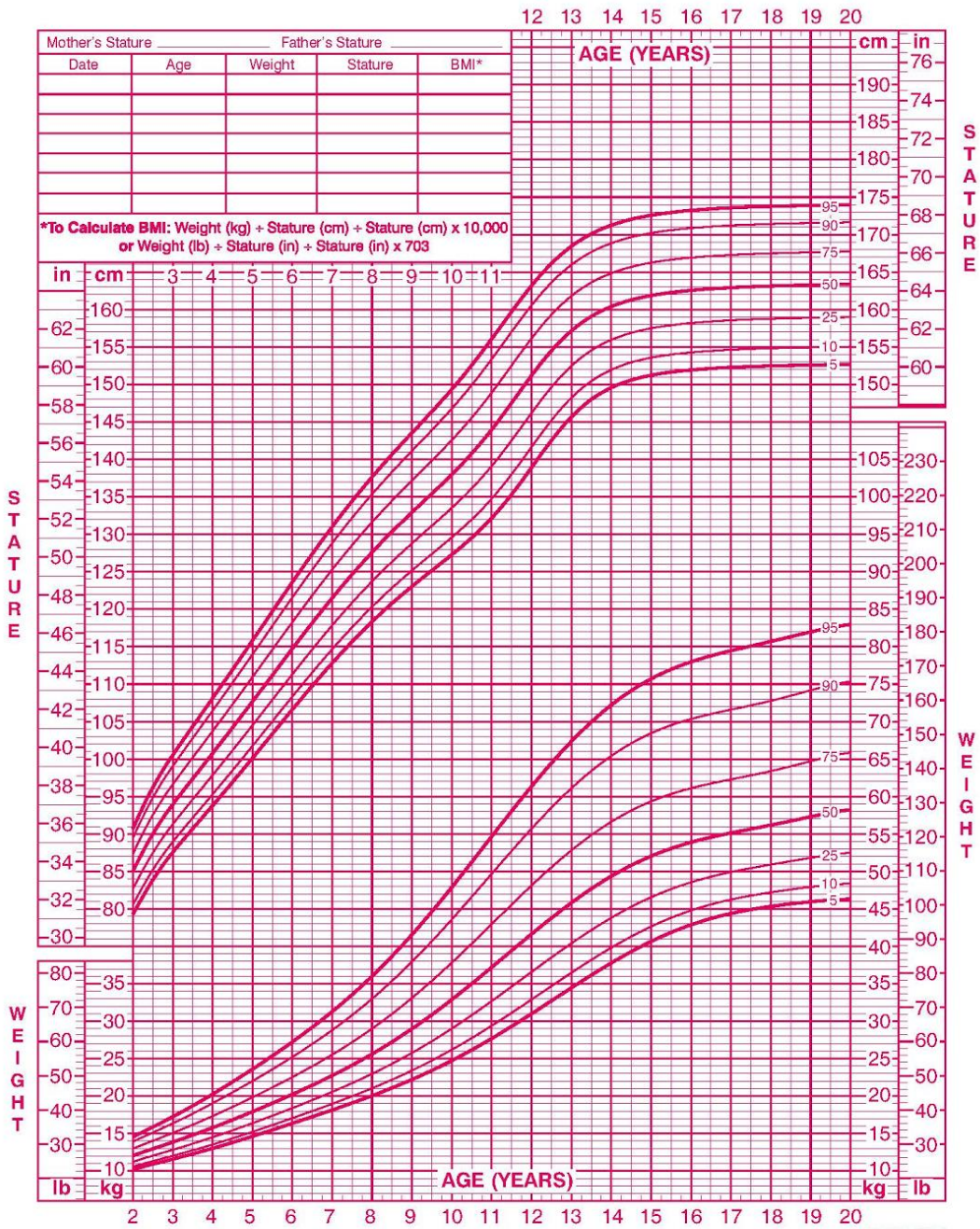
Sincerely,



Kristen Salomon, Ph.D., Vice  
Chairperson USF Institutional Review  
Board

**Appendix C: National Center for Health Statistics (2000). Individual growth chart 3rd, 5th, 10th, 25th, 50th, 75th, 90th, 95th, 99th percentiles, 2 to 20 years: Girls stature-for-age**

**2 to 20 years: Girls** NAME \_\_\_\_\_  
**Stature-for-age and Weight-for-age percentiles** RECORD # \_\_\_\_\_

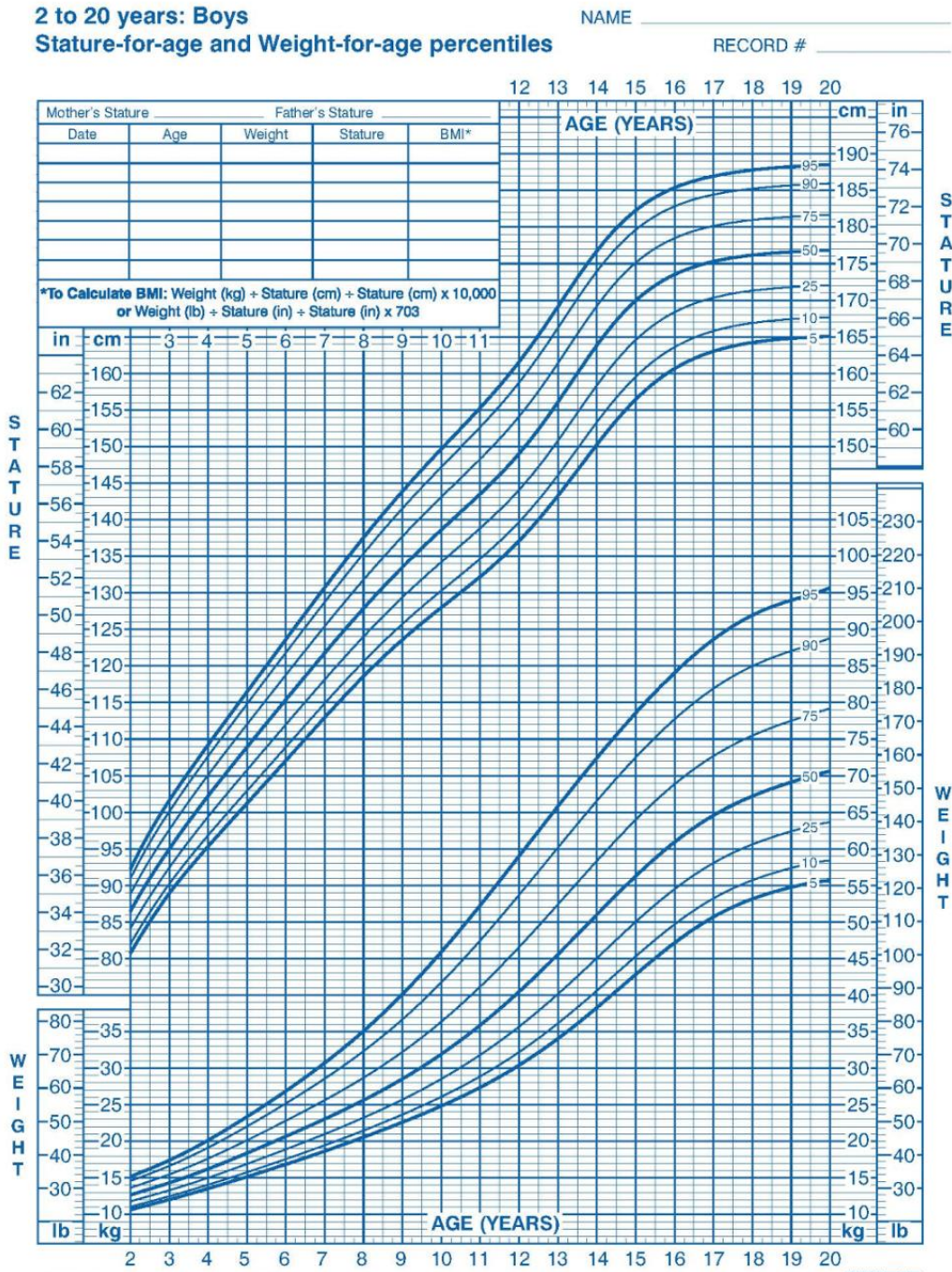


Published May 30, 2000 (modified 11/21/00).  
 SOURCE: Developed by the National Center for Health Statistics in collaboration with  
 the National Center for Chronic Disease Prevention and Health Promotion (2000).  
<http://www.cdc.gov/growthcharts>





**Appendix D: National Center for Health Statistics (2000). Individual growth chart 3rd, 5th, 10th, 25th, 50th, 75th, 90th, 95th, 99th percentiles, 2 to 20 years: Boys stature-for-age**



Published May 30, 2000 (modified 11/21/00).  
 SOURCE: Developed by the National Center for Health Statistics in collaboration with the National Center for Chronic Disease Prevention and Health Promotion (2000).  
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