

**“I WANNA BE TONED I DON’T WANT TO BE MUSCULAR”  
DOMINANT DISCOURSES AND WOMEN’S EXERCISE CHOICES**

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## **DEDICATION**

To Molly.

Molly died on June 25, 2010. She was my constant companion - my baby - since we brought her home at 10 weeks old. She & I spent many nights up late as I finished reading or writing. She was also very patient when I didn't give her the attention she wanted and totally warranted. It saddens me to think about the all time I should have spent with her but didn't. She deserved better from me, and I will always regret not cherishing my time with her more. I hope she knew how much I love(d) her. I think of her every day, and still miss her terribly.

Thanks for being the best dog in the world.

## **ABSTRACT**

This thesis explores how women who exercise regularly frame their involvement in exercise with regard to discourses of femininity, fitness, consumerism, and healthism, and how these contemporary discourses impact women's exercise choices. Sixteen semi-structured interviews were conducted with women who exercise regularly. The objective was to elicit detailed information about the types of exercise these women were involved in, how they came to exercise in particular ways, and with what rationales. A Foucaultian discourse analysis of the interview transcripts was undertaken to uncover commonalities and differences in how the sometimes competing discourses of femininity, fitness, consumerism, and healthism affect the types of exercise engaged in. By examining the interplay between discourse, power/knowledge, surveillance, discipline, subjectivity, and the resultant construction of normative feminine and health ideals, this thesis attempts to determine how women are constructed, and construct themselves, as regular exercisers and how this construction impacts the ways in which the women chose to exercise.

Keywords: Discourse, Fitness, Femininity, Consumption, Healthism, Foucault

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# **Chapter 1**

## **Introduction**

How do women who exercise regularly frame their involvement in exercise with regard to discourses of femininity, fitness, consumerism, and healthism? In what ways do these discourses impact women's exercise choices, if at all? Poststructural theorizing, particularly that of Michel Foucault, would posit that the interaction of power with knowledge, discourse, surveillance, and discipline constructs individuals as subjects. I proposed to explore how these poststructural Foucaultian theories of power and the subject function, through discourse, to constitute women and encourage women to constitute themselves as regular fitness participants. I looked specifically at the types of fitness in which women regularly engaged, and how discourses of consumerism, femininity, fitness, and healthism influenced the ways in which they chose exercise.

## **Rationale for Project**

As a female who exercises regularly, and often chooses to engage in exercise not considered "typically" feminine such as heavy weight lifting, I was curious to learn why women chose to exercise as they did, and how their choices were influenced by discourses of femininity, healthism, consumerism, and fitness. I hoped to determine if women drew upon these various discourses when making their exercise choices, and if the women with whom I spoke were aware of being influenced by said discourses. For example, I am aware of how my body "should" look according to dominant discourses of western femininity. However, as my body type will never allow me to represent this normative female form I feel free to choose multiple types of exercise, even those like heavy weight lifting, that create a body type even less like the norm. I consciously

choose to resist dominant discourses of femininity and fitness. I am happiest with my body when I feel fit, strong, and muscular even if that means I am not “acceptably” slim and toned. In addition, because I have experienced a health issue that forced me to stop exercising and led to a significant weight gain, I had a vested interest in learning how other women who exercise navigate current dominant discourses of healthism, consumerism, fitness, and femininity. Was there awareness that these contemporary discourses may affect exercise choices? If so, were the women aware of how these discourses influenced their exercise choices? Like me, had any of the regular female exercisers with whom I spoke consciously chosen to resist dominant discourses of femininity and fitness, for example? Had others chosen certain types of exercise in an attempt to reflect the western normative female form as closely as possible? Were some influenced by discourses of healthism or consumerism? Poststructural theorizing, in particular Foucaultian theorizing, suited this project as I was not attempting to determine why women exercise, but rather, how exercise choice was affected by circulating discourses. How did women constitute themselves as subjects in relation to exercise and the influence of discourses of femininity, healthism, consumerism, and fitness?

### **The Subject and Subjectivity**

It should be noted that theorizations of the constitution of the subject have changed over time. In the modern epoch, the Cartesian subject dominated philosophical theory. The Cartesian subject is one that exists because one is capable of thought. In essence, the fact that one thinks one exists means that one knows one exists. Sermijn, Loots, and Devlieger (2007) stated that “Descartes considered the self as exclusively linked to the conscious rational mind”, a self that will be “guided by its own reason” (p.

37). This grand meta-narrative of the rational thinking subject pervaded much western philosophy. The Cartesian subject is one that would produce discourse. Weedon (1992) noted that this subject is fixed, and that the internal core makes one what one is. It was, and still is for some, the basis for a good deal of theorizing about the subject.

However, as postmodern thinking progressed and grand narratives began to be dismantled through this theorizing, poststructuralism gradually challenged this static conceptualization of the subject. Poststructural theorizing deconstructs the Cartesian subject, in part because this subject does not take into consideration the “social and historical positioning of the self” (Sermijn, Loots, & Devlieger, 2007, p. 38). Usher and Edwards (1994) explained that poststructuralism developed the idea that subjectivity is decentred, and is a “cultural *construct*, inscribed by the meaning system that is language and by discourses” (p. 16). The poststructural subject comes to define herself in specific ways as a result of understanding herself within specific subject positions within specific discourses. For example, in terms of my own subjectivity, I could define myself as a woman, a student, and an exerciser, depending on the discourses through which I come to construct and recognize myself in relation to others. In fact, I would define myself as all of these subjectivities, and more. The move toward thinking of the subject as culturally and discursively created signalled a major difference between modern and poststructural theorizing. That is, in poststructural thinking, the subject is constituted by discourse, essentially the reverse of the Cartesian subject. Helstein (2007) noted that the subject is “only produced as subject through discourse” (p. 84). According to Foucaultian theorizing, discourse is where and how subjectivity is constructed. Weedon (1992) defined subjectivity as “the conscious and unconscious thought and emotions of the

individual, her sense of herself and her ways of understanding her relation to the world” (p. 32).

Weedon (1992) further claimed that the terms “subject and subjectivity are central to poststructuralist theory and...mark a crucial break with humanist conceptions of the individual which are still central to Western philosophy and political and social organizations” (p. 32). Foucaultian theorization relates the construction of the subject and subjectivity to power, knowledge, and disciplinary practices in relation to discourse. Some critique Foucault’s notion of the subject being discursively produced, claiming it means that there is no agency for individuals, or that individuals are slaves to discourse. However, this is not what Foucault meant when he claimed that the subject is discursively produced. Butler (1992) stated, “to perform this kind of Foucaultian critique of the subject is not to do away with the subject or pronounce its death, but merely to claim that certain versions of the subject are politically insidious” (p. 13). That is, the subject still exists, but the ways in which it is constituted are ruled by discourse and discursive practices, or “truths”, common to a particular society. Butler (1992) further noted that deconstructing the subject does not dismiss it, but rather questions it, and opens the term up to new uses. Smith and Riley (2009) wrote that Foucault was in large part “responsible for constructing and institutionalizing the poststructural model” (p. 115), despite the fact that Foucault resisted the labelling of his work. In Foucaultian theorization there is always room for alternatives, for resistance, for modification, and for transformation of the subject and of discourse. This is why I chose to use poststructural theorizing about the subject and power in my research on women and their fitness choices. In order to determine how women came to be constituted as subjects I first had

to deconstruct power relations and subjectivity. Foucaultian theorization allowed me to do this, whereas the Cartesian notion of the subject would not. Kaufman-Osborn (1997) claimed that the Cartesian subject is but a “shadow of his former self”, as his “capacity for agency” is actually, in poststructural theorizing, a result of the “webs of power in which he is enmeshed and by which he is called into being” (p. 649). It is this very “web of power” that allowed me to explore how women were constituted as subjects, and in relation to my research, specifically how women were constituted, and constituted themselves, as female exercisers. Performing this analysis helped me to determine how contemporary discourses affected women’s exercise choices and how women framed their motivation to exercise within specific discourses.

### **Foucaultian Theorization**

My analysis was framed within a number of key Foucaultian concepts including discourse, power/knowledge, surveillance and discipline, resistance, technologies of the self, and subjectivity. It is necessary to define and explain each of these concepts here before proceeding.

#### **Discourse**

Within this thesis I explored how, at this contemporary moment, discourses of consumerism, femininity, fitness, and healthism constructed women as females and as female exercisers. Discourse is composed of the statements used to describe and give meaning to a concept, while at the same time producing the concept. In poststructural theorizing, discourse is the only way in which individuals come to have understanding or knowledge about that concept. Discourse, in effect, generates “truth”, which refers to what is produced, practiced, and accepted as “true”. Dominant discourse is the “truth”

about a given concept that is accepted as having the most influence in a given society, at a given time. Foucault (1980) also referred to regimes of truth, which in each society are “the types of discourse which it accepts and makes function as true” (p. 131). Certain sets of statements, functioning within established rules, gain acceptance as being true or false. The repetition of the western, feminine body ideal in media and other institutions, which generally reproduce a society’s dominant discursive practices, leads to that body being accepted as the norm for females. Bodies that do not meet this socially constructed ideal are bodies that require work to correct such deficiencies. As a result of the reiteration of this ideal, individuals may begin to act out or perform these norms, signalling acceptance of them. Individuals then internalize these norms, and discipline themselves to better reflect them.

Discourse is contingent upon the cultural moment in which one lives. Hall (2007) posited that discourse outlines how and in what ways individuals can speak of certain topics. Discursive rules must be followed for statements to be intelligible and to exercise power. Women will be both subject to, and subjects of, these discursive rules. That is, women who exercise will be subject to discourses of femininity or fitness as they perform the actions required to be constituted as females and/or as exercisers. In addition, women know and recognize themselves as female exercisers through these discourses, and are able to participate in exercise as a result. Specific discourses, such as femininity, fitness, consumerism, and healthism, construct women as healthy, female, consumers of fitness, or mark them as deviant subjects – unhealthy, too muscular, or unfit, for example.

## **Power/Knowledge**

Discourse and power are irrevocably linked. Foucault (1980) stated, “relations of power cannot themselves be established, consolidated nor implemented without the production, accumulation, circulation and functioning of a discourse” (p. 93). The power of discourse is that it limits the ways in which one can be constituted as a subject, but at the same time, permits one to be constituted as a subject through action. Foucault (1990) wrote that “discourse transmits and produces power; it reinforces it, but also undermines and exposes it, renders it fragile and makes it possible to thwart it” (p. 101). Thus, discourse produces power and individuals’ responses to power, but at the same allows for resistance to this discursively produced power. Foucault (1980) described power as a force that can create enjoyment, and construct knowledge through discourse. Foucaultian power is not hierarchical or repressive. In fact, it is both productive and constraining, as well as relational. Foucault (1990) wrote, “power is everywhere; not because it embraces everything, but because it comes from everywhere” (p. 93). Power relations operate not only between individuals, but also within them. Markula and Pringle (2006) defined power as the relations through which individuals become particular types of subjects who in turn interact with other subjects.

Discourse and knowledge are also intimately linked in Foucaultian theorizing. Discursive practices are productive actions that cannot be separated from discourse, as discourse constructs social action. Diaz-Bone, Buhrmann, Rodriguez, Schneider, Kendall, and Tirado (2008) explained the two concepts this way: “discourse as a social structure and discursive practice as social practice” (p. 9). Markula and Pringle (2006) stated that “knowledge is discursive and discursive practices form knowledge” (p. 53),

meaning that knowledge is constructed through language by speaking or writing about concepts, but that discourse in action, producing meaning and understanding, is what creates knowledge. Flax (1992) stated “we cannot understand knowledge without tracing the effects of the power relations which simultaneously enable and limit the possibilities of discourse” (p. 453).

As a result, power and knowledge are also linked in Foucaultian theorization. Foucault (1995) stated that it is “power and knowledge relations that invest human bodies and subjugate them by turning them into objects of knowledge” (p. 28). Power/knowledge produces individuals as knowing beings capable of action. In order to be productive, individuals must have knowledge about concepts or actions. This knowledge will be specific to one’s culture and moment in time. For example, in sports and fitness, one must learn and obey the rules of the game to be a participant of that sport, to know one’s role in the sport, and to be a part of the sport. There are constraints on actions while at the same time action is not simply permitted but required. Shogan (1999) posited that constraints resulting from power inhibit and prescribe actions, and it is these constraints on actions that “produce what counts as skill in a sport” (p. 4). Women who regularly engage in fitness activities are constrained by the function of power/knowledge but can act within power relations, and become a particular type of person as a result of knowledge. In this case, that person is a female exerciser. For example, knowing the rules of a gym restricts some action, but also permits action. In order to be constructed as female exercisers rather than deviant or unknowing subjects, women must know and follow the rules of the gym or the fitness activity engaged in. This knowledge may also affect the type of exercise undertaken by women at the gym.

For example, as dominant discourses of femininity and fitness indicate that it is more “appropriate” for women to engage in cardiovascular exercise than heavy weight lifting, women may gravitate towards cardio machines more than the weight area. Thus, women who exercise in gyms are both subject to, and subjects of, power/knowledge.

Foucault (1972) noted that power exists only in action, which is why subjects must be able to act within power relations, and that it is “power and knowledge relations that invest human bodies and subjugate them by turning them into objects of knowledge” (Foucault, 1995, p. 28). For Foucault, the body was a central component in power relations (Smart, 2002). The body is subject to power relations but is also a subject that can act within and re/produce power relations. But, in order to be productive, individuals must have knowledge about concepts or actions. Thus power/knowledge constrains, permits, and even encourages action by individuals and their bodies. Foucault (1980) wrote of power: “not only do individuals circulate between its threads; they are always in the position of simultaneously undergoing and exercising this power”, and that “the individual which power has constituted is at the same time its vehicle” (p. 98). A female exerciser cannot be constituted as a subject without power/knowledge relations at work, and without awareness of contemporary discourses such as femininity, consumerism, fitness, and healthism. At the same time, when subjects of power function within it, the effects of power are reinforced and reinscribed. Important to note is that the subjects of discourses of femininity, of fitness, and so on, are always already constituted concepts that create and define individuals as these subjects. The discursively produced knowledge of healthism, fitness, femininity, and consumerism allows individuals to see themselves as, and to be constituted as, women, or exercisers, or a hybrid of multiple subjectivities.

For women who participate in fitness activities, this means that the ways in which they are constituted as female exercisers and their exercise choices will be defined by the interplay between power/knowledge, discourse, and discursive practice.

### **Surveillance and Discipline**

Surveillance and discipline are also common themes in Foucaultian theorizing. Foucault (1995) drew on Bentham's concept of the Panopticon to describe the disciplining effects of surveillance. Originally developed in the 1800s, the Panopticon was a prison design intended to allow for the potential perpetual surveillance of prisoners. Foucault borrowed from this concept to describe the power of the disciplining effects of observation and surveillance. Knowing that she may be observed at any time, a woman behaves in an acceptable manner. A female monitors and disciplines her own body and actions according to accepted norms, or dominant discourses. Individuals begin to regulate themselves and their actions according to these now internalized norms. Carlisle Duncan (1994) described the panoptic gaze as one that "surveys women for possible "transgressions" against the patriarchal ideals of femininity" (p. 50). She further noted that "the disciplinarian is a disembodied authority" (p. 50), which encourages women to blame themselves for their imperfections. Foucault (1980) referred to this as a "society of normalization" (p. 107), because the reiteration of a society's norms serves to discipline its subjects by encouraging the internalization of norms and subsequent self-discipline. Markula (1995) wrote that individuals are then governed less by external sources of power, and more by themselves through the internalization of control mechanisms. Again, females who engage in exercise are constituted as subjects through the internalization and performance of norms surrounding both exercise and femininity,

as well as through self-disciplining practices undertaken to ensure that one's body reflects the norm. For example, Mills (2003) believed that "femininity can be viewed as a disciplinary regime" as "femininity is achieved...through a long process of labor to force the body into compliance with a feminine ideal" (p. 93).

Exercise is one way through which women may discipline themselves and their bodies. The power exerted by surveillance and discipline serves to constitute some women as exercisers, and allows them to function appropriately as exercisers. It also defines what will be acceptable forms of exercise, and what body shape is acceptable as a result of exercise. For example, attempts to shape their bodies to better reflect the normative female form constrain women, and serve to reinforce the notion of the ideal body. Although some women may see engaging in fitness as empowering, and it likely is in many respects, at the same time the drive to create and maintain an ideal female body continues to oppress women and restrict actions. The subject and her subjectivity are constructed in a given historical and cultural moment. For example, currently female exercisers who develop large muscles may not be considered feminine, as their body shapes fall outside the discursively produced, gendered, normative form for females. Here discourse may rule out, rather than rule in, because discourse has the power to do both. That is, because the muscular female body does not fit the socially constructed norm for female bodies, that body is cast out of the definition of femininity and is considered to be something other than feminine. The statement "very muscular women are feminine" may be unintelligible for some as it does not follow the rules surrounding the definition of the normative feminine female form. Certain women will be constructed, and will construct themselves, as subjects who do fit the norm. Others will

be constructed as being beyond or outside the norm. I hoped to explore how this ruling in and ruling out affected how women disciplined their bodies through their exercise choices. I expected to discover that women chose to do certain types of exercise more than others in order to maintain a feminine shape. Women may also have chosen or avoided certain types of exercise in order to reflect discourses of fitness that indicate certain types of exercise produce certain types of bodies. Women may have chosen to engage in more normatively acceptable cardiovascular exercise and light strength training as a result.

Discourses of healthism also involve discipline. Through government and private programs aimed at “educating” the public about the dangers of obesity, lack of exercise, smoking, and other potentially health- or life-threatening issues, we learn that we should do everything in our power to avoid these dangers and undertake action to prevent and/or counter them. We are encouraged to constantly surveil ourselves to ensure that we eat the right food (Canada’s Food Guide, for example), exercise correctly (ParticipAction), avoid smoking (Canadian Lung Association), avoid gaining weight especially around the middle (Canadian body weight classification), and otherwise maintain our own health. Failure to maintain personal health allows judgements to be made about that person’s personal responsibility by peers, by health professionals, fitness experts, and others involved in the health and wellness industry.

Consumerism is also disciplining. Seeing reiterations of the ideal body encourages us to change our behaviour. We are encouraged to purchase products and services to create a better body. Women must pay for the privilege of shaping their appearance to better reflect the norm. We surveil our bodies and behaviour to ensure that

we are performing our gender correctly in terms of the way we present our bodies, the types of exercise we do, and the choices we make in terms of consumption.

### **Resistance**

Poststructural theorization allows for resistance. In fact, Foucault (1990) stated, “where there is power, there is resistance” (p. 95). Many women may be fully aware of the contradictions surrounding the normative feminine body. As a result some women, may resist dominant discourses of femininity, and may consciously engage in physical fitness activities that make them look even less like the western feminine norm. Others may exhibit less resistance to dominant discourses, and may attempt to shape their bodies to closely reflect the norm. Still others may be unaware of exhibiting resistant behaviour although this resistance may be visible in practice as these women exercise in specific ways. Resistance also serves to constitute individuals as subjects, and allows females to constitute themselves as specific types of exercisers.

Resistance can also challenge and subvert contemporary discourses, eventually leading to a change in dominant discursive practices. Since norms are socially constructed, these norms can be challenged and can change as a result. Day and Keys (2008) wrote that, as Foucault’s notion of power is one that circulates through all relations, “women and girls have the potential to ‘rewrite’ gender ideologies, their actions and identities in beneficial ways” (p. 4). For example, women who engage in certain types of exercise could possibly change the contemporary norm that muscular bodies are unfeminine. Butler (1998) stated “women’s sports offer a site in which this transformation of our ordinary sense of what constitutes a gendered body is itself dramatically contested and transformed” (p. 104), and that women’s athletic bodies have in the past challenged and changed certain accepted

gender norms with regard to female athletic bodies. Butler (1998) used the example of Martina Navratilova, whose more “masculine” body eventually became acceptable for female tennis players. Resisting norms and deliberately performing gender incorrectly through fitness can impact and possibly change established norms. Consequently, some bodies that were traditionally considered unacceptable for females may become more acceptable. Thus, the ability to transform normative ideals of femininity is inherent in resistance. This resistive power will allow women who exercise to constitute themselves differently in the face of contradictory and changing discourses of femininity and female exercisers. Because women who exercise can resist dominant discourses, there will be those who choose, like me, to do more heavy weight training than cardiovascular exercise, for example.

Thorpe (2008) studied snowboarding media such as films, magazines, and television, and stated “attempts to change the world on a large scale can only come about through individuals changing their personal actions and performances” (p. 211). Thus resistance to discourses surrounding femininity and fitness may be transformative in nature. I wanted to determine if the women I interviewed were aware of resisting dominant discourses of femininity, fitness, healthism, and consumerism, or if any resistance exhibited was actually subconscious despite being visible in practice. Again, through a Foucaultian approach to discourse analysis I looked for awareness of this transformative potential. Some female exercisers may already have been engaged in practices that could challenge the currently accepted norms surrounding femininity and female exercisers, whether they were aware of it or not.

## **Technologies of the Self**

Foucault (1990) also developed the concept of technologies of the self, which outlined how individuals become subjects, and constitute and change subjectivities within power relations. Smart (2002) described Foucault's technologies of the self as a means by which individuals can mould and change their subjectivities in order to define, develop, and transform themselves. In order to change oneself through technologies of the self, one must first problematize one's body or mind. According to Markula and Pringle (2006), problematization refers to recognizing the limitations of one's current subjectivity before one can alter it. Like resistance, technologies of the self can have an effect on one's subjectivity and on dominant discursive practices, again through reinforcing or subverting dominant discourses. Markula (2003) stated, a "physically active woman, then, must become aware of the limitations of discursive femininity and the athletic self in order to reinvent herself" (p. 104). Once a woman becomes aware of the problems inherent in her in relation to accepted norms, she can then change or alter her subject position. This can be empowering in terms of being constituted as a specific subject, or transforming one's subjectivity, although the options for subjectivity are still discursively limited.

## **Foucaultian Subjectivity**

Women who exercise find themselves subject to multiple and competing discourses and fragmented subjectivities. Shogan (1999) noted, "overlapping, conflicting disciplines together produce a distinctive hybrid identity" (p. 45). Hybrid identities result because women will be constituted as multiple subjects. There are discourses of sex and femininity that will construct individuals as feminine women. There are also discourses

of sport, the body, of health, and so forth, that will all affect how women constitute themselves, and are constituted, by these multiple discourses. Women who exercise regularly must manage these multiple discourses and resultant subjectivities in the way that makes the most sense to them. Some will attempt to reflect the norm as closely as possible, by choosing exercises that create a normative female body. Others may reject the norm, and engage in exercise that will make their bodies look even less like the norm. Some women will engage in “unfeminine” forms of exercise, but will exhibit typically feminine behaviour outside sports and fitness. Women who exercise will often feel pulled in multiple directions as a result of competing discourses, and must find a way to accommodate the numerous pressures they feel in order to be constituted as the hybrid subject they are. Power is at work here, because as Foucault (1982) pointed out, “subjects are faced with a field of possibilities in which several ways of behaving, several reactions and diverse comportments may be realized” (p. 221). There are multiple ways that women who exercise can be constituted and can constitute themselves, although the options are limited by the number of discursively constructed concepts that surround females and female exercisers in that society and at that moment in time. Weedon (1992) noted that women who function within multiple, competing discourses may be bothered by the contradictions between discourses, writing, “as the subject of a range of conflicting discourses, she is *subjected* to their contradictions at great emotional cost” (p. 34). Thus, being constituted as a hybrid subject can be a complicated and uncomfortable venture for some women who exercise regularly. Fuss (1989) also noted that it is not always possible to easily distinguish multiple subject positions from each other, or to simply choose from a list of options. Helstein (2007) wrote that “discourses of gender

and sexuality produce feminine females and masculine males, discourses of high-performance sport produce athletes...” (p. 85). Thus it can be seen that multiple discourses will affect women who consume fitness, and serve to empower or constrain actions within each discourse, as well as causing friction between the numerous and overlapping discourses and subjectivities through which women come to define themselves as subjects, and within which women must function.

Further, with regard to healthism, women may feel conflict between the pressures presented by competing subjectivities to be, or at least look, healthy by exhibiting a normatively healthy body. Given that most women are more than exercisers – they may be employers or employees, mothers, partners, students, or any number of other subjects – the time constraints felt by managing these multiple discourses could prevent them from engaging in the type of exercise or amount of exercise women are pressured to undertake to remain “healthy”. These competing subjectivities may impact the ways in which women choose to exercise.

### **Literature Review**

Many researchers have looked at various aspects of women and exercise that were relevant to situating my project. Examples include: motivations for exercise (Strelan, Mehaffey, & Tiggemann, 2003), exercise as a liberating or constraining activity for women (Mutrie & Choi, 2000), and effects of exercise on body image (Tiggemann & Williamson, 2000). Smith Maguire (2008) looked at the consumption of fitness, and Sassatelli (2010) researched fitness culture. Chance (2009) wrote about the production of the body ideal within the gym space, which is relevant to my project in several ways.

Within this body of literature, several studies were particularly relevant to my thesis in terms of how discourse affected women's exercise choices.

### **Motivation to Exercise**

Women choose to exercise for myriad reasons, such as enjoyment, health, body shaping, and social interaction. Reasons for exercising can be positive and/or negative, and exercising can affect women in positive and/or negative ways. Although this thesis was not searching for answers as to why women exercise, it was important to have an understanding of the motivation to exercise before looking at how women's exercise choices were affected by discourse.

Prichard and Tiggemann (2008) undertook a study to determine how reasons for exercising affected the type of exercise chosen and body image in the gym. Their conclusion indicated that:

the reasons women have for doing exercise provide a mechanism through which different types of exercise are associated with negative body image outcomes. Thus, despite the physical health-related benefits associated with regular physical activity, exercise motivated by appearance reasons (e.g., weight control) can lead to poorer body image in some women. (p. 855).

Interesting to note was that women who exercised to change their appearance appeared to have poorer body images. Further, the authors discovered that women who chose to do aerobic exercise often did so for the changes this type of exercise made to their bodies, and that there is a similar negative correlation between doing aerobic exercise and poor body image. Prichard and Tiggemann (2008) also discovered that doing weight related exercise did not negatively affect body image in the same manner as aerobic exercise. The authors were unable to determine if the environment within the gym (mirrors, potential for observation) created negative body image, if the women interviewed already

had body image issues before joining, or if a combination of the two things produces poorer body image. Regardless, these findings were important to remember when analyzing how discourses affected the exercise choices made by the women with whom I spoke. I had to determine how discourse could have affected their reasons for choosing specific types of exercise, which translated into motivation to exercise in certain ways.

Henry, Anshel, and Michael (2006) found that a combination of aerobic, anaerobic, and strength training exercises had a more positive effect on body image than did aerobic exercise alone. Greater gains in strength and fitness were also seen as a result of the combination of exercises. The authors (2006) noted, however, that the gains in positive body image may have been temporary as women's goals often changed to thinner ideals as more weight was lost through exercise. Because the majority of women with whom I spoke chose to do a combination of strength and aerobic exercise, it was important to note that this combination may have had a more positive effect for women who exercise than did aerobic exercise alone.

### **Focus on Appearance**

D'Abundo (2009) studied aerobics classes, and focused on messages from aerobic instructors, attempting to determine if their messages related more to health and wellness, or focused more on appearance. Further, the effect of these messages on participants in aerobics classes was studied. D'Abundo (2009) found that there was a preponderance of messages about appearance coming from these instructors, and fewer messages about health and wellbeing put forth by the aerobics instructors. The author discovered that aerobics instructors frequently linked health and appearance, following discourses of healthism that indicate in order to be considered healthy women must

appear healthy by having normative body shapes. This article helped form the basis for my analysis of how discourses of healthism, fitness, and femininity affected women's exercise choices.

Pienaar and Bekker (2007) studied the female physical ideal using text and images from pro-anorexia websites. Their findings were also important for situating my thesis. The authors (2007) examined how discourses of femininity, health, diet, and consumer culture affected "female body management" (p. 549). While Pienaar and Bekker (2007) discovered that discourses of the sexually attractive (aesthetically ideal) female body had significant impact on women, discourses of diet (as a means to create the sexually attractive body), consumerism (to purchase one's way to the ideal), and health (conflation of health and the sexually attractive body) were intimately linked. The authors discovered that "the discourse of the sexually attractive body holds the most sway with the discourses of health and diet in its service" (p. 550). Further, Pienaar and Bekker (2007) speculated that discourses of health may have been a "counter-offensive"; that the healthy body "may constitute a concession to women's increasing awareness of the problems associated with objectification of the female body" (p. 550). That is, using health as a reason for exercise appeared to be a more positive motivator than appearance alone.

Markula (1995) also examined the ways in which the relationship between ideal femininity and fitness impacted women's exercise choices. She noted that women in her study preferred aerobic exercise to weight training because of a preference for tone over muscularity. Markula performed textual analyses of magazines such as *Health*, *Women's Sport and Fitness*, *Shape*, and *Self*, as well as observing aerobics and other fitness classes.

The many relevant works of Markula (1995; 2003; 2004) will be discussed in more detail in upcoming sections.

### **Muscularity.**

With regard to muscularity, Grogan, Evans, Wright, and Hunter (2004), studied women bodybuilders to determine how females involved in bodybuilding negotiated their sport's requirement to be muscular with society's pressure to be slim and feminine, sometimes referred to as the female apologetic. The authors (2004) believed that women involved in this sport are "engaged in a complex balancing act where they want to be muscular, toned and athletic looking, but not to get unacceptably muscular. Although they may be rejecting mainstream cultural ideals, they are nonetheless not completely free to evolve their own ideals" (p. 59). Grogan et al (2004) provided background on how women who exercise must negotiate multiple subjectivities, and must manage the pressure to conform to multiple ideals. Dworkin's (2003) article on women's muscular strength was also relevant, as it discussed how women negotiated tension resulting from the development of muscularity thorough exercise. These studies related to my project as all assisted with understanding how the size of women's bodies is regulated by socially constructed notions of fitness and femininity, and how this regulation affected the ways in which women undertook exercise.

### **Fat.**

Much of the research consulted for this thesis examined the idea of fat, so only a few examples are presented here. Fat has become a national obsession – avoiding fat, talking about fat, and criticizing those considered to be fat. Dworkin and Wachs (2009) referred to fat as a "cultural transgression", meaning that fat is so abhorred by western

culture being fat is both feared and reviled (p. 35). Hart, Leary, and Rejeski (1989) noted that women in their study who believed they were fat had body image issues. Smith Maguire (2008) suggested that obesity has become a moral panic, and that media in general relentlessly cover the obesity issue, continuously reinforcing socially constructed beliefs that being overweight is both a moral and public issue. Similarly, Holmes (2009), who studied the number of articles on obesity that appeared in the *Vancouver Sun* over a period of time, suggested that obesity was once considered to be a “lifestyle issue”, but has since taken on even more dire consequences – obesity is now an epidemic causing panic and requiring institutional action (p. 224). Scott-Dixon (2008) wrote that because fitness is often viewed as a cosmetic project, fitness activities encourage exercisers to lose fat and develop a more ideal body.

Women judge themselves and others based on the idea that fat is bad and to be avoided at all costs. These studies were vital to understanding how feelings about fat and fatness have come to be conflated with failure to accept responsibility for our appearance and health, and how the pressure to constantly fight fat has impacted the ways in which women choose to exercise.

### **Personal Responsibility for Health**

Roy’s (2008) discourse analysis of Canadian the women’s magazines *Chatelaine*, *Homemakers*, and *Canadian Living* looked at how discourses of healthism are affecting women. First of all, women are consuming magazines by the millions. Within the magazines are articles on various topics, often written by “experts”. According to Roy (2008), when it comes to health, “women’s magazines are an important and distinctive discursive form as they integrate expert discourse on health found in medical journals

with everyday practices and knowledges” (p. 464). The author stated that magazines present information on health in specific ways, providing a particular “reality” (p. 464). Roy (2008) outlined the ways in which magazines disseminate discourses of healthism, which in turn produce a sense of responsibility for one’s own health. Using examples such as cautionary tales and inspirational stories, Roy (2008) provided a significant framework on which I based my analysis of how discourses of healthism affected the women with whom I spoke.

Similarly, Lupton (1995) discussed how the body is regulated by public health initiatives. These health initiatives are produced by experts - researchers and scientists - and are then disseminated in media. When looking for possible influences of discourses of healthism, Lupton’s work assisted me in determining how healthism impacted women’s exercise choices, and why women felt the pressure to maintain a healthy looking body. Lupton (1995) also discussed how Foucaultian thinking is linked to discourses of health and responsibility for one’s health. This information was vital to the analysis of the interview data for influences of consumerism and healthism on women’s exercise choices.

### **The Need to Consume**

Both Smith Maguire (2008) and Sassatelli (2010) often referred to discourses of consumption and consumerism, particularly as they related to exercise. In addition, Dittmar (2008) outlined how consumer culture has become linked to the search for the “good life” and “body perfect” (p. 1). With regard to my research, Dittmar (2008) commented that consumerism leads to “people internalising consumer culture ideals of beauty and affluence as personal values, no matter how unhealthy and unrealistic those

ideals, and the pursuit of them, might be” (p. 2). Discourses of healthism, fitness, femininity, and consumerism were linked in these works. None of these discourses functioned alone – each one significantly influenced the others. These studies were useful when situating how and why women spend money on exercise and exercise related products and services.

### **Theories of Discipline**

Carlisle Duncan (1994) studied how Foucaultian theorizations of the Panopticon and media combined to encourage women to constantly monitor their bodies and behaviours, using *Shape* magazine for the textual analysis. Carlisle Duncan (1994) discussed the public versus private issue with regard to the disciplining of the female body. She posited that women were made to feel that all of their problems in life stem from “their lack of personal commitment to this rigid body ideal” (p. 61), and if they would simply accept responsibility for the shortcomings evident in them by accepting and internalizing socially constructed ideals they would be transformed. This study also noted that the magazines that Carlisle Duncan (1994) analyzed did not question the “public, social motive that mandates an almost-impossible-to-achieve body ideal” (p. 61), but rather puts the blame on women who chose the wrong regimes. Carlisle Duncan’s (1994) paper clearly outlined the ways in which panoptic effects caused women to discipline themselves in certain ways, according to socially accepted norms. Her research was valuable to my analysis of the panoptic effects of the gym space and how it affected women’s exercise choices.

Like Carlisle Duncan (1994), Chance’s (2009) use of Foucaultian theorization to demonstrate how discipline of the body occurs in the gym was invaluable to my own

analysis of how the women with whom I spoke were affected by the space, the equipment, and the internal and external gaze in the fitness centre. Drawing on Chance's (2009) research, which drew on her photographs and videos of fitness centres, I was able to understand how the Foucaultian concept of discipline, when applied to exercise, directly affected the women with whom I spoke. The women I interviewed appeared to experience many of the same types of discipline, and effects of discipline, outlined by Chance (2009) and Carlisle Duncan (1994).

### **Discourses in the Literature**

As with many of the studies above, I analyzed the effects of multiple normative discourses. However, my study builds upon and extends their results because I have highlighted a particular set of discourses for analysis. Within my review of the recent scholarly literature on women and exercise four dominant discursive themes emerged: femininity, fitness, consumerism, and healthism. It was therefore these discourses that provided the basis for this analysis. Drawing on the existing research that outlines contemporary dominant discourses of femininity, fitness, consumerism, and healthism, I analyzed the effects these discourses had on interviewees' perceptions of their bodies and their exercise choices. Each of these four discourses will be introduced and described in the sections that follow in order to outline its connection to my project. These discourses do not stand alone, however. Each has links to the others to some extent. I have separated them here simply to make defining and connecting each concept within my research project clearer.

## **Femininity.**

Discourses of femininity can have a powerful impact on our behaviour.

Normative femininity in contemporary, western society indicates that the ideal female form is thin, fit, with large breasts and a slim waist and hips – and is often understood to be white. Harper and Tiggemann (2008) used a variety of women’s magazines, such as *Cosmopolitan*, *Cleo*, *Vogue*, *Russh*, *Shop Til You Drop*, *Marie Claire*, *New Woman*, *Harper’s Bazaar*, *Madison*, and others, to determine effects of media on self-objectification (p. 649). The authors (2008) stated that “there is no doubt that Western women are subject to a great deal of pressure to conform to the thin ideal of feminine beauty”, and that mass media have been “identified as the most pervasive and the most powerful” (p. 649) of the social influences that construct and reinforce the thin ideal. Additionally, women are expected to “look feminine”, which includes applying makeup, doing their hair, wearing appropriate and flattering clothing. I analyzed the interviews to determine if the women with whom I spoke were aware of, and attempted to reflect, these norms with their exercise choices and ultimately with their own bodies. According to discourses of femininity, the female body is intended to attract the opposite sex, which is why exhibiting an ideal shape is so important in white, western culture. Discourses of femininity rule some bodies in and some bodies out as acceptable. Fat is seen as a negative condition, and leads to that body being considered less sexually attractive. What generally occurs is a comparison of one’s body to the ideal. Because the ideal is unattainable for most, our bodies inevitably come up short. Most women are aware that the ideal is just that – a constructed notion. However, this often does not prevent women from attempting to reach the ideal as closely as possible.

Part of the gendering of the female body includes issues of comportment. Women are expected to take up less physical space, and to make smaller movements than men. Taking up physical space is a masculine quality. Proper feminine behaviour includes keeping our limbs close to our bodies, such as crossing our legs. Women are also expected to be more graceful and passive in our movements. Being loud is not acceptably feminine behaviour, and large, space-occupying movements are considered to be masculine, and thus less appropriate for women. Because some exercises, such as weight lifting, require more space and larger movements, and are often noisy, this too may act as a deterrent to women undertaking exercises requiring larger, and hence more masculine, spaces and movements.

This results from assumptions made about sexuality, with the assumption being that everyone is heterosexual. Heteronormativity refers to the idea that heterosexuality is the norm, and any other form of sexuality (homosexuality, bisexuality, etc.) is less/not acceptable. This is also sometimes referred to as compulsory heterosexuality. Miriam (2007) referred to heterosexuality as being “social, institutionalized, and compulsory”, and claimed that heteronormativity is “crucial for the maintenance of female subordination” (p. 211). Within heteronormativity, sex and gender are closely linked. Masculinity signifies a desire for female bodies. Thus, if a woman displays masculinity she must be manly and desire women also. Because fitness and sports pursuits are often considered to be masculine, women who are involved in these pursuits may be considered to be lesbians as a result. Women involved in fitness activities may begin to hyperfeminize themselves to counter possible assumptions about their sexuality. Discourses of femininity further encourage compulsory heterosexuality through the

requirement to be attractive to males. Women are expected to emphasize their femininity through the choices they make and this is particularly true of women involved in fitness. Otherwise, they may be considered masculine, or even lesbian.

Women who exercise must negotiate contradictory messages about their appearances and sexuality. Expectations indicate that women should be toned but not muscular, fit but not masculine, slim but not without breasts, and certainly heterosexual. Navigating through these contradictions can prove challenging for many women, particularly when discourses of fitness, healthism, and consumerism are added to the mix.

### **Fitness.**

It is difficult to separate discourses of fitness and femininity. These discourses are linked because each influences the other quite extensively. Women often use exercise to create the ideal body. Some types of exercise may be believed to be better at creating the desired figure, meaning that some women may choose a specific type of exercise for its desired result. However, femininity also influences fitness, as some women may choose to do or avoid some types of exercise based on whether the exercise is considered to be acceptably feminine. In terms of discourses surrounding fitness, D'Abundo's (2009) research on aerobics classes demonstrated that in many cases, personal appearance was emphasized more than health and wellness. Markula (1995) wrote that media tend to portray only the ideal, thin female body, and that ideal image may impact the way in which women exercise. Developing large muscles challenges the thin ideal, whereas aerobic exercise allows women to develop tight musculature and may assist with more rapid weight loss. Women may thus choose aerobic exercise because it allows them to

sculpt their bodies to be close to the norm, while also providing health and fitness benefits. When interviewing participants who chose to engage in aerobic activities rather than muscle building exercise, I was curious to note if their reasons for choosing aerobic exercises were similar to those in these and comparable studies. Additionally, some women may choose to do more repetitions with lighter weights rather than lifting heavy weights, as lifting lighter weight with more repetition is thought to create tighter rather than larger musculature. Following expert advice found in media and through health and fitness professionals, more women are undertaking a combination of aerobic and strength training exercises to sculpt their bodies into a more desirable shape. In their study of femininity and muscularity, Grogan, Wright, Evans, and Hunter (2004) wrote that “slimness is a valued attribute for women” (p. 49), and that muscularity is undesirable in women, noting that even young girls are as afraid of becoming muscled as they are of being fat. Markula (1995) posited that women were cautioned in fitness literature to avoid heavy weights or weight lifting and use “slow, controlled repetitions” (p. 433) instead. Aerobic exercise was preferred over weight training by the women in her study as aerobic exercise assisted in creating a more ideal body shape – firm, toned, and defined but not overtly muscular. According to the literature, this fit body shape also demonstrates personal responsibility for one’s health. The link between femininity, fitness, and health will be discussed shortly.

Markula (2004) also used Foucaultian notions of ethical care of the self to analyze both femininity and fitness. She wrote that “a body shape itself is not oppressive: what matters is how this shape has been used to discipline individual women” (p. 316). Unfortunately many women continue to feel inadequate as females and ashamed of their

bodies simply because they do not exhibit the normative female form. As a result, women may discipline themselves, their behaviour, and their bodies to better reflect western gendered ideals. Bell (2008) noted this phenomenon in women's bodybuilding. Although women's bodybuilding is often seen as stretching the boundaries of what is considered an acceptable female form, these bodies are still judged using traditionally feminine criteria. Women are still expected to have a curvy figure, and some female bodybuilders may go so far as to have breast implants to counter the "muscularity" developed by bodybuilding. Skimpy bathing suits are required, as are spike heels in many contests. Female bodybuilders usually wear typically feminine hairstyles and makeup, despite bodybuilding purportedly being a sport. Bell (2008) wrote, "although women's bodybuilding has great potential as a liberating archetype for female human beauty, judging standards in the sport reflect a masculine aesthetic of female human beauty that subverts this potential" (p. 43). Much like western society in general, until bodybuilding can move away from this androcentric standard for judging females, female bodybuilders continue to reiterate and be constrained by the accepted western norms even while challenging them. Thus, with regard to the female exercisers I interviewed, fitness could be both empowering and constraining at the same time, and the effects of this duality on women who consume fitness was examined.

Markula (1995) explained that "patriarchal domination over women is based on the assumption that men are naturally – and biologically – stronger and bigger than women" (p. 441). Women who engage in typically masculine exercises in the gym challenge this notion, causing unease among males and females because women are socially conditioned, and expected, to be smaller and weaker. Thus it was important for

me to note any friction between the normative western feminine body and the bodies of female exercisers and how women who may, through exercise, develop non-normative bodies handled this friction. In addition, females are gendered to be quieter, more susceptible to authority, and to inhabit less space. This gendering of the body may be seen in fitness centres as well, and may affect how women use and view their bodies when engaged in fitness activities. Women may tend to take up less space while in the gym, and may avoid the use of heavy equipment or weights. Bell (2008) commented: “walk into your local gym, and notice how the users of the weight room are at least 90% men; then see if you can find one woman using a barbell” (p. 47). Female exercisers may do more cardiovascular exercise and low weight strength training to avoid developing unfeminine muscles, as these are seen as inappropriate for normative female bodies, and it is this phenomenon that I wished to explore. Generally, women’s bodies are disciplined and controlled within physical fitness centres as much as in other social institutions. I undertook this discourse analysis to determine exactly how this socially constructed gendering affected females who regularly consume exercise, and affected the type of exercise engaged in as a result.

### **Healthism.**

Healthism is another example of dominant discourse currently circulating around the active female body that may affect women’s exercise choices, and again, is linked with both femininity and fitness. Roy (2008) defined healthism as an obligation to actively pursue good health “through personal individual adherence to the many and varied protocols for healthy living” (p. 465). Increasing personal responsibility for one’s health removes some of the financial burden from governments. Smith Maguire (2008)

stated that “illness is regarded as the outcome of a failure to make the right choices and the individual is held responsible – indeed, blamed” (p. 47). Dworkin and Wachs (2009) further noted that the healthy body was linked to gender ideals, in that the healthy body also exhibits socially acceptable, gendered body characteristics. The discourse of healthism may thus influence women to engage in certain types of exercise in order to avoid moral judgements being made about their bodies, particularly if their bodies do not represent gendered ideals. In our western society there is a correlation between this ideal body and health. That is, in order to be considered a healthy body, one must have a thin, fit, and toned body. A woman who does not exhibit the ideal female form may be seen as someone who does not take responsibility for her own health and wellbeing, and may be “punished” as a result. Punishment may include being excluded, ridiculed, or otherwise ostracized. Wright (1997) stated that there is an “equation of health with fitness as realized in a slim toned body, the apparent product of hard work and exercise” and that dedication to developing this body is “the practice of the responsible individual” (p. 5). Lupton (1995) wrote of healthism as “the privileging of the fit, slim, muscular body” (p. 146). Thus there is a discursively constructed moral component to exercise via healthism that will affect how female consumers of fitness view their bodies and any potential deviations from the normative female form. Through my analysis I looked for indications that the women whom I interviewed were aware of or drew meaning from this moral imperative to have a normative feminine body, because that body represents “health”, and how they functioned in relation to this discursively produced concept particularly in cases where their bodies and the types of exercise engaged in did not match the norm. Sassatelli (2010), who extensively studied fitness centres, noted that “gym going is

described as a reasoned commitment, a form of self-government that responds to one's own, true, natural needs. This allows fitness fans to define themselves as moral subjects..." (p. 205). According to Eichberg, who studied the fitness industry in Denmark and other countries, (2009), "fitness treats socially produced problems such as fatness, inactivity, boredom and poor time management as personal failings" (p. 177). I hoped to determine if any of the women with whom I spoke felt she had been judged in these ways, and if so, in what ways did this neoliberal discourse of healthism affect her exercise choices, if at all? It is also important to note that discourses of healthism encourage us to then judge others who do not exhibit an ideal body using the same criteria. We pass judgement on those who are fat, out of shape, or otherwise not normative. Did the women with whom I spoke pass judgements on others as a result of the influences of healthism?

### **Consumerism.**

Throughout this thesis I refer to consumerism. With regard to consumerism and exercise, Smith Maguire (2008) posited that it "concerns the ways in which individuals are encouraged to evaluate and work on their bodies in the context of consumer fitness culture – in commercial health clubs and the fitness media, and through personal fitness services" (p. 3). Others, such as Dworkin and Wachs (2009), called this concept "a culture of lack" (p. 10). A culture of lack refers to the dominance of consumerism in western culture. This concept relates to and connects media and healthism. Because the fitness industry depends on consumers to buy products and services, advertising is used to sell the body's shortcomings, which can only be corrected through consumption: "transforming women and men into the right kind of object is the goal for multinationals,

as this produces ever-expanding profits” (p. 11). Eichberg (2009) claimed “the fundamental social existence of the practitioner is determined by being a consumer and being the target of certain producers” (p. 184). As our bodies always lack something when compared to the normative western body, we must purchase products or services to fix this deviation from the norm. Advertisers influence the construction of the current western, gendered ideal body, and reiterate this ideal through media. Subsequently consumers may then attempt to recreate this ideal with their own bodies through the purchase of sanctioned products and services. Dworkin and Wachs (2009) noted that displaying “the right kind body reinforces not only privileged social locations, but types of moralities and the performance of citizenship” (p. 11). Smith Maguire (2008) wrote:

Consumption plays a crucial role in the resolution of the tension between restraint and indulgence: the prospect of shopping for a newly fit body is a means to reward discipline with pleasure; the buying of a health club membership, new sports equipment or personal trainer services is represented as a “necessary” indulgence in order to accomplish self-discipline. (p. 196)

Purchasing certain products, brands, or services may be emphasized as the solution to the problem of a non-normative body, and may be required for exhibiting appropriate self-discipline in terms of having the ideal female body. Dittmar (2008) explained that consumerism, and advertising in particular, produces both the deficits that must be corrected and the solutions that we must purchase in order to correct the deficits. The intersection of consumerism, healthism, and media reiteration of body ideals creates pressure to construct one’s body to be like the norm. Thus it was important to determine the effects of consumerism on women’s exercise choices, and to note the intimate relationship between the discourses of consumerism, healthism, fitness, and femininity.

## **The Project in Context**

According to the Canadian Fitness and Lifestyle Research Institute (CFLRI), in 2008, 48% of Canadians were somewhat active, with Albertans being “more likely than the national average to be at least moderately active” (para. 1). The city of Lethbridge, Alberta is home to approximately 86,000 citizens, with a steadily increasing rate of growth. Of this population, in 2010 51.1% were female. The overwhelming majority of the population is Caucasian. The city boasts over 140 kilometres of multiuse paths and trails, as well as a marathon club and several cycling associations. There are six (formerly seven) full service physical fitness facilities (gyms), one of which is women-only (one of the women-only gyms in town recently closed). One coeducational facility has a women’s only area. Both the University of Lethbridge and Lethbridge College offer full service gyms for both members of those institutions and the community. The International Health, Racquet and Sportsclub Association (2010) reported that the Canadian health club market garnered over two billion dollars in the past year, and that one sixth of the Canadian population is a health club member. Smith Maguire (2008) wrote, “women’s rate of participation as health club members is growing faster than men’s” (p.16). Many women are clearly invested in physical fitness endeavours. These factors, along with my personal interest in and experience with fitness activities, all combined to make the study of women’s exercise choices both interesting and relevant. When thinking of women and physical fitness, I intended to explore how discourse affects the exercise choices of those women in Lethbridge who exercise regularly.

## **The Female Body**

It should be noted that, like subject and subjectivity, the definition of the ideal female body has changed over time. Wolf (1990) posited that “the qualities that a given period calls beautiful in women are merely symbols of the female behaviour that period considers desirable: the beauty myth is always actually prescribing behaviour and not appearance” (p. 4). That is, in our current, Western, patriarchal society at least, in order to become a woman who will be desired by men a certain appearance is required because that appearance serves to constrain women in some way(s). In order to be desirable to men, a woman must discipline herself to produce the type of body deemed appropriate in that moment in time. It is the discipline of the female body that is most important. Appearance is a side effect of this discipline, not the goal. Males can retain control of females by imposing behaviours on women that limit acceptable behaviour and women’s resultant bodies. Deliovsky (2010) wrote, “these behaviours involve constant self-surveillance, grooming, and self-management. When women do not give the appearance of self-care and weight management, then there can be self-condemnation and condemnation from family and society for having “let themselves go”” (p. 106). Formerly the ideal female body was quite plump and round, as seen in paintings by masters such as Titian and other Renaissance artists, but the norm has changed, becoming thinner and thinner over the course of time. As the studies previously referred to reveal, this change to a thinner ideal is seen through media representations of the female body. Media bombard us with images of thin women, sometimes frighteningly so. Obesity is portrayed as being not just unhealthy, but morally repugnant. Sassatelli (2010) wrote that “fat is ugly because above all it is useless, not docile and functional like

muscle, and moreover, the most obvious sign of a lack of physical discipline” (p. 401).

We are encouraged to repudiate fatness and strive for thinness, even to the point of eating disorders. It can be difficult to manage all of these images, particularly if a woman’s body is not close to the ideal.

I have experienced this discord between how I actually look and how certain discourses indicate I should look. For many years I was a regular, somewhat compulsive, exerciser. I exercised in some way every day, whether it was strength training, cardiovascular exercise, or a combination of the two. Despite this, I was not normatively slim. I have very large, muscular legs, and am clearly an endomorph. I do not have a “Barbie” shape with a large bust, tiny waist, and balanced hips. Nor would my weight have been considered appropriate for a woman. In fact, despite being extremely physically fit, using the Body Mass Index (BMI) calculation, I was considered overweight. Regardless, I was very happy with my body, because I was very, very strong, and very fit. My cardiovascular fitness was similar to that of an elite athlete. For me, being strong and fit was far more important than being normatively slim and shapely. I liked being able to physically do everything I wanted to do because I was so strong and fit. I also understood that, given my body type, I could never have an ideal female form. It simply was not possible for me to have a normatively feminine body without surgical intervention, and I had no intention of going that route. In fact, at that time I chose to exercise in a way that took me further from the norm, as opposed to closer to it. I consciously resisted the dominant discourses of femininity and fitness by engaging in heavy weightlifting and developing musculature that to some may seem unnatural for a woman.

However, as someone who exercised every day and was very physically fit for many years, experiencing a health issue that forced me to stop exercising and led to a substantial weight gain has been discomfiting. I now dislike my body, and by extension, myself. I compare my body to other women's and come up lacking. My weight issue and lack of fitness have become a constant pressure in my life. I am now clearly being influenced by discourses of femininity, even though not being normatively feminine did not bother me previously. For me, apparently, I am comfortable being outside the ideal to a point, but if I move too far from it, I begin to experience discomfort. This discomfort results from awareness of discourses of femininity combined with awareness that I am even further from exhibiting a desirable female form. Despite knowing that the normative female body is a social construction with no basis in "reality", I want to look more feminine. I want to be thinner, fitter, able to wear different clothing, and all of those things that go along with femininity at this time and place. I also feel bad that I am not "healthy" because my body does not represent health. Because I am not slim and fit at this moment, it is clear to those looking at me that I am not being responsible for my own health. I have "let myself go". Discourses of healthism are clearly at play here too. Yet it bothers me that not being these things bothers me. Because I am aware of the constructed nature of discourse I feel I should be able to ignore discourses of femininity or healthism, but understanding how discourse functions and not subscribing to it are very different things. I have discovered that for me it is exceedingly difficult, if not impossible, to avoid the influence of discourse when it comes to my appearance. I am now disciplining myself in a way that I had not previously, because I feel pressured to *look* more acceptably fit, feminine, and healthy.

To try to counter my weight gain, and through influences of discourses of consumerism, I recently purchased a book to help me lose weight through cycling, as that is my sport of choice. As I read the book, I was struck by one phrase in particular: “a happier size” (Yeager, 2010, p. 109). It disturbed me to read that, because it brought home just how important weight and size are to our overall happiness. The message here is that if you are overweight or somehow outside the norm size-wise, you cannot possibly be happy. The only way to be content with your body, and thus as a person, is to be slim, which is an incredibly limiting approach to our bodies. In her book on white femininity, Deliofsky (2010) noted:

Not only does the patriarchal portrait reveal ideal beauty as middle-class, heterosexual, young, slim, tall and cellulite-free with long, blonde hair, big (perky) breasts and blue or green eyes that are perpetually focused on herself or on men, she is a nice, happy person constantly smiling, feeding and nurturing others – all the while denying herself self-nurturance and knowing her subordinate place in the hierarchy of gender. (p. 111)

Of note is the statement that a woman’s eyes should be focussed on herself. As we live in a culture that is still primarily patriarchal, women are held to standards different from those to which men are held. Women should be focussed on two things. The first is meeting men’s expectations for women’s behaviour and body type. This means keeping themselves under constant surveillance to ensure that their bodies meet the ideal – the ideal that our patriarchal society has constructed. Women must focus on pleasing men, but at the same time must also focus on themselves to ensure that their bodies and behaviour are “acceptable” to the society in which they live. Women must discipline themselves to produce the behaviours and bodily form that qualify them to be considered women. That is, to be a successful female, a woman must exhibit the qualities that determine one’s gender. Butler (1992) wrote about performing gender. In order to be a

successful member of one's gender, one must learn, understand, and correctly perform those behaviours that represent said gender. For a woman, this might include such things as taking up less physical space, doing her hair and wearing makeup, wearing feminine clothes, and having a normatively feminine body. We begin learning how to perform our gender from birth, as certain behaviours are rewarded and others are punished. That is, discourse tells us what is acceptable, and discursive practices indicate how we act out these acceptable behaviours. For example, girls wear pink and boys wear blue. Attempts to change this norm are met with disdain, as a boy in pink falls outside what dominant discourses of femininity and masculinity indicate is acceptable. These discourses rule out girls wearing blue and boys wearing pink, especially as infants. We do not know how to behave when we cannot ascertain gender – we do not know how to act around a person whose gender cannot be determined. Over time, we begin to perform those behaviours for which we receive positive feedback from both the people around us, and the institutions to which we belong. At this moment in time that means women will be pressured to behave in normatively female ways such as wearing high heels, clothing that flatters, applying makeup, doing our hair, and most importantly, having an ideal body. All of these discursive practices confirm a woman's status as feminine and female, and behaviours outside these norms make us suspicious about that person's gender, sexuality, mental and physical health, morality, and so on.

Sadly, being outside the normative feminine ideal for our bodies reflects negatively on women in our culture beyond discourses of femininity. Being overweight, out of shape, or simply not having an ideal female form allows judgements to be made about a woman, especially when viewed through discourses of healthism, fitness,

consumerism, and femininity. To perform her gender correctly a woman must discipline herself appropriately to develop an “acceptable” female form. Dominant discourses of femininity, fitness, and healthism affect our reactions to a woman based on her appearance. If she is not slim and is not exercising in ways to emphasize or improve her femininity, she is lacking. She has not accepted responsibility for her own health, which corresponds to discourses of healthism. Part of the normative ideal indicates that being slim equates to being healthy – whether or not it actually is healthy. The *appearance* of health is what matters most. If a woman is overweight, she is not taking responsibility for her own health, and we know this because she does not *look* healthy, according to socially constructed definitions of a healthy female body. Constant surveillance is required to ensure that she looks healthy, represented by being thin, even if there is no actual link between thinness and health. Additionally, if a woman is not wearing stereotypically feminine clothes, or dressing in a way to emphasize what is right about her body, this too leads to judgements being made. As a result, women may feel compelled to buy feminine clothing, to buy “shape-up” shoes, or to pay to go to the gym to create a “better” body. This relates to consumerism, which is the idea that we can buy a better, or at least more normative, body. We can pay to change ourselves to better reflect dominant discourses of femininity, fitness, and healthism, to be more acceptable in terms of one’s gender.

For me, in terms of consumerism, I pay for two gym memberships, I buy technical clothing and shoes, cycling equipment, and subscribe to several cycling magazines. In part I buy these things because I require equipment specific to the activities I like to engage in, such as cycling shoes, helmets, and clothing. However,

other items I purchase in the hope that they will help me create a more ideal body. I read books and articles on how to get slim, eat right, and about which exercises will get me looking great. I buy books and magazines written by “experts” who tell me what I need to do to improve myself. I am clearly affected by consumerism as it relates to fitness, and often choose to perform exercises recommended by these experts in order to develop a better body, whether that is slimming or developing muscles important for cycling. I seek out and purchase information and products that will assist me in becoming “better” – a better cyclist, a better woman, a better person – by exercising in specific ways. It saddens me that I cannot be happy with my body or myself as the person I currently am, and must purchase products and services in order to feel better about myself. Have other women felt the same as I have, and been affected by discourses of consumption as they relate to exercise choices? Foucaultian concepts of confession can be seen at work here. We must confess that we are not disciplining ourselves appropriately to resemble the norm, then shame ourselves into submission to the “rules” of femininity by exercising more, dieting, seeking out expert advice on how to better ourselves, and attempt to undertake the remainder of the behaviours required to reshape our bodies and selves. Through this analysis I hoped to determine if the women with whom I spoke had experienced similar feelings, and had adjusted their behaviour, as it relates to exercise, as a result.

## Chapter 2

### Methodology

Data for this Foucaultian discourse analysis was generated through semi-structured interviews with females who exercised on average at least four times per week. The interviews were examined for patterns of discourse that indicate the discursive practices at work in constructing females as exercisers, and to determine how these discourses affect the types of exercise chosen by women who exercise.

#### Interviews and Interview Questions

Kvale (1996) claimed that qualitative interviews allow researchers to obtain “qualitative descriptions of the life world of the subject with respect to interpretation of their meaning” (p. 124). A qualitative research approach was required in this case, to facilitate the exploration and subsequent understanding of how women came to engage in particular types of exercise with regard to discourses of consumerism, femininity, fitness, and healthism. The analysis was based on self-reported experiences of the participants in my study. Semi-structured interviews were appropriate for this project, because as Gratton and Jones (2003) noted, “the researcher adopts a flexible approach to data collection, and can alter the sequence of questions or probe for more information with subsidiary questions” (p. 141). Rapley (2004) argued that qualitative interviewing allows researchers the opportunity to gather “*contrasting and complementary talk on the same theme or issue*” (p. 18). Thus a qualitative research approach allowed participants to explain and describe their experiences in the manner that made sense to them, and allowed me the freedom to explore similar themes in different ways according to the comfort and knowledge level of each participant. This approach generated enough

suitable data to analyse, because it allowed interviewees to provide detailed descriptions of their experiences and their feelings, toward both exercising and current dominant discourses circulating around femininity, fitness, consumerism, and healthism. General questions were determined in advance, but the open-ended, semi-structured format of the interviews allowed me to change both the wording and the sequence of questions asked, based on the responses of each participant.

Most of the forty-one questions I prepared attempted to elicit descriptive statements from participants. For example, I posed questions such as: “Describe the type(s) of exercise in which you engage most frequently”, “Why do you choose that type of exercise most frequently?”, “Are there types of exercises you avoid?”, “Describe your idea of the ideal female body”, and “In your opinion, does your body match your description of the ideal?”. Phrasing questions in this manner allowed me to ask additional questions based on each woman’s responses, probing for further detail. Thus participants had the opportunity to be as explicit about their feelings and experiences as possible, providing me with detailed information with which to work.

Asking open-ended questions further provided the opportunity for participants to answer in their own words, with little influence from me as to what I planned to look for when analysing the transcripts. There was a chance that what I expected to hear was not what the interviewees felt was relevant or influential. Gratton and Jones (2003) pointed out that semi-structured interviews may allow for unexpected themes and insights to be explored in detail. As Rapley (2004) noted, interviewing can be used “to enable previously hidden, or silenced, voices to speak” (p. 25). In addition to listening for silenced voices, I needed to listen for what may have been left unsaid. According to

Foucaultian theorizing, that which is left unsaid is as important as what is said.

Discourses that I had not previously considered may have had an effect on some female exercisers, and I had to remain open to that possibility.

### **Reflexivity**

While performing this discourse analysis, as an active woman I strove to remember that my experiences with fitness activities, and my knowledge of and personal experience with discourses of femininity, fitness, healthism, and consumerism might have been very different from that of each participant. Recognizing that the experiences and feelings of each participant may have varied greatly from both mine and other participants' was important. I attempted to prevent my personal beliefs and approaches to consumerism, femininity, fitness, or healthism from colouring my interaction with each participant, and from having undue influence on any participant. I also remained aware of how all aspects of the research process could affect the final results. Being reflexive about the process and my role in it was vital to the process. According to Pillow (2003), reflexivity involves "an ongoing awareness during the research process which aids in making visible the practice and construction of knowledge within research in order to produce more accurate analyses of our research" (p. 178).

With regard to reflexivity, Pillow (2003) further wrote that being reflexive allows researchers to "demonstrate one's awareness of the research problematics and is often used to potentially validate and legitimize the research precisely by raising questions about the research process" (p. 179). Given that I was interviewing women who also exercise at gyms, I was curious to know if the majority of the women with whom I spoke had backgrounds similar to mine and to each other. There is a cost to belonging to a gym,

meaning that many of the women I interviewed may have had similar financial, educational, and class statuses. However, I could not assume that all the women with whom I spoke would have similar backgrounds, and I attempted to avoid making assumptions about class, economics, and so forth. During the interviews it became clear that all but one of the interviewees did in fact come from backgrounds quite similar to mine and to each other. Most identified themselves as Caucasian, with one participant identifying herself as Korean. Moreover, the majority of the participants appeared to have similar educational backgrounds, as all were either in university currently, or had completed post-secondary education. Those who were currently in the workforce were all working in professional arenas, such as the legal, medical, and teaching fields. The majority of interviewees did come from similar backgrounds, which means that my findings may not be applicable to women of different classes or educational backgrounds. I discuss this issue in the Limitations section of the thesis (see Chapter 5).

Pillow (2003) also referred to self-reflexivity, where the researcher must recognize her role in creating the topic to be researched, choosing the settings where interviews occur, and analysing and interpreting data, highlighting “the importance of researcher (sic) becoming consciously aware of these factors and thinking through the implications of these factors for her/his research” (p. 179). Because I constructed almost everything about my research, the interview and transcription process, the analysis of raw data, and production of conclusions, I had to remain careful of possible biases created as a result. While it may be impossible to avoid these biases, acknowledging them was important throughout the research process so that the biases themselves could be examined when necessary. For example, the interview situation always contains power

imbalances. Being interviewed can be somewhat unnerving because as Kvale (1996) noted there is “an asymmetry of power” (p. 126) within an interview, with the interviewer having the power to set the interview situation up in a particular way, to choose the questions to be asked, and so forth, even within semi-structured interviews. While this cannot be avoided, I remained aware of potential effects of this power imbalance. Some women may have hesitated to answer fully or honestly if they were concerned about my reactions to their statements. Even if a participant’s responses were not what I anticipated, they were still valid for my research. I had to ensure that I remained open to any answers, even if they differed from my expectations. I was also careful to analyse my responses to unanticipated information from interviewees, lest it revealed a bias on my part about which I needed to be reflexive. While conducting the interviews I attempted to give each participant time to respond in full before continuing, although I was not always successful at this. I repeated certain key phrases to ensure that I correctly understood the meaning behind the words. I often found, and hope the interviewees did as well, that because we were discussing a topic of mutual interest in terms of exercising, the conversations were easy and allowed for significant discussion. At the end of each interview I invited each participant to take a copy of the questions asked, and to contact me should she have anything to add after thinking about the questions and her responses. I hoped that providing the opportunity to contact me later, when we were no longer “officially” in an interview, would provide each woman with the opportunity to add any information she felt she may have missed, to expand upon something we discussed, or to change any answer given. I did not hear from anyone after

the interviews, which I trust meant that the women felt they had ample opportunity to make their point during our talks, despite the power imbalance in the interview situation.

I asked each participant to choose where she would like to be interviewed, and at what time. This gave the women some power and control over the interview situation, albeit in a limited way. When explaining the consent letter, I ensured that each woman understood she could refuse to answer any question, and could stop the interview at any time. Although I was not always successful, I tried to avoid interrupting and talking over the interviewees, so that each woman felt she had time to express her thoughts, and that I was truly interested in what she was saying. In several interviews the participant and I ended up in more of a conversation than a strict question and answer interview, which may have created less of a power imbalance, or at least decreased the feeling of power imbalances inherent in interview situations.

Another aspect of reflexivity is that of researcher as insider/outsider, as described by Villenas (1996, 2000) (as cited in Pillow, 2003). Although I was an insider in many ways, being a female who exercises regularly interviewing other women who exercise frequently, I remained an outsider in many cases. For example, when speaking to the women who were younger or older than I, I could not assume that my experience at a younger age was similar to experiences of today's younger women. I have noticed that there are different standards for young women today as opposed to when I was in my twenties. For example, I often see young women wearing very small and tight-fitting shorts and tops while exercising in the gym. When I was that age I, and many of my peers, would not have exercised in anything but baggy shorts and loose t-shirts – we did not want our bodies to be visible at all.

I also could not assume that I was able to fully understand the experiences of an older age group, being younger than some of the interviewees. Nor was I able to assume that my experiences were similar to those around my age. Just because I am also a female exerciser, I could not take for granted that I would be considered an insider to any specific group I might interview. I did find that I had similar experiences in the gym, and had felt the same types of emotions with regard to my body and exercising. While I was able to empathize with some of the sentiments expressed by the women with whom I spoke, I still had to ensure that I was listening carefully to what each woman was saying, as opposed to hearing it from my point of view. As a result I wanted very much to conduct my research as Pillow (2003) describes it: “doing research “with” instead of “on””(p. 179). I attempted to give each woman the time and space she required to answer fully in her own words. Interviewees had the freedom to create and develop their own stories with as little influence or interference from me as possible. I intended to approach my research from this feminist point of view, “hearing, listening, and equalizing the research relationship” (p. 179). I believe this approach allowed me to gather extensive, useful information while making the process an enjoyable and comfortable one for the participants.

### **Interviewing Women**

I also intended to utilize some aspects of what Devault (2004) described as “talking and listening from women’s standpoint” (p. 227). Devault (2004) observed that language is inherently androcentric, “reflecting male experiences”, and that language can be “incongruent with women’s lives” (p. 227). Devault (2004) suggested that, when interviewing women, attention be paid to the language being used, as it might limit

women's responses. Additionally, Devault (2004) believed that it is important to "ground our interviewing in accounts of everyday activity" (p. 232) in order to draw out the most complete descriptions of women's lives and activities. This produces a discussion that is more like everyday women's talk, and as a result, produces information that better reflects how women think and feel, removing some of the androcentric bias inherent in western language. Given that I interviewed women exclusively, I wanted very much to incorporate many of the techniques Devault outlines. Of particular interest was the concept of "personal listening" (p. 237). This technique includes attempting to be aware of unspoken sentiments, trying to avoid labels and labelling, and letting women describe their own experiences in ways that make sense to them. Personal listening refers to using "unspoken knowledge" (p. 238) to better understand what is being said. That is, there are areas where women may share similar backgrounds or experiences, and using these similarities may help the interviewer understand all the nuances in the interviewee's responses, even if the nuances are unspoken. Although I recognized that women's experiences would vary greatly due to sexual orientation, race, age, and many more variables, I hoped that by using some of Devault's techniques and applying them to the interviews I conducted, the interview process would be more enjoyable for the participants, and more fruitful for me in terms of the quality of information gathered. More enjoyable because the participants knew that I was truly listening and wanted them to have control over how they described their feelings and experiences, and more fruitful because the participants were able to disclose more information as a result of feeling more comfortable during the interview. These techniques provided rich, detailed data on which I based my discourse analysis.

Some techniques I used in my attempt to incorporate personal listening in these interviews included repetition of some words and phrases used by the participants, asking for clarification of what participants meant by certain statements, and encouraging discussion rather than adhering to a strict question/answer format. Instead of using technical language, like discourse for example, I wanted the women to use the language that made the most sense to them, and allowed them to describe their feelings and experiences in the manner that was most meaningful to them. I attempted to allow each woman to think about her answer without rushing her, to search for the words that she wanted to use to describe their experiences, and to feel that whatever way she chose to answer was acceptable. On occasion I provided some examples from my own experiences, not to colour or influence their answers, but to express that I have experienced similar feelings.

Unfortunately, I must acknowledge that on occasion, especially early in the interviewing process, I interrupted and “talked over” several participants, as well as finished statements made by participants. I also talked too much about my own experiences, which may have given the mistaken impression that I was less interested in theirs. After reviewing the first two interviews I realised that I was not conducting the interviews in the manner I had planned, and changed my approach. From then on I avoided interrupting as much as possible, and left personal narratives to the end of the interview, rather than during, while the women were explaining their own beliefs and experiences. One mannerism I was less able to control was finishing sentences. Although I believe this may have been an attempt on my part to express my understanding of what the participants were saying, I am certain that it was annoying, and may have caused

some women to give less detailed descriptions. As a result, I would say that I was only partly successful at incorporating Devault's techniques in this project.

### **Participants**

After receiving ethics approval from the University of Lethbridge, posters requesting volunteers for these interviews were displayed at the following physical fitness centres (gyms) in Lethbridge: Only Women's Fitness (no longer in business), YWCA, Lethbridge Fitness Club, Gold's Gym, GoodLife Fitness for Women, as well as the University of Lethbridge and the Lethbridge College physical fitness facilities. All of these facilities kindly agreed to display a poster after I explained who I was, and what the research entailed. I anticipated locating, and in fact did locate, some participants through word of mouth requests and the snowball effect as well. Requests for participants provided a basic description of the study, the criteria for participation in it, and my contact information. Interested women contacted me via email or phone, at which time preliminary meetings or telephone conversations were arranged. The preliminary discussions allowed me to ensure that each woman met the selection criteria, had a full understanding of the nature of the study and her participation in it, and that each woman remained interested in being a participant. At this point, appointments for interviews were scheduled at a time and place convenient to each participant.

To be a participant, each woman had to exercise regularly as recommended by the Public Health Agency of Canada (2003), on average thirty minutes of moderate to vigorous effort four times per week. Participants had to be willing to discuss the type(s) of exercise they chose regularly, as well as their feelings about their bodies and their reasons for choosing specific types of exercise. Age of participants was not a concern

(although participants were required to be over the age of eighteen), as upon subjecting the interview transcripts to Foucaultian discourse analysis, I expected I would, and did, discover commonalities among women of similar ages, and/or differences between age groups.

I met with each of the sixteen women individually over the course of several weeks between February and April 2010. The location of the interview was determined in consultation with each participant to ensure it occurred at a time and place convenient to her. Interviews lasted between forty-five minutes and two hours, depending on how much each participant talked about her experiences. Each woman was asked the same forty-one questions, but probing questions varied according to responses given. In most cases the meetings seemed more like conversations than interviews, with each of us volunteering information and discussing our feelings and opinions on exercise and fitness, femininity, personal health, and spending habits. In some cases, we discussed unrelated topics such as our dogs. These discussions allowed us to feel as comfortable with each other as possible. All of the women were personable, well spoken, and thoughtful, which is not surprising given that each woman had to volunteer to be interviewed. I suspect that women who were more reserved or shy, or less happy with their bodies, may have been less inclined to call or email me to volunteer. Issues with the self-selection process will be discussed in the Limitations section in Chapter 5. Each interview was fully transcribed using both audiotapes and handwritten notes, and these transcriptions became the basis for discourse analysis. Sixteen participants were interviewed for this study. The interviewees presented in this way:

| Pseudonym | Age | Race            | Employment Field  | Marital Status           | Key Fitness Background /Interests                  |
|-----------|-----|-----------------|-------------------|--------------------------|--|
| Sandra    | 18  | Caucasian       | Student           | Single                   | Studying exercise science                          |
| Karen     | 20  | Canadian        | Student           | Single                   | Certified Lifeguard                                |
| Brooke    | 20  | Human           | Student           | Single/"Fluid" sexuality | Exercises for mental health benefits               |
| Janet     | 21  | None given      | Medical           | Not married              | Interested in running races                        |
| Kim       | 22  | Canadian/white  | Student           | Engaged                  | Former amateur wrestler                            |
| Cynthia   | 22  | Caucasian       | Medical           | Married                  | Former alpine ski racer, wants to be a firefighter |
| Kate      | 23  | Korean          | Student           | Single                   | Struggling with her weight                         |
| Cathy     | 24  | None given      | Geography         | Married                  | Began exercising to recover from an accident       |
| Nancy     | 25  | Caucasian       | Legal             | Engaged                  | Played on male football team, played rugby         |
| Jill      | 30  | Caucasian       | Health & Wellness | Married                  | Operates a fitness centre                          |
| Laura     | 37  | Caucasian       | Pharmaceutical    | Married                  | Invested in fitness activities                     |
| Grace     | 39  | Caucasian       | Homemaker         | Married                  | Significant weight loss through exercise           |
| Robin     | 50  | Caucasian/white | Self employed     | Married                  | Wants to remain fit and healthy                    |
| Nicole    | 57  | Caucasian       | Community Service | Married                  | Serious runner, completed Iron Man                 |
| Carrie    | 58  | None given      | Admin             | Married                  | Regular exerciser since childhood                  |
| Helen     | 62  | Caucasian       | Education (ret)   | Married                  | Long time runner                                   |

A real variety of body shapes was evident with these women. The women ranged from quite short and somewhat stout to very tall and thin, with points on the continuum between those poles. I would describe all of the women as having a “normal” appearance, with normal referring to what is realistic, as opposed to socially constructed concepts of the ideal female body. Only one woman came close to the ideal, being blonde, beautiful, and very tall and thin with little excess body fat. However, the remainder of the women looked like most women we see everyday – varying heights and weights, but no extremes of either. To me, the women *looked* fit and healthy. All appeared to take care of themselves in terms of their clothing and overall appearance. I would not have described any of the women as overweight, although if compared to the ideal I am certain many of them would have been considered too heavy.

### **Debriefing**

After concluding each interview I described the research project in more detail. Most of the women were quite interested in knowing the purpose behind the questions asked, and what I hoped to discover with this information. I explained that through my literature review I had identified four discourses that appear to circulate around women, and female exercisers in particular. Each discourse was described and discussed, and I also outlined my hypothesis, which is that these and possibly other discourses would influence women’s exercise choices, although I did not know exactly how the women’s choices would be influenced. Each woman received a copy of the questions asked during the interview, along with my contact information and an invitation to contact me should any of them have additional information to add, require clarification of any aspect of the research, or express a desire to be removed from the project. None of the women

contacted me after our interview was complete.

### **Discourse Analysis**

There are many different approaches to discourse analysis. Graham (2005) claimed that “discourse analysis is a flexible term”, and is “greatly dependent on the epistemological framework being drawn upon” (p. 2). It is therefore necessary to make clear that I engaged in Foucaultian discourse analysis, which examines how knowledge is constructed, how power affects knowledge, and how individuals come to function within multiple discourses. The concept of experience also affects how women exercise. Historically, the idea of experience would be that which is produced by an individual; experience as the source of wisdom. However, poststructural theorization indicates that experience is also a discursive construction. Butler (1992) believed that subjects in action “are themselves instituted effects of prior actions” (p. 10). That is, action cannot be undertaken without the history of all prior action affecting it. Scott (1992) also posited that experience constructs subjects, not the reverse. Experience is always already constituted by discursive formations, and those formations affect what one encounters as experience. Flax (1992) wrote that because experience is known only through language, “the meaning of our experience and our understanding of it cannot be independent” of language and discourse (p. 453). With regard to athletes, Shogan (1999) commented that experiences “don’t just happen” but are “the consequences of certain sets of discourses and technologies that make possible these experiences and not others” (p. 47). Thus experience too both constrains and permits the actions of those who are subject to it. For females who exercise, experience with exercising will be constituted prior to their personal experience of it. For example, some women who take up weight training may

experience a negative reaction to their involvement in a traditionally masculine endeavour. This experience was constituted before their own experience of it, however, as discursive practices that outline what are acceptable fitness activities for women will have already ruled heavy weight training out. Consequently, women's experience is also discursively produced, and affects the constitution of their subjectivity as female exercisers as a result. Experience is always already constructed prior to our own experience of it. Undertaking a discourse analysis allowed me to understand how discursively constructed experience affected each woman's individual experience of exercise.

### **Foucaultian Discourse Analysis**

Within this type of discourse analysis, discourse “defines and produces the objects of our knowledge. It governs the way that a topic can be meaningfully talked about and reasoned about” (Wooffitt, 2005, p. 72). Flax (1992) wrote that every discourse has a “distinctive set of rules or procedures” that constitutes what is considered “a meaningful or truthful statement”, and that discourse is “simultaneously enabling and limiting” (p. 452). What is said about something must fall within the constructed rules of acceptability, and if it falls outside, those statements are considered to be less valid; they have less influence, and are often subjugated to the dominant knowledge about that topic as a result. Weedon (1992) claimed that statements that challenge existing “truths” will likely be “dismissed by the hegemonic system of meanings and practices as irrelevant or bad” (p. 35). Being subjugated did not diminish any potential effects of this knowledge on the women with whom I spoke, however. Thus, during this Foucaultian discourse

analysis I looked not only for dominant discourses, but also for subjugated knowledges that may have affected, or been produced by, female exercisers.

I also listened for what remained unsaid during these interviews, as Foucaultian theorizing and discourse analysis indicates that what is unsaid is as important as what is said. Spivak (1990) noted, “when a narrative is constructed, something is left out” (p. 18). During my analysis I looked for instances where women did not discuss discursively constructed influences that I might have expected to hear in the context of female exercisers. That is, were there instances where women consistently avoid discussing a particular concept or topic, and if so, which one(s)? What did this silence indicate? Were certain voices silenced? Did some women feel they are not heard either as practitioners of a specific type of sport or exercise, or as potential experts on exercise and fitness? Related to this, some women may feel silenced due to discursively constructed concepts like age, race, class, gender or sexuality. These variables may present barriers, preventing women from engaging in exercise to the degree they wish, or engaging in the type of exercise in which they are most interested. I attempted to remain aware of potential silences, and to effectively use discourse analysis to determine the effects of this silencing with respect to both what is left unsaid and/or who is considered a legitimate speaker and why.

Graham (2005) noted that Foucaultian discourse analyses avoid the search for “truth”. Wooffitt (2005) suggested that in this form of analysis “it is more important to see *how* it is that the what, whom and why have been constituted in discourse” [italics added] (p. 156). Questions were asked not to determine a “truth” about why women engage in exercise or in specific types of exercise, although I did ask women about their

motivations for exercising, and exercising in specific ways. Rather than searching for truth, I analyzed the discourses within which women who exercise framed their responses. Because “the body is both produced and valued through constructed social norms” (Bridel & Rail, 2007, p. 131), I had to determine which discursively produced norms circulated around the bodies of female exercisers. In Butler’s (1998) article on athletics and gender she stated, “the body that one lives is in many ways a body that becomes liveable only through first being cast in a culturally intelligible way” (p. 107). That is, one must know what one’s culture states about bodies in order to understand what one’s own and others’ bodies are and mean within that culture. We cannot know or speak about the body outside the language, or discourse, used to describe it, and the discursive and bodily practices through which one becomes embodied. I searched for the discursive constructs through which the participants made sense of their active female bodies.

Smith and Riley (2009) stated “according to Foucault, the task of analysis is to map discourse structures and their underpinning epistemic assumptions rather than evaluate their truth value by seeking a correspondence to an objective “reality”” (p. 117). There were several questions I was required to ask through this examination of discourse and discursive practices. How did the women with whom I spoke make sense of their bodies, as women and as frequent exercisers? Did they draw upon dominant discourses of femininity, healthism, consumerism, and fitness as I have hypothesized? Did they draw upon other discourses that have yet to be identified as significant and/or dominant in the scholarly literature? How did these women function successfully within multiple and possibly competing discourses? Was resistance to dominant discourses apparent, and

if so, in what ways? Were there differences in how women exercisers demonstrated resistance to, and acceptance of, dominant discourses surrounding femininity, healthism, consumerism, and fitness? All of these questions led me to the main focus of my thesis, which was, how did these (and potentially other) discourses affect the way in which these women exercised, in terms of the type of exercise most frequently engaged in?

### **Foucault and sport.**

Thorpe (2008) noted that Foucaultian theorizing is applicable to sport, particularly with regard to the issue of power. Similar to Thorpe's (2008), my research drew on Foucaultian "concepts of power, power-knowledge, discourse, and technologies of the self" (p. 200) to determine how women came to be constituted as female exercisers. To do this it was necessary to first determine which discourses, discursive formations, and discursive practices were likely to have an effect on these women. My review of the scholarly literature, highlighted in the previous chapter, identified four dominant discursive themes that researchers have highlighted as circulating and significant with respect to women who exercise. Within my research, when interviewing women who regularly engaged in particular types of exercise I listened for these and possibly other discourses that framed how the participants came to exercise in specific ways, how they related to their bodies, and how they discursively constructed themselves and their bodies within the context of exercise.

Bridel and Rail (2007) stated that "placing the body and the Foucauldian perspective at the centre of research questions remains relevant to sport sociology, in particular when considering multiple subjectivities, sport, physical activity, and dominant discourses of the body prevalent in contemporary Western society" (p. 139). Because I

intended to search for “how”, not “why”, women come to exercise, and to explore the constructed nature of female exercisers and their bodies, using Foucault’s concepts of knowledge, power, and discourse was the most useful approach. Wright (1997) noted that “knowledge of the body and the body itself is constituted in specific cultural and historical circumstances and in the context of particular relations of power” (p. 1). Taking a Foucaultian approach to discourse analysis allowed me to deconstruct and examine the contemporary, western, gendered, dominant concepts of the ideal active female body and the resultant effects of these discourses on the types of exercise in which women chose to engage. Bridel and Rail (2007) posited that “the body is a subject of technologies of power – technologies established through discourses of “expertise” such as medicine, law and science “ (p. 130). Markula and Pringle (2006) also pointed out that fitness knowledge is generally based on medical, psychological, and physiological research that is then accepted by the fitness fields as expert knowledge. Experts in these fields discursively produce knowledge, but who are these experts? Whose voices are heard as experts and whose are silenced? Which discourses acquire authority as a result? I attempted to determine which discourses exerted the greatest influence on female exercisers and their subsequent choice of exercise type. For example, is it mainly the medical and physiological professions that have authority to make claims about what is and is not appropriate exercise for women, and what a “healthy” female body looks like? Do fitness experts such as personal trainers also have a voice? Media no doubt also has significant influence over what becomes accepted as “truth” about female bodies. The reiteration of the feminine ideal in media such as television and advertising, and health, beauty, and other publications that outline how “women can achieve their

beauty goals via a careful, healthy diet and exercise” (Day & Keys, 2008, p. 7), all impact the ways in which individuals come to know and identify themselves as females, as exercisers, and so forth, and may affect the type of exercise in which women regularly engage.

Using a qualitative research approach informed by poststructural conceptualizations of discourses and discourse analysis made sense for my research project. Generating data through open-ended, semi-structured interviews allowed for the exploration, analysis, and subsequent interpretation of how women came to engage in particular types of exercise with regard to discourses of femininity, consumerism, fitness, and healthism. Thus, since discursively produced knowledge about female exercisers was precisely what I intended to research, using discourse analysis based in Foucaultian theorizing was the most appropriate approach for my research. This Foucaultian approach to discourse analysis allowed me to answer the questions I wanted to ask, as it permitted the deconstruction and examination of discursively constructed norms affecting females who exercise. Because of the interplay between discourse, power, knowledge, and the construction of normative feminine ideals, it was crucial to determine how women were constructed, and constructed themselves, both as women and as regular exercisers within dominant discourses of femininity, consumerism, healthism, and fitness.

## Chapter 3

### Interview Analysis

After analyzing the interviews it appeared that the majority of women with whom I spoke were indeed affected to some extent by contemporary discourses of femininity, fitness, and healthism as noted in the literature. As I suspected, discourses of femininity and fitness were linked for many of the women with whom I spoke, and healthism was also closely related. Discourses of consumerism also had an effect, although a slightly different effect than I anticipated. The four discourses circulating around women who exercise, as identified in the literature, definitely influenced these women in some way, although the women were not always aware of the effects. Additionally, the women often demonstrated some aspect of resistance to these discourses, although again, not always in the manner I anticipated.

#### **Femininity**

As expected, the majority of women with whom I spoke expressed awareness of the normative female figure, were able to describe that normative ideal body type for women, and often referred to media as the source of this knowledge. When asked to describe the ideal female body, Carrie responded, "... not overweight, you know trim and fit". Nicole, a 57 year old participant, described the ideal as "...not big curves...a fit looking body". Helen said "...certainly slim". Nancy, a twenty five year old just about to get married, described the ideal female shape as "...relatively low BMI, toned muscle, flat stomach...basically you know like a fitness model kind of thing". There was a general awareness that the normative woman is slim, toned, and fit; however, few women

described specific features like breast or hip size. For most women the description was of the body as a whole, instead of parts.

When asked what influenced their definitions of the ideal female body, the responses were similar. Janet, a 21 year old in the medical field, felt the ideal body is “displayed a lot by media”. Laura said, “there is so much pressure out there for women to look a certain way, it’s in your face”. Nancy and Laura both mentioned *Oxygen*, and Cathy, a 24 year old who started exercising to recover from an accident, said she reads *Shape*, which are both women’s fitness magazines, indicating that the fitness models influenced their image of the ideal body. I asked Cynthia if magazines influence her, and she mentioned *Victoria’s Secret* catalogues. Laura, who had returned to exercising regularly after a time away from it, also referred to workout and weight loss shows on television, as well as other gym members as influences on her image of the ideal body. When asked about the influences on her description of the ideal female body, Helen, who had been exercising since she was 19, said: “definitely the media, in any form...I’m totally convinced that’s where all our ideas come from”. Carrie said the ideal was “magazine style”. Media did appear to significantly influence the definitions of the ideal female body for the participants. The types of media mentioned differed, but all were aware that media representations had a significant impact on what qualifies as an ideal female body. All of the women were able to describe the normative western female body as found in media, despite not necessarily completely subscribing to that image for themselves. This demonstrated the effect that discourse can have. Women repeatedly observed images of the normative female form, and gradually came to accept it as being “true”. Foucaultian theorizing posits that we internalize normative images that are

constantly reiterated through media, “expert” opinion, peer groups, and institutions. We see what is ruled in and ruled out. In this case, discourses of femininity rule in a slim, toned body and rule out muscularity and extremes of weight. The women with whom I spoke were very aware of what was acceptable for a women’s shape according to these discourses. Kate, a 23 year old international student, stated outright “I want to have the ideal body” so that she can “wear really hot clothes”. Implicit in this statement is the requirement to sculpt one’s body into a form that allows a woman to wear sexy clothes. Why? Perhaps it is to attract men, to feel “normal”, or to avoid being considered masculine. This illustrates Deliovsky’s (2010) argument that women must focus on themselves to produce the kind of body that is attractive to men.

Interestingly, some of the interviewees did not describe the ideal female form or what influences their definition of it in the manner I expected. For example, Jill, a 30 year old woman who worked in a fitness centre, said, “I don’t have this vision of the ideal”. Kim declared, “I stayed away from media”. Sandra, an exercise science student, claimed that being healthy was more important than how a woman looked. Nicole, who had been active since she was a child, said she would not look through fashion magazines. Grace had been obese before beginning an exercise program. She believed that the ideal depended upon how women carry themselves and what they are carrying on their bodies. Janet, who worked in the health care field, was influenced most by what she saw and read in nursing and health literature. I found it quite interesting that some of the participants did not feel, despite being aware of the ideal, that media and other representations of the ideal female body overly influenced them.

However, upon analysis of the transcripts, it was evident that these women were

still being influenced by contemporary discourses of femininity, framing subjectivities through discourse, although the degree to which they took up this influence varied. For example, when asked about the ideal female body image, Nicole, who claimed she was not concerned about looking like the ideal and did not look at magazines, commented: “I do have...an aversion to fat”. Given discourses of the obesity epidemic running rampant at the moment, it was not surprising that some women harboured negative feelings towards fatness. Kate, who identified as Korean, noted that in her home country “obesity means they are lazy”. Robinson, Bacon, and O’Reilly (1993) defined fat phobia as a “pathological fear of fatness often manifested as negative attitude and stereotypes about fat people” (p. 468). Combined with fat phobia are discourses of obesity that affect our perception of those who are overweight. Beausoleil and Ward (2009) posited that we are exhorted by government and public policymakers to “fix” the problem of obesity by changing our behaviour through better eating, getting more exercise, and making attempts at weight loss. The authors (2009) asserted that there is a “general conflation of thinness with good health and fatness with bad health” (p. 1). This conflation is precisely what encourages women to feel aversion to fat, and to want to avoid carrying fat on their bodies. This abhorrence appeared to cause the women with whom I spoke to exercise in ways that would assist in fat reduction or prevention. Beausoleil and Ward (2009) also wrote that attempts to avoid fat tended to affect consumption, stating:

the endorsement of individualistic approaches to solving the obesity "problem" we contend has fed into a consumer culture in which health has come to be viewed as a commodity, permitting those in a position to sell health solutions (such as fad diets, pharmaceuticals, and other quick fixes) to prosper (para. 3)

I discuss the relationship between fatness and consumption in a later section.

In a similar vein, when asked what a muscular woman makes her think of it seemed legitimate for Laura to claim, “of a man, to be honest”, and “the ideal body is that femininity without the harsh muscle tone that guys have”. Kate said, “women don’t like muscular bodies”. Given representations of the ideal as being slim and toned but not muscular, it was not surprising to hear women say that fat is unattractive and undesirable, and that muscularity is unfeminine and masculine in appearance. In fact, muscularity in a woman often calls her sexuality into question. Dworkin and Wachs (2009) claimed “strong women are assumed to be lesbians” (p. 7). Because a woman is muscular she is considered to be a lesbian, as a result of “hegemonic masculinity” (Dworkin, 2003, p. 242). The women in Dworkin’s (2003) study used the term toned to describe the ideal female body, as did many of the women with whom I spoke. Further, while Dworkin (2003) noted that although more muscularity on women is allowed now than in the past, women are still required to “contain” their musculature to retain an acceptable level of femininity (p. 253). The women with whom I spoke also seemed to feel that being beyond a certain level of muscularity definitely allowed their femininity to be questioned, and avoided exercises that might have increased muscularity to an “unacceptable” level. The women were comfortable using strength training to assist with toning, but not to develop obvious muscularity.

This relates to how discourse rules in and rules out. We can see that masculine and overweight women are ruled out according to discourses of femininity – these bodies are unintelligible according to circulating “definitions” of femininity. This was most apparent when the women were asked whether their own bodies matched their description of the ideal. All but one of the participants said that their bodies did not meet

their ideal. Mutrie and Choi (2000) noted that women are “bombarded with images of the ideal (usually white) woman with a thin body” (p. 545), and compare their bodies to this thin ideal. When asked how she felt about her body at this moment Jill, who was slim and fit, said “actually, fairly happy”, but when asked if she thought her body resembled her ideal she responded this way: “I always look at myself in the mirror and its like, oh if only I...”, and “I think there is always things you’re gonna pick apart about yourself”. When I asked Cynthia, who was exercising specifically to pass the firefighter’s fitness test, about her feelings towards her own body, she said she was feeling pretty good. But when asked if she worried if her body resembled the ideal, Cynthia, a former elite athlete, replied “all the time...I compare myself to other girls on a regular basis”. Cathy, who exhibited the most normative shape of all the participants, claimed she was not overly influenced by media images of the ideal female, but then said, “I’ll see someone and be like, I kinda wouldn’t mind to look like her”. She also stated that she reads *Shape* magazine frequently, and would like to look like women in the magazine – to have a “nice flat stomach one day”. Kate, who was struggling to lose weight, responded to the question of how closely she matched the ideal by saying, “Oh I’m not close. To reach the goal I have to lose thirty pounds”. Helen said she did not feel happy with her body the way it currently looked due to menopausal changes, and said, “I keep thinking to myself that if I could lose the, the fat around the middle then I would be happy, but maybe not, there’s always something”. Laura, who had been very fit in her twenties, stated, “I’m pretty happy I mean it could always be better”, and “I think it’s one of those things with women...no matter how you look at yourself, there’s always gonna be something that you see wrong with yourself”. It was clear that the participants were aware of the ideal,

and even if they initially claimed to be happy with their bodies, they also still wanted to make changes to their bodies, or still compared themselves to others who did represent the ideal. Even Nancy, who played both football and rugby and claimed to have a very positive body image, said, “I do recognize there are some things I could change”. It is a sad commentary on our society that women cannot feel comfortable in their own bodies because of the constant pressure felt to discipline themselves to look more normatively attractive. Markula and Pringle (2006) noted, “it has been estimated that only about 5 per cent of women are born with the right genes for the contemporary slim ideal” (p. 83). Despite this, many women continue to pressure themselves to develop the normative body.

The older participants were certainly aware of the normative female body, and described the ideal using many of the same terms and frames of reference as did the younger women. Of great concern to some of the older women were the changes in their bodies as a result of menopause. With the exception of Carrie, a 58 year old who did not appear to feel the same kind of pressure as the others, all of the older women felt a similar duress to resemble the norm. Carrie claimed she felt great about her body, and even though she knew her body did not resemble those in the media, it did not bother her. In fact, she said, “you get to this age and it’s like, I don’t care”. For the other women, however, comparisons were still being made between their bodies and others, whether peers or media images. There did not appear to be much difference between younger and older participants in terms of awareness of or the desire to have an ideal body, and to better match the norm. I further noted that the older women continued to compare themselves to the normative *young* female body. In fact, Helen frequently compared her

current body to her own body when she was twelve. The older women did not compare themselves to other women of a similar age, but still referred to the young, fit, female as the basis for comparison. Prior to the interviews I thought perhaps women in different age groups might compare themselves to women in those same age groups who exhibit feminine bodies, particularly as there are many older women regularly seen in media who do have bodies that I envy. This did not appear to be the case for the women with whom I spoke. Given that discourses of normative femininity refer to a young body, however, it was not surprising to hear that the older women still compared their bodies to the young ideal.

With regard to the normative female body, Deliovsky (2010) wrote that “...women recognized the “absurdity” of the images. This recognition, however, did not stop the women from emulating them” (p. 104). Interestingly, this was true in my study as well, as many of the women understood that the standards often used to measure a woman’s success at representing normative femininity are actually unrealistic. For example, Robin, a 50 year old woman, stated, “I don’t like the public image or the expectations, they’re false, they’re misleading and they’re dangerous”. Kim, now 22 years old, said she was aware of the influence of media, and fought the ideal image when she was a girl. But in fact for most of the women, knowing that the ideal female body image was unattainable did not mitigate the desire to exhibit that shape. Helen, the oldest participant in this study, blamed the media for the emphasis on women’s bodies: “I’m totally convinced that’s where all our ideas come from, and we’re all so brainwashed...just like we’re brainwashed girls have to wear pink and play with dolls, and it’s the same thing I think. And even knowing that I can’t get past it”. Jill, who

believed that her mother was a very strong role model for her, noted that the images we see of women tell us “what we should look like, and I mean aside from body type, what your hair should look like, what colour your hair should be, what you should wear”. She believed we respond differently to women who do not follow the accepted rules of behaviour. Deliovsky (2010) further noted that women recognize that the normative female body is not real, but despite feeling “real” women still feel lacking in comparison to “virtual images of femininity” (p. 107). This demonstrates the power of discourse – we may be aware of the constructed nature of the ideal, but cannot stop ourselves from aspiring to it. We do this because of rewards and punishments. We are rewarded by being accepted as a female and as “normal” if we perform our gender correctly according to discourse, and emulate established norms through our behaviour. When we perform incorrectly, whether it is being overweight, too muscular, too tall, too short, small-breasted, or otherwise masculine, we are punished. We may be punished by experts who want to convince us that we will be happier if we are more “normal”, by peers who give us advice on diet or exercise, and even by ourselves, by chastising ourselves for eating the wrong foods, skipping a workout, and/or being born with the “wrong genes” that make us endomorphs instead of ectomorphs. In fact, women frequently punish themselves for perceived transgressions. For example, although I want to not care about my weight and my body shape, I cannot avoid it. I work toward that goal, and chastise myself for not reaching it. Cynthia, who was working with a trainer to ensure she passed the firefighter’s fitness test, confessed twice that she felt unfit if she took a couple of days off from working out, referring to it as “slacking off”. Grace, despite losing a tremendous amount of weight, recounted that she would look in the mirror and tell

herself was not close to the ideal. Similarly, Laura, who enjoyed tough workouts, often admitted that she needed to work harder to try to develop the ideal body. I will elaborate on the effects of external and internal discipline further in Chapter 4.

However, this is not to say that discourses of femininity are always negative or constraining. There is room to manoeuvre through, or resist discourse, in ways that make sense to us. Resistance can be interpreted in many ways. For this project, as discussed in Chapter 1, resistance refers to defying, ignoring, or otherwise not subscribing to dominant discourse. One of the main tenets of Foucaultian theorization about resistance is that we must first recognize that the ideal is a social construction. Once we see the contradictions or gaps between the ideal and what is actually attainable for each of us, we recognize the constructed nature of knowledge. That is, a woman must first recognize that the ideal is a social construction. She must then realize she cannot attain the ideal for some reason. Once this contradiction is revealed, space for resistance appears. Lupton (1995) stated “resistance thus includes ways of contesting or non-conforming to a set of established dictums at the site of everyday life” (p. 133). Resistance is generally visible in people’s actions. Women can consciously choose to ignore discourses, as I do when I lift heavy weights, or as Kim did when she was wrestling. However, resistance can also be less conscious, although still visible in practice. For example, Carrie, despite being a regular exerciser, hated exercise classes, particularly step classes. She claimed to be too uncoordinated to be successful in these types of classes. Despite the fact that fitness classes are considered to be the almost exclusive domain of female exercisers, Carrie eschewed them. Although women are often expected to take and enjoy fitness classes,

Carrie went against the grain and avoided them, simply because she did not enjoy them as much as using fitness equipment in the gym.

With regard to discourses of femininity, the women did not simply follow prescribed ideals for the female body without thinking about them. Most of the women were aware that the expectations for females were socially constructed, and often not achievable goals. Although their interest in exercise and exercise choices often revolved around developing a more normative form, the women's behaviour occasionally demonstrated some resistance to these discursive constructions. For example, Carrie said she was well aware that her body did not resemble those seen in magazines but she did not care. First and foremost she wanted to be happy with her body through her exercise choices. Despite being aware of the normative female form, she was less concerned about reaching *the* ideal than reaching *her* ideal. While her ideal was no doubt influenced by discourses of femininity, she was not focused solely on replicating the normative female form in terms of being very slim, she was working toward a body that was functional for her needs. Sandra, who had exercised regularly since she was a child, commented that attempting to achieve a particular appearance through exercise is not good because "not everyone's capable of looking certain ways". She noted that females are all built differently, and it is not realistic to expect that every woman's body can become the norm. Cathy, who focused on core strength after a back injury, commented that she was a tomboy growing up, and that she was not concerned with "looking like a girly-girl". She even used the term "butch", and did not mind if people thought of her that way. She preferred to be strong and fit, capable of going to her family's farm and "chucking hay bales". Like Carrie, Robin had long given up trying to meet others'

expectations for her appearance, and was striving to be happy with her body the way it was. Kim claimed that she had always been aware of the influences of media, and fought the ideal body image as a girl. She further claimed that “fashion has destroyed femininity in a twisted way”, and tried to avoid being influenced by images in magazines and other media. These women were exhibiting some resistance to discourses of femininity through their behaviours.

Additionally, the women were not going to the gym and exercising strictly to reshape their bodies. Many of the women spoke of the social benefits of exercise as well. Again, this demonstrated that the women were not exercising to mindlessly replicate discursive body ideals, but that they were choosing to exercise for multiple reasons. For example, several of the interviewees exercised with friends and family members, which they enjoyed. They received social pleasure from these interactions. Nicole, who was a regular runner, stated that the “social part of it is very important to me”. She had become friends with many people she met through their shared enjoyment of exercise, and stated she had “an affinity” with other active people. Cathy liked her dance classes because of the social interaction and fun factor. Again, the women were not simply following prescribed behaviours. They were making conscious choices about what they enjoyed. This also demonstrated the difficulties that women who exercise can face in terms of managing multiple subjectivities and expectations. The women knew what they “should” look like, and made attempts to better reflect that through exercise, but also had to juggle what they wanted and enjoyed with regard to exercise. The women were not just exercisers; they were friends, partners, employees, hikers, and more. It was not simply a

matter of following – choices had to be made based on the end result each individual hoped to achieve through exercise.

Resistance to discourses can disrupt accepted norms. Over time, as people observe resistance to dominant discourse, what is considered “normal” can change. Butler (1998) wrote that resistance to dominant discourse can actually transform discourse. She further reported that women being involved in fitness can alter norms “through a spectacular public restaging”, and that “challenges to the norm ... effectively unsettle the rigidity of gendered expectations and broaden the scope of acceptable gender performance” (Butler, 1998, p. 108). What this meant for the women with whom I spoke is that, each time one of the women chose to do something outside accepted norms, such as exercise in the free weight area, reject step classes, develop and be comfortable with muscularity, or simply lift heavy weights, these actions affected the way observers reacted to them. Thus resistance can affect the women exhibiting the resistant behaviour, but it can also affect those observing the resistance to dominant discourse. This can lead to questioning the “normal”, to feelings of “liberation” from discursively constructed rules for behaviour, to the transformation of discursively constructed norms, and finally to an allowance of a wider definition of what is acceptably feminine, for example.

### **Fitness**

Exercise held numerous benefits for these women, and the women had many reasons for choosing to exercise. All mentioned psychological benefits along with physiological. Stress relief and a way to “blow off steam” were regularly mentioned as reasons for exercising. One participant found she was able to reduce other more physically and emotionally harmful compulsive behaviours by undertaking regular

exercise. Each of the participants chose to exercise for aesthetic reasons as well as health reasons, although this was not directly stated by all of the women. All hoped to attain a specific goal with regard to how their bodies looked as a result of the exercises in which they chose to engage.

Some participants indicated that they often chose to do more “acceptably” female cardiovascular exercises such as running, or using equipment like step or elliptical machines. Carrie, who walked to work every day, chose to do more cardio than weights because she felt she “got a bigger bang for her buck” in terms of the effects cardiovascular exercise had on her body. Cathy liked jogging because “it really tones your midsection and your legs”. However, most of the women did both cardiovascular exercise and strength training. The women were aware of current research that indicates combining both types of exercise assists in creating the ideal, toned body, and undertook both types of exercise in order to develop a more feminine form. For example, Helen, a regular runner, liked running because “it uses a lot of calories”, but also did weights for the “firmness” produced. Laura described her strength training routine like this: “every exercise I do I feel I’ve made a step towards helping that muscle and tightening and toning it and actually making me feel more feminine”. Most of the women regularly combined cardio and strength training in single workouts specifically for weight loss and toning, in order to reflect the normative female form.

However, the majority of women were careful to avoid lifting heavy weights in order to prevent the development of large muscles. This is illustrative of Bell’s (2008) suggestion that large musculature in women is seen as unfeminine, and thus is to be avoided. Because women are socially conditioned to be concerned with attracting males

through their femininity, women may choose to avoid creating a body type that will be seen as less feminine. Laura, who enjoyed various forms of media related to exercise, referred to the fitness models in *Oxygen* magazine, saying, “they’re toned and have muscle definition”, but “they don’t look too muscular”. Cynthia had been worried about bulking up too much prior to getting married. She stated, “sometimes if I work out really heavy I’ll get like football player shoulders” and “I like to be strong, but don’t want to look like a man”. Despite working out regularly and enjoying strength training, Cynthia believed that “a girl can be gross ripped” if she did too much heavy weight lifting. Janet was concerned about doing some exercises with weights because she did not want to be “one of those little macho women weight builders”. Cathy, who was naturally tall and thin, hoped to be “toned, like a little bit of definition, not like excessive”. When referring to a colleague who was a power lifter, Nicole said, “I did not like her look at all, it was way, way too masculine”.

Almost every woman used the word “toned” in their descriptions of the ideal female body, to describe what they would like their bodies to look like, and to indicate what they hoped undertaking certain exercises would do for their bodies. Tiggemann and Williamson (2000), Prichard and Tiggemann (2008), and Grogan, Evans, White, and Hunter (2004) all found in their studies that women frequently exercised for the toning of their bodies that results. Helen’s take on the bodies she saw in the gym was: “There are a lot of people there who, are obviously fit, but um they look a bit, soft”. Robin used weights and balls for toning, saying that she wanted to be toned but not muscular. Janet, a 20 year old participant, used the word toned multiple times to describe how she wanted her body to look as a result of exercising. For her toned meant that she could see the

outline of her muscles but they were “not necessarily overly defined”. Cynthia commented, “obviously I’m a girl and I would love to, tone up in some places”. The concept of toned related quite strongly to discourses of femininity and fitness, to the extent that the two things may have been inseparable for these women. That is, a woman cannot be feminine without becoming acceptably toned through fitness activities. This relates to healthism also, as a woman must exhibit a normatively toned body to be considered healthy. Robin, who had always been active, wanted exercise to help her maintain “a healthy level of fitness, to be toned, to remain healthy”. With regard to muscle development through exercise, one participant claimed, “I don’t do heavy weights”. Both Markula (1995) and D’Abundo (2009) wrote that women are encouraged to undertake exercise that will prevent excess muscularity and will encourage a slender, toned body. Nancy, who was involved in some traditionally masculine sports, said she weight lifts because she liked to see the tone and definition in her muscles, but still did cardio because “I know it helps to slim down”. Jill, who undertook many types of exercise, said she likes muscles, but “I don’t want to get – giant” using the term “big beefy bodybuilder” to describe women who are more muscular. If she felt she was becoming more muscular than toned, Sandra changed her work-out routine: “If I notice I’m getting a little bulky then I’ll just decrease my weights a bit”.

As positive as “toned” was for most of the women with whom I spoke, equally negative was “jiggly”. Several women used jiggly to describe what they did not want to be, or were and wanted to change. They wanted to move from jiggly to toned. Sandra, who was the youngest participant at 18 years old, wanted to be “more toned, I don’t wanna be jiggly”, so she picked certain muscle groups to work when exercising. It was

interesting to note that the same descriptive terms of toned and jiggly were used by most of the women. Clearly these are well known and accepted terms, given that all of the women used at least one to describe the female body. This reflects dominant discourses of femininity and fitness, which currently indicate that the ideal body must be toned but not muscular, and in no way jiggly. Jiggly is definitely to be avoided, through exercise, special creams, diet, or even surgery. Neither toned nor jiggly can be affected without significant effort. Women are expected to accept responsibility to undertake whatever type of discipline is required to increase tone and reduce jiggliness in their bodies.

Women are also expected to exercise in specific ways, according to discourse of fitness and femininity. Despite that, Nancy and Kim chose to engage in exercise far outside the norm for women, but were affected by their involvement in these sports in slightly different ways. Kim was a wrestler, and even travelled to another country to wrestle at an amateur level. However, despite being involved in a traditionally masculine sport, she still referred to discourses of femininity when speaking about female bodies. She was regularly weighed and measured, and even engaged in weight cutting, to ensure she was meeting the criteria for her weight category. She claimed she did not find this to be a negative experience. However, she did discuss Christine Nordhagen, a female wrestler she admired, describing her as being an exceptionally strong wrestler, but followed that description by saying “if you saw her in a dress you would not think she was a wrestler”. Like women’s bodybuilding, female wrestlers are still judging themselves and other female wrestlers by androcentric standards. It was interesting, but not surprising, to hear a woman who had chosen to engage in a stereotypically masculine sport such as wrestling discuss the fact that she was still concerned about having a

feminine body, and was concerned about being thought of as masculine due to her involvement in this masculine sport. Her idol was a female who was not only successful at wrestling but at representing femininity at the same time. Broad (2001) referred to this as the female apologetic in sport, which is the pressure athletic women, particularly those involved in traditionally male dominated sport, feel to “‘apologize’ for their sport participation through traditional expressions of femininity and heterosexuality” (p. 183). Discourses of femininity and fitness indicate that a woman should engage in acceptably feminine behaviours in order to counter any assumptions made about that woman as a result of her involvement in sport and fitness. The female apologetic is a response to heteronormativity and compulsory heterosexuality, and the three function together to encourage each woman to emphasize her femininity, and eschew any hint of masculinisation.

As with femininity, however, resistance to discourses of fitness was occasionally visible through the choices made by some of the women with whom I spoke. Nancy, currently 24 years old, played football on her high school’s male football team and also played on a women’s rugby team while in university. She played football for several years, and rugby until experiencing a knee injury. Like Kim, she resisted discourses of fitness and femininity that would rule out women’s participation in those sports. She was well aware that it was highly unusual for a female to be playing football with males, but was able to resist dominant discourse that indicates this is unacceptable and played both sports successfully. Unlike Kim though, Nancy remained determined to resist dominant discourses of femininity and fitness despite no longer being engaged in these traditionally masculine sports. She said, “I exercise because I love being a woman, but I

hate being weaker than men”. She was aware that as a woman she should be the weaker sex, but she still chose to exercise in ways to make her stronger and capable of competing with males. Being as strong or stronger than some males in the gym was satisfying for Nancy, and she often chose to exercise in ways to develop muscles and strength.

Like Nancy, Cynthia, who had been a downhill ski racer and was used to training regularly, noted that she had no problem exercising outside the norm for women. She did not mind being in the “boys’ area” (the free weight area where males tend to congregate), because she felt strong and capable. The males in the gym did not intimidate her, nor was she ashamed of her muscularity and resultant strength. She said, “I like squatting more than guys do, it makes me feel good”. Although she was aware that, according to discursively constructed norms, she should not want to - or be able to – be in the boys’ area lifting weights, she was happy and excited to be capable of this. She was not overly concerned that her femininity or sexuality would be called into question as a result of her strength. With regard to lifting heavier weights, Laura’s concern was not so much about developing muscularity as it was about retaining proper technique. She wanted to be certain that she was able to do the exercises without risk of injury, and to maximum effect in terms of strengthening muscles. Grace, who enjoyed multiple types of exercise, was also less concerned about developing muscularity. She felt she was naturally muscular and was currently attempting to develop this muscularity to the extent that her body would allow. With regard to muscularity she said, “I have no problem with that”.

Many of the women also indicated that they chose to exercise because they enjoyed it. While they recognized the health, fitness, and appearance benefits of

exercising, most of the women genuinely enjoyed physical activity. Karen, a 20 year old certified lifeguard, swam because “I love being in the water”. Nicole liked many forms of fitness activities and noted that exercise was an activity she enjoyed for many reasons. Jill stated that while she was aware of the many benefits of exercise, “I don’t do it specifically for health reasons, I actually enjoy it”. Helen liked the psychological benefits of exercise and said something similar, stating “enjoyment is part of it too you know, I really like doing it”. The women were not exercising only because the society in which they live indicated that they should, but because they received enjoyment from the activities they undertook. All of them said that they wanted to be able to do the things they enjoy doing, and that being physically fit assisted with this. For example, being fit and strong allowed the women to go hiking, to take cycling holidays, to work on their farms, to be safe at work, to play sports, and do other activities that they enjoy. Exercise was a means to an end for the women with whom I spoke. While developing a more normative shape and being healthy were desired benefits of exercising, those were not their only reasons for exercising. The women also wanted to be able to do all the physical activities they enjoyed, and being fit and strong through exercise allowed them to do this and, they hoped, would allow them to be able to continue these activities even as they aged.

### **Healthism**

Eichberg (2009) stated, “fitness discourses tend to present the question of health as a question of aesthetic appearance” (p. 177). Lupton (1995) claimed that “the pursuit of good health has become an end in itself rather than a means to an end”, and that “poor health itself is a ‘distasteful’ state” (p. 70). Discourses of healthism suggest that we must

assume personal responsibility for our health, and that we must have the ideal body in order to be considered healthy. What must be remembered is that the ideal is not actually attainable for most women, but we are still drawn to it as a result of the influence and conflation of discourses of femininity, fitness, healthism, and consumerism. An influential part of the discourse of healthism is the notion that it is important to *look* healthy, whether or not one is in fact healthy. Interestingly, this works in opposite ways. That is, a woman can be quite slim or even thin, which equates to being healthy, when in fact she is far too thin and is not fit or strong. Some women may be slim but not be in good cardiovascular health. Conversely, as in my case when I was exercising more regularly, a woman can be larger than is considered acceptable and in very good health, but be seen as unhealthy because her body is not normatively slim.

The women I interviewed did appear to be affected by discourses of healthism, and in multiple ways. Several women commented on wanting to avoid medication and treatments for disease. Even the youngest participants were concerned about remaining healthy as they aged. There was a clear understanding that it was each person's responsibility to maintain good health throughout her life. Corresponding with discourses of healthism, the younger women certainly felt pressure to exercise now in order to prevent illness and avoid the need for health care intervention and medication later. The middle aged and older women also felt similar pressure to maintain or improve their good health status as they got older. Sandra, through her studies in exercise science, noted that she has seen people where "it decreases the quality of their life if they're not fit" as they age. Roy (2008) wrote that women's magazines often warn of the dire consequences that may result from ignoring personal responsibility for one's health.

Examples of possible negative penalties resulting from refusing to change one's behaviour to attain better health included chronic disease, ill health, ostracization from one's loved ones, and even death. This sort of fear mongering can increase a woman's desire to accept personal responsibility for her health according to dominant discourses of healthism.

A number of women commented that being healthy was important due to family genetics. Several had family members with chronic health issues they wanted to avoid. Laura said, "I always knew I should get in shape because there's family health issues". Jill, who started exercising regularly in her twenties, was aware that "we have family histories of diabetes and heart attack", so she exercised to prevent the development of these health concerns. Others referred to using fitness for the prevention of health issues resulting from aging. The prevention of osteoporosis was regularly mentioned. Avoidance of medication was also important, with Laura saying exercising and eating right was important "just so I don't have to be on medications". Helen, a 67 year old woman, did not want to be like older people she knew who were "taking 10 or 12 pills a day". Most of the women were concerned about being healthy as they aged, as Carrie stated: "you see other people like my age or older and they've got this wrong and that wrong". She used exercise to attempt to prevent this from happening to her. Nancy, who was only 25 years old, said she exercised now in an effort to minimize health risks later in life. She claimed that being healthy now would "definitely ease some of these pains in the future". Nicole admired some older women she saw working out in the gym, and wanted "to be healthy, right through into old age". Diabetes was mentioned as a specific risk as a result of not exercising regularly, even when young. High cholesterol was also

mentioned as a condition that should be avoided through regular exercise and healthy eating, and was thought to be a personal responsibility to avoid because of the possible long-term health implications. Women are expected to know what diseases they are susceptible to, and make lifestyle changes to prevent disease. For example, Cynthia felt she could be more healthier and thus more normative if only “I could commit myself a little bit more”. Janet felt that she needed more “self control when it comes to eating”. Further, she commented that, “if you don’t work out, and you don’t keep care of yourself, you could end up...having serious health conditions”. Jill remarked that heart disease is a major killer of women, and that it is not a man’s disease anymore although “so many women think it is”. The women with whom I spoke appeared to accept the responsibility to attempt to prevent illness through their fitness choices.

It should be noted that in addition to attempting to prevent illness, the women actually did experience health benefits as a result of exercise. Grace, who had experienced depression issues, felt that exercising had a positive influence on her mental state. Brooke had a similar experience. Having dealt with some self-destructive behaviours, she used exercise to divert her attention from those behaviours. All of the women used exercise as a form of stress relief. Each woman commented that exercising, regardless of the type of exercise undertaken, significantly improved her emotional and psychological well-being. When it came to discourses of personal responsibility for one’s health, the women were not taking up discourses of healthism without thought. Many saw concrete health benefits from exercising, in addition to the benefits experts claim we will see from exercise, such as lowered risk of diabetes, blood pressure, high cholesterol, and so on.

Along with the pressure felt to assume personal responsibility for one's health, a key danger of healthism is the judgement of others based on these criteria. That is, once a woman accepts discourses of healthism and begins to monitor and discipline herself so that her body resembles the norm and *looks* healthy, she may then judge others who do not exhibit this normative form, possibly harshly. She may believe that someone whose appearance does not reflect acceptance of personal responsibility for health is lazy or undisciplined. This can be seen in the comment one of the women made about having an aversion to fat. When I asked Helen why remaining slim is important to her, she said "I equate it with health", demonstrating that discourses of healthism indicate *looking* healthy becomes equated with actually being healthy. A woman who takes on discourses of healthism, and therefore sees health as a personal responsibility, will then use the criteria she and/or others once used to judge her body to judge others as to whether or not they are healthy - and thus responsible citizens - based on their appearance. Sandra claimed that although she loved exercising, "there is health purposes for exercising and everything but there's also the aesthetic reasons, everyone wants to look good". Kim said that healthy means being slender. Robin considered a healthy body to be a toned body. Linking the discourses of femininity, fitness, and healthism is ideal body image. In order to be considered healthy, a woman must be slim, toned, and fit. Women are not considered to be healthy if they do not *appear* healthy. Health is judged by one's appearance. If a woman is not normatively slim, she has not accepted responsibility for her own health.

As with femininity and fitness, punishment may occur for not appearing healthy. For example, doctors and other health experts may express concern about this. Media

reiterates healthism discourses, documenting the need to accept responsibility for one's own health. Women are bombarded with magazine and newspaper articles about the benefits of exercise, of avoiding fat around the middle, of reducing risks of heart disease, diabetes, and other ailments resulting from a lack of exercise and proper diet. This is an interesting conundrum for many women, myself included. Work on the body must be done constantly to ensure that the appropriate level of health, fitness, and femininity is reached. Even when I was extremely fit, I did not "look" healthy when using the definition of health in discourses of healthism because I was still too heavy and too muscular. Through fitness testing, my cardiovascular health and muscular strength "proved" that I was indeed very, very healthy, but because I was not normatively slim and toned many thought I was not as healthy as I could be. My body was often judged using discourses of healthism, with doctors, and even complete strangers, commenting on the size of my legs, for example. My larger than normal body was being judged as unhealthy or inappropriately big based on the idea that thin equates to healthy.

Discourses of healthism function through experts like doctors or health professionals. Lupton (1995) noted that these professionals develop, through research and study, theories as to what is healthy, and what we should undertake or avoid in order to develop and maintain good health. The author stated that health experts encourage us to believe that we are capable of managing ourselves to develop "socially desirable goals" (Lupton, 1995, p. 10). Experts can appear in many milieux, from grade schools to media. For example, I was fascinated to hear Kate used a formula for calculating a healthy weight. In middle school her physical education instructors taught her that she should multiply her height in centimetres by .9 to determine her ideal weight in pounds.

Any more or less than this sum indicated that she was not at a weight appropriate for her height. She remembered this formula and still used it to determine how far she was from achieving her ideal.

However, the women I interviewed referred most frequently to magazines and fitness professionals as the experts they consulted for definitions of health and how to achieve it, and often used terms like Body Mass Index (BMI) in their descriptions of the ideal body. What is interesting here is that the women were drawing on scientific or medical discourses without necessarily having a complete understanding of them. Women may know what number is desirable according to discourses of fitness, femininity, and healthism, especially with regard to BMI, but not know what the number means, what it measures, or what assumptions are made or weaknesses exposed as a result of being a particular BMI. However, BMI and appearance became conflated. This demonstrates the effects of discourses of fitness and healthism as well. Women are required to know what a healthy BMI is, and their bodies must reflect this, whether or not the women truly understand the “science” behind the measurements. Smith Maguire (2008) claimed that these types of measurements allow women to have information about their bodies formerly the domain of only fitness or medical experts; that these measurements require self-monitoring and self-discipline; and finally that these markers are often used as motivational tools as well. The author (2008) further noted that measurements such as BMI are basic standards that do not take into account variations in body shape or fat distribution. Also interesting is that magazines and other forms of media, and sometimes fitness professionals, became the experts to whom the women referred for health information and advice. Some of the women mentioned certain groups

as being “experts” when it comes to discourses of health and fitness. Canada’s Food Guide was mentioned as a guide to healthy eating, as were health and fitness magazines like *Oxygen*, *Women’s Health*, and *Shape*. These publications were also referred to for information on how to exercise to lose weight and tone up. Roy (2008) noted that many of these magazines for women depend on the construction of a “moral imperative” (p. 436) to entice women to accept and internalize discourses of healthism, because magazines and their advertisers both depend on paying customers to support their businesses – basically we exhibit personal responsibility for our health through consumption patterns. Links between healthism and consumerism will be discussed further in the upcoming section. While experts such as health, medical, and fitness professionals develop the science on which these discourses are based, because the information is most readily accessible through media such as magazines, it is the people writing in the magazines who become the de facto experts. Despite not necessarily having an educational background in a medical or fitness field, merely reporting on health and fitness issues positions the writers as experts who can give advice, creating in women the need to discipline themselves using discursive practices suggested by these “experts” to demonstrate acceptance of the ideal. The magazines were also regularly referred to as providing examples of the type of body women should aim to (re)produce.

Fitness professionals were also considered to be experts. Robin, who consulted a trainer when first attending her gym, referred to those working in gyms to as “trained professionals”, and she followed the exercise plan set for her by a personal trainer quite closely. Other women also sought advice from fitness professionals and used the programs set by their trainers when exercising. Discourses of both fitness and healthism

posit that one must consult professional experts for advice and guidance on exercising and healthy living, and the majority of women with whom I spoke believed that it was appropriate for them to seek this guidance and input, whether it be from experts in magazines, in gyms, or occasionally even public/government health institutions. Experts must be consulted in order to learn what is appropriate and inappropriate in terms of one's appearance, and to learn how to exercise in ways to sculpt one's body into normativity.

Thus there is an intimate relationship between discourses of femininity, fitness, and healthism. It can be difficult for women to negotiate these discourses and resultant subjectivities. For me, I chose to ignore the pressure to sculpt a more female body through a different form of exercise. I knew that by doing so I was affecting how people would see me in terms of femininity – being less feminine because I was not slim; in terms of fitness – choosing heavy weight lifting and cycling over strictly aerobic exercise; and in terms of healthism – knowing that I would be judged as being less healthy, and thus less responsible, because I was not slim and toned. Many of the women with whom I spoke had experienced, feared experiencing, or had judged others based on similar criteria.

### **Consumerism**

Consumerism, in terms of exercise choices, relates to spending money on items like clothing, shoes, gym memberships, personal training, and other fitness related products and services. It also refers to the pressure to “buy” a better body. This better body can be purchased through surgery to reshape the body, through exercise to mould the body into a specific shape, and even with clothing, through buying articles that

flatter, and in some cases, control tummies, hips, and thighs. Even pregnant women are being encouraged to disguise their pregnancies (read as weight gain) and enhance their feminine shape by wearing maternity Spanx (Onstad, 2011). Smith Maguire (2008) posited that “compulsory self-production has been harnessed as the engine of consumer industries and the framework for everyday lives” (p. 19). That is, discourses of consumerism provide us with certain socially constructed choices from which we must choose those that make sense for us individuals, and as fitness participants. A study by the Canadian Fitness and Lifestyle Research Institute (CFLRI) indicated that, in 2006, the average Canadian adult spent approximately \$1400 on “sports expenditures” which include equipment, memberships, clothing, and more. Eichberg (2009) reported that “the fitness media are the central instrument in promoting an individualised user-image: “Do it yourself – choose yourself – be yourself by consuming” (p. 176). The message is that, as individuals we can make choices of what to purchase, but to construct oneself as a fit consumer and be recognized as a fit consumer one must first consume “appropriate” fitness products and services. Key here is the conflation of discourses of fitness, femininity, and health with consumerism. In order to accept personal responsibility for her health, and as a result her appearance, a woman must consume. In our western, consumption based society, we exhibit responsibility and morality through consuming. That is, until we purchase the products and services required to develop and maintain the ideal body, we have not fully accepted responsibility for our health and appearance. In essence, what a woman must be able to say is “I am a better and more responsible citizen because I purchase a gym membership”, for example. Here we can see how discourses of fitness, healthism, and femininity become linked with consumerism.

Consumer culture is based on the manufacture of need. In order to sell more products and services, manufacturers must constantly convince consumers that we *need* to buy these things. In order to be a better person, we must invest in ourselves. Phillips (2005) speculated that “consumption offers mirroring exercisers hope” (p. 535), meaning that by purchasing the right products they have some hope of producing the ideal body. When asked why she spends money on products and services related to exercise, Laura explained that it “helps me feel better, and it helps my body”. All of the women paid to attend a gym, although for the University students, this fee is included in their tuition. Some women have paid for personal training assistance. Others bought or subscribed to fitness magazines, and all purchased workout specific clothing or footwear. In this way discourses of consumerism are linked with discourses of healthism. We must buy our way to good health. We must purchase products and services to improve our body shape. Robin felt the ideal female body is “a marketable concept”. Consumerism is similar to healthism as there is an aspect of personal responsibility attached. As we are responsible for our own health, and as there are many products and services we can buy to improve our health, we often succumb to the pressure to consume these products. Cynthia spent money on products and services related to exercise because “it’s all gonna help me go faster, be stronger, and be better overall”.

However, in speaking with these women, it surprised me that the majority were not concerned about purchasing or wearing name brand clothing. While most said they wore clothes designed for exercising and that fit well, the clothing was not necessarily from recognizable brand names. Robin did not spend much on fitness clothing, and stated, “I’m not into the trendy gym clothing”. For example, I had expected to hear about

women choosing Lululemon, Nike, or other recognizable names, but few of the women expressed a desire to buy brand specific clothing. Laura had a preference for One Tooth clothing, but was the only woman to name a specific brand. Most were concerned with wearing clothes appropriate for fitness activities, with wicking and heat management properties, for example. These women were more concerned with practicality than fashion or projecting a particular image through brands, and did not claim to be spending significant amounts of money on clothing for the gym.

The manufacture of need is seen here though, even if not in terms of brand name clothing, in that women who exercised regularly were encouraged to purchase workout specific clothing. Clothing companies convince us that we must have wicking t-shirts, clothing with silver incorporated in it to prevent odours, technical clothing that compresses muscles in specific ways, and more. Do we really need this technical gear to work out? The answer is probably not. No doubt we could do our cardiovascular exercise or strength training in plain cotton tops and shorts, but we become convinced that this specialty clothing will make us better, faster, cooler, and less smelly. This need is manufactured and sold to us by the companies producing the workout gear, and through advertising we are convinced to purchase it in order to increase our chances of success at reshaping our bodies into a more acceptable shape, so we can be recognized as responsible consumers of health and fitness.

There is also a relationship between consumption and knowledge, and this relationship can be read in specific ways. That is, the women had to have knowledge about the products available to them, and had to understand how the various features would impact their performance. Informed decisions were then made about which of the

technical products was most appropriate for that woman's desired goals. As a result, the wearer/user of certain fitness related products demonstrated a particular level of fitness knowledge that placed her either above or below those observing her, depending upon the product chosen. Despite not purchasing specific brand names and instead choosing clothes or shoes based on their technical features, the women sent messages about their knowledge level through their purchase and use of these items, whether intentional or not. Thus there was a relationship between discourses of consumerism and knowledge that also allowed the women to be viewed as responsible - and discerning - consumers.

Women who exercise in gyms may feel pressure to purchase certain types of clothing in order to "fit in" at – and outside – the gym. This demonstrates the connection between knowledge and consumption. If the majority of exercisers are wearing technical clothing, regardless of the specific brand, other women in the gym may want to emulate the look and so make purchases based on what is currently popular or trendy in their fitness facility. This kind of pressure can certainly affect the purchases made by female exercisers. Similarly, the type of clothing being purchased can be influenced by what is considered stylish outside the fitness centre. For example, wearing yoga pants and technical tops and hoodies as everyday wear has become acceptable. Laura stated, "I love yoga wear", and she regularly wore it outside the gym. She also spent considerable time looking at and shopping for fitness clothing. Grace had a similar comment about this. She wanted to have functionality in the clothes purchased for wear while exercising, but fashion clearly influenced her choices as well. She said, "I find myself wearing fitness clothes outside the gym because it's a motivating factor out here too. You work hard to try and fit into such nice clothes". Grace commented further that she was influenced "by

the way they market things”. She was fully aware of the power discourses of consumerism can have, and her spending had been influenced by this power.

In terms of expenses related to fitness, shoes were one that all of the women considered essential, not for fashion reasons, but for health reasons. Shoes appropriate to the type of exercise being done were considered a requirement, not an indulgence. As with clothing, the brand name of the shoe did not matter for most women, but the fit and function did. Like clothing, women may feel pressure to purchase certain types of shoes based on marketing campaigns indicating the features of the shoe. For example, Karen, who played both indoor and outdoor Ultimate Frisbee, said she spent money on cleats to be better able to play both, and I purchase clipless cycling shoes to improve my cadence and power when on the bike. There are actual technical features that are relevant to specific activities. What happens with consumerism is that so many features are designed in order to increase consumption that we cannot possibly need all of the features being offered. However, advertising convinces us that we do need them, whether or not these features are actually relevant to our interests or skill level. We buy these shoes although there may be little discernible advantage gained through wearing them. In fact, we may purchase multiple pairs of shoes for use in different activities although one pair would likely suffice in most instances. Another way to think of this phenomenon is belief in the need versus need. Through advertising campaigns and expert testimony we become convinced that products designed for specific uses will improve our performance or our enjoyment of our fitness activities, and we buy them because we *believe* we need them – features become needs as a result of marketing campaigns.

For example, Janet bought the Shape-Up shoes that are all the rage at the moment. According to the marketing information, these shoes are designed to help: “burn more calories, reduce joint and back stress, tone muscles, and protect against slippery surfaces” (The original for work, 2011). The website further states wearing these shoes “may result in stronger buttock, leg, back and abdominal muscles”. Janet wore them at work in order to improve her figure as she went about her daily job functions. This is an example of how discourses of consumerism - the manufacture of need - have directly affected at least one of the exercisers with whom I spoke. The desire to sculpt an ideal body is so strong that women purchase products that will assist them to develop this body without any specific bodywork required – the shoe will do the work for you as you wear them. Interestingly, a class-action lawsuit has been launched in California against Skechers (*Morga v. Skechers U.S.A, Inc.*, 2010). The lawsuit alleges that the claims of health benefits and improvements that can be achieved by wearing these shoes are actually false, and that the shoes do not provide the advantages claimed by Skechers. New Balance has also recently had a class-action suit launched against it, asserting that the company also made false claims about the efficacy of the shoes (Keiper, 2011). It will be interesting to watch these suits make their way through the courts. Will these lawsuits have any impact on belief in the need versus need, as consumers see that advertised features may not have the desired effect?

However, women who exercise are not simply mindless consumers. Smith Maguire (2008) noted the tensions that exist for consumers of fitness as they try to navigate the many and varying choices offered to them by our consumer culture. She wrote:

Participation in the fitness field is bound up with producing subjectivities that are fit to consume, in that they locate the production of meaning, producing bodies that are fit to be consumed by others as visual representations of an individual's identity, social position, and subjectivity (p. 192)

Women who exercise can choose between multiple options for fitness, and can even choose to not engage in fitness, although they risk greater punishment for the latter choice. Most of the women with whom I spoke made conscious and informed choices about what they spent their money on and why. Sassatelli (2010) claimed the "use of the gym cannot simply be explained away by the manipulation of clients by cynical, self-interested managers and trainers" (p. 201). Women demonstrate acceptance of some socially constructed norms and rejection of, or resistance to, others. The choices are still discursively produced, but women can make choices based on their own desires, goals, and willingness to participate in fitness. Cathy spent money on clothes, shoes, gym memberships, Wii exercise games, and more, but said "I'd rather spend money on something that actually makes me feel good...you actually see a benefit from". While the women were influenced by discourses of consumerism and actively purchased products and services related to fitness, they chose to do so for specific reasons. At least one woman indicated that she could have been spending this money on things that would be far worse for her. Some even noted the amount she was spending was insignificant. As Carrie said, "in the grand scheme of things, of what I spend money on, this isn't much". Robin agreed, noting, "you can be fit without spending a lot of money". Several women, like Sandra, believed that having the proper equipment made exercising easier, safer, and more enjoyable. For example, Kim noted the importance of a good sports bra, and many others discussed the importance of activity appropriate footwear. Given that the women felt physically and emotionally healthier when they exercised, spending money to be able

to do so made sense for them. What is important to note here is that the women were making informed choices. They were choosing to spend money to exercise over other expenditures. They chose to purchase workout related clothing and equipment. The women were able to assess and weigh the available options, and choose the one(s) that made sense for them.

What remained unquestioned by the women with whom I spoke, however, was the need to consume. That is, there was no question that the women would spend money, but they were able to choose, from within discursively acceptable choices, on what to spend it. Dittmar (2008) extensively studied consumer culture, and noted “consumer culture abounds with symbolic messages associated with material goods and “ideal” people” (p. 7). That is, messages are sent through what we consume, and read in particular ways by different groups of people. What we buy and how we look as a result says something about us as people, whether we intend for that message to be sent or not. We can be seen as “cool”, out of style, wealthy, poor, and so on, simply as a result of how we spend our money and how we present ourselves to the world. Additionally, how these messages are read depends significantly on the perspective of the viewer. Is that person from a lower or higher class? Does that person have an ideal body, or not? These types of statuses will affect the messages being sent and received by our patterns of consumption. The manner in which these messages are read can result in feeling better or worse about oneself depending on one’s status in relation to who is being viewed.

Dittmar (2008) also wrote that consumerism becomes “entrapment, and possibly entrapment of the worst kind, because people are often unaware of its pervasive influence” (p. 199), and that “while we believe we are expressing our selves, we are, in

fact, developing, monitoring, and moulding our identities with respect to the unrealistic images of consumer culture” (p. 200). With regard to our appearance, we are encouraged to constantly consume in order to produce the ideal body. Dittmar (2008) referred to the “body perfect” (p. 2), that which represents the normative feminine form as closely as possible. We must consume products such as diet foods, magazines, clothing, gym memberships, along with services such as personal training, dietary advice, and so on, in order to develop the ideal body. What is important is *consumption*; consuming tells observers that a woman is taking responsibility, following norms, and undertaking every possible action to sculpt her body into an acceptable form. Problems arise, however, for those who cannot consume. If one does not have access to products and services proposed as appropriate by dominant discourses of femininity, fitness, healthism, and consumerism, a woman will be judged as lacking. She will be lacking for two reasons. One, she will not be able to consume the “appropriate” products and services. Two, as a result of not being able to consume the appropriate goods and services, she is less likely to have an ideal body. Thus the inability to consume can have significant negative effects for those without the resources for consumption.

The conflation between discourses of consumerism, healthism, femininity, and fitness can be seen here. We must consume in order to be responsible for our health. In order to be responsible for our health, we must exhibit the ideal feminine body. In order to exhibit the ideal body, we must exercise in certain ways.

### **In Summary**

While I was occasionally surprised by the manner in which discourses of healthism, consumerism, fitness, and femininity affected the women with whom I spoke,

that they were affected by them was not surprising given that the literature had already identified these discourses as circulating around female exercisers. The four discourses identified in the literature were intimately linked for the women with whom I spoke. No discourse stood alone; each was related to the others in some way. For example, discourses of femininity clearly influenced discourses of fitness, and vice versa. Because the majority of women were attempting to reshape their bodies to appear more normative in some way, discourses of femininity were referred to as the “guide”. In order to use fitness to create a more normative shape, it was vital for the women to understand what their bodies should look like, according to socially accepted norms. The women first had to problematize their bodies. That is, she had to reference the ideal body, then make comparisons between her body and the ideal in order to understand what about her required “fixing”. From there, discourses of fitness influenced the women’s exercise choices, in that they were “compelled” to choose exercise that would assist in the development of the ideally feminine figure.

Similarly, discourses of fitness and femininity were inseparable from discourses of healthism. Healthism indicates that in order to be considered healthy, one must *look* healthy, which means a woman must have a normative body shape, and must exercise in ways that assist in the development of this ideal body. The women with whom I spoke also appeared to have taken on discourses of healthism. Additionally, most of the women had accepted personal responsibility for their own health, and exercised in ways to develop and maintain good health. For example, the women were doing some weight bearing exercise to ward off osteoporosis. They were also concerned about maintaining a healthy weight to prevent diseases like diabetes or heart attack, and so did cardiovascular

exercise to avoid weight gain and resultant concerns like high cholesterol. Further, discourses of healthism convince us to internalize the “healthy equals ideal” requirement, leading us to then judge others based on these criteria. On occasion the women with whom I spoke did “judge” others’ appearances based on the idea that thin equates to healthy, referring to discourses of femininity as the basis for this judgement. In addition to judgement, the women often referred to other women who “appeared” healthy as their models, despite not knowing if the other women were, in fact healthy, or simply exhibited the ideal body.

The women were also influenced by discourses of consumerism. All of the women felt pressure to spend money – on something. This is the nature of discourses of consumerism. We must buy for many reasons, such as improving oneself, for prestige, to fit in, or to show one’s status. Discourses of consumerism influence us on several levels. For example, as a consumer society, we are obliged to spend money. What we spend our money on is up to us, providing we choose from discursively constructed options, but spending money is a requirement. There was no question that the women would spend money, the only question was, on what would they spend their money? Consumerism was also closely related to discourses of femininity, fitness, and healthism. The women did feel pressure to purchase products and services related to fitness in order to create a normative shape, and to prevent health issues. With regard to clothing and shoes, while they were less likely to purchase brand name items than I anticipated, they still chose to purchase technical clothing and performance shoes. While this equipment may improve comfort and possibly performance as one exercises, it was not a requirement strictly for exercising, but rather for fitting in. However, through advertising, exercisers were

convinced that buying this type of equipment and investing in these products would make them better – more feminine, healthier, fitter.

The women also demonstrated the effects of consumerism through their purchase of gym memberships and magazines. The magazines were bought to provide guidance in terms of what a woman should aim for in terms of fitness, health, and body shape. The women with whom I spoke used the information in the magazines they consulted as “expert” advice. The women equated it with the advice they might receive from health professionals, and acted on this guidance. The women’s magazines suggested the best exercises for women to do, how to eat properly, and how to understand what “healthy” means, according to dominant discourse. These magazines became guides on to how to exercise to develop an ideal body, leading many of the women to choose to exercise in specific ways when exercising in the gym, that they paid to attend.

From the Foucaultian discourse analysis I would posit that the women with whom I spoke were most influenced by discourses of femininity. All of the women, whether or not they claimed to be influenced by discourses of femininity, described a clear visual image of how a woman should appear, as reiterated in media and other sources. All were well aware that to be considered normative a woman must be slim, fit, toned, and attractive. This image of the ideal body appeared to influence the women significantly in terms of how they felt about themselves, and how they chose to exercise. All of the women had compared their bodies to the ideal at some point in time, and all found themselves lacking. None was completely happy with her body, and each of the women was able to name the “flaws” she saw in her appearance. All of the women referenced media as the most powerful source of this image. Discourses of femininity definitely

affected exercise choices, as the majority of women chose to exercise in ways to develop a more feminine form. Some chose to do exercise that was considered outside the norm, but always remained aware of the possibility of developing more masculine qualities as a result.

Despite the fact that the women with whom I spoke were most visibly influenced by discourses of femininity, I was able to determine that exercise choice was in fact influenced by the confluence of discourses of fitness, femininity, healthism, and consumerism currently circulating around of the bodies of women who exercise. The women drew on these four discourses, as all chose to do a combination of cardiovascular exercise and strength training (but not heavy weight lifting) because that combination was found to produce the desired results in terms of body shape. Cardiovascular exercise, such as running, elliptical training, or cycling, was believed to assist with weight loss and maintenance of slimness. Strength training using lighter weights and more repetition was thought to produce the toned appearance of their muscles that the women desired, and the women were all involved in strength training to some degree. Discourses of fitness affected their choices because these discourses and the “experts” disseminating this information indicated that undertaking this combination of exercises was most suitable for women. The reason this combination of exercises is thought to be most suitable for women is because it is believed to produce the most normative body. Discourses of femininity outline the ideal body as being slim, toned, and fit – and young. Fatness, muscularity, and aging bodies are inappropriate. Women must attempt to recreate the ideal body, and exercise in a manner that will assist them with this. Hence discourses of femininity influenced the women to choose certain types of exercise to assist with either

the maintenance or development of the ideal body. Navigating through these discourses and multiple subjectivities has proven to be challenging and complicated. However, the women were also able to weigh the various options available to them, and choose the ones that made most sense to them and their goals. As one would expect, resistance was seen in their behaviour, as was conformity. Resistance and conformity were impacted by theories of discipline. Discipline in the Foucaultian sense affects and was affected by the discourses circulating at a given place and time. Chapter 4 will outline how discipline impacted the women with whom I spoke and the exercise choices they made.

## **Chapter 4**

### **Fitness Centres, Body Modification, and Discipline**

Fitness centres (gyms) are relatively recent additions to western culture (Sassatelli, 2010; Smith Maguire, 2008). In this short space of time, however, gyms have become the arena where most of our fitness and exercise related activities occur. Sassatelli (2010) noted that what occurs in gyms differs from sports. She wrote that the gym provides the “possibility of modifying, improving and maintaining the body” (2010, p. 100). One of the main reasons we go to the gym is to make changes to our bodies - there is an aspect of gym membership and use that includes modification rather than just physical activity. When we attend a gym there is an expectation that our bodies will change as a result, generally to better represent dominant discourse. As outlined in the previous chapter, discourses of fitness, femininity, healthism, and consumerism come together to encourage us to want to change our bodies in the gym. Added to the influence of these discourses is the concept of discipline, which had a very powerful effect on the women with whom I spoke, and on their exercise choices. This chapter will describe how discipline affected the women I interviewed.

#### **Foucault and Fitness Centres**

Although Foucaultian concepts of discipline were discussed generally in Chapter 1, it is important to link these general theories to fitness centres and exercise, and delineate how these relate to women’s exercise choices. As I analysed the transcripts I was surprised at how regularly and visibly theories of discipline affected the women. None referred to what they were experiencing as such, but Foucaultian theorizations of discipline clearly had some influence on women’s exercise choices. Shogan (1999)

explained that Foucaultian disciplinary power “includes detailed descriptions of how the organization and regulation of time, space, and movements train, shape and impress bodies with the habituated gestures, procedures, and values of a discipline” (p. 9). Smith Maguire (2008) noted that when in the gym the exerciser was encouraged to compare herself to others, and referred to “the spatial structuring of visibility: mirrors and the position of equipment and exercise areas facilitate surveillance of, and by others, encouraging the individual to adopt a permanent attitude of self-surveillance” (p. 137). Although not identical to one another, the construction of fitness centres often follows a similar layout. This layout allows for the discipline of bodies to occur. Markula and Pringle (2006) described how “the space, the gym, is constructed to allow disciplinary control over fit bodies” (p. 78). The next sections outline how Foucaultian concepts like the Panopticon, docile bodies, and technologies of the self affected the ways in which the women in my study experienced discipline, thus impacting their exercise choices.

### **The Gym Space as Discipline**

Markula and Pringle (2006) detailed how the design and function of the fitness centre can be seen to follow Foucaultian conceptions of discipline, stating, “a fitness centre... certainly bears the characteristics of a ‘disciplinary’ space” (p. 76). The authors described how the gym space is regulated essentially the way the environment within military and other institutions is regulated, according to Foucault. The regulation of activity is required to discipline bodies. Within fitness centres there are areas for weight lifting, for stretching, for cardiovascular activities, classes, and more. Only specific activities are allowed in each space, and each space is intended to produce useful action. Exercisers are encouraged to stake a claim to a particular space according to the activity

undertaken. The space claimed may be representative of where a woman feels she fits in the overall picture of the gym. For example, in fitness classes those who feel less capable may choose the back row, where they cannot be watched while exercising. Carrie, who preferred to use fitness equipment, noted this when she discussed her aversion to classes. Because she felt uncoordinated and ungraceful she did not want anyone to see her attempting to follow the routines. Kim noted something similar: “I’m always that person at the back, tripping”. Thus the regulation of space affects rank. In Foucaultian theorization, rank is not static. People move in and through ranks. In the case of fitness centre members, rank refers to where they stand in relation to others in the gym. In comparison to other users, a woman can rank above and/or below others. For example, if she is able to perform more exercises or exercise longer than other members, she would rank above them. Cynthia mentioned this, commenting that she added weight if she thought others were watching her, to move her up in the ranking. However, she still ranked below those who could do more than she could. Bodies in the gym are also ranked in terms of “acceptability”. Markula and Pringle (2006) explained that rank can be based on criteria such as having an ideal body, wearing the right clothing, or by being especially competent in the gym. As with other institutions, exercisers will be judged and classified according to certain criteria.

With regard to the regulation of activity, Markula and Pringle (2006) described how every activity undertaken in a gym is further regulated by time: “consequently, effective use of time, in addition to optimal use of space, is an integral aspect of disciplinary techniques” (p. 77). Time is regulated within the gym in multiple ways. For example, exercisers are regulated in terms of time allowed on fitness equipment. There

are limits placed on each machine, and users must sign up for their time. They are then expected to stop when their allotted time has expired. This regulation of time means that exercisers must use their time as efficiently as possible to ensure they are getting maximum benefit from the exercise. Time is also important with regard to other exercisers. For example, if a woman can run faster and longer than others, that positively affects her position on the hierarchy. Foucault (1995) referred to “a time of good quality, throughout which the body is constantly applied to its exercise” (p. 151). Time disciplines our activities, and the choices we make when we are exercising. Time also affects how often we attend a gym, and how long we stay. Women who exercise struggle with multiple demands on their time, and so must be as efficient as possible with their time. Thus, when they make choices about the types of exercise they undertake in the gym, their choices may be influenced by time. As one of the participants said, cardiovascular exercise provided more bang for her buck when it came to the time she spent in the gym. Women’s exercise choices were affected by the time they felt they had to commit to fitness activities. Thus both activity and time disciplined the women with whom I spoke, and affected their exercise choices as a result.

Added to the control of space and activity was the concept of the Panopticon, an architectural design that allows for the perpetual observation of those within the space. Despite the fact that observation may be intermittent or absent, those within the Panopticon behave as though they are being observed at all times. Established rules for behaviour are followed. The structure of the physical fitness centre itself can have a powerful impact on female exercisers. This is a space where observation occurs on several levels. Markula and Pringle (2006) commented that “a fitness club lays itself out

as a large field of visibility: anything one is doing can be observed by multiple others” (p. 79). Knowing that one can be observed, one begins to behave in the manner acceptable to the circumstances one is in. With regard to fitness centres, the spaces tend to be open, with few walls separating different areas. There are usually mirrors in the free weight area and in classrooms. Gyms often also have large windows allowing people to gaze in and out. Although not deliberately designed as panoptic structures, gyms generally recreate the all-seeing gaze of the Panopticon prison design. Many gyms, such as those at the University of Lethbridge and Lethbridge College, also have windows surrounding the facility allowing passersby to view members exercising and using fitness equipment. The track and pool at the University of Lethbridge also have viewing areas where people can sit and watch individuals exercising in those areas. The potential for constant external surveillance of exercisers creates a panoptic effect. This possible surveillance disciplines gym users to exercise in certain ways. Markula and Pringle (2006) noted, “each participant is exposed to the controlling gaze of his/her fellow exercisers as well as their own gaze reflected by the mirror” (p. 80). In terms of the panoptic effects seen in the gym, Laura referred to “mirrors all over”, allowing other members to view her as she exercised. Janet, despite being involved in exercise her whole life, had been unnerved by the mirrors in the gym and said, “if I don’t have to look at myself I’m OK with it”. Kim commented on the viewing area at the University of Lethbridge pool and gym, exclaiming, “I hate that people can watch in the pool”, and “I don’t really like that you can watch the gym, either.” Grace, because she was overweight when she began exercising, chose her gym specifically because it was empty, and therefore “least threatening to me”. Laura was aware that people were watching her, but

was less concerned about it, saying, “you do your own thing and if they’re gonna stare let them stare”.

Exercisers in these fitness centres were aware that they could be watched. In fact, Brooke noted that surveillance began even in the change room, and referred to “women checking to see if, you know, other women are as skinny as they are or as big breasted”. She believed there is a strong sense of competition between women with regard to their appearance, despite the fact that the standards to which women hold themselves and others are “ridiculous”. This panoptic effect means that women begin to behave in a manner acceptable to the discourses dominant in the moment in time and place in which they live. In some cases this can result in simply following the rules of the gym. For example, an exerciser using a treadmill is not likely to go over the thirty-minute limit in case someone notices that person has been on the machine longer than the stipulated time limit. The panoptic effect may also mean that a female exerciser does more cardiovascular exercise than heavy weight lifting, ensuring that she wears the “right” clothing, or that she has, or is at least working toward developing, the ideal female form. In the case of the women with whom I spoke, the majority did in fact follow the “rules” of the gym as a result of the disciplining effects of the gym space. Most were uncomfortable in the free weight area because of the mirrors. Most felt that people were looking at them as they exercised, and were probably judging their bodies. Carrie thought people might look at others in the gym and think they are not thin enough, not muscled enough or too muscular, not trim enough – “oh I could go on forever!”. Kate, who believed she was thirty pounds overweight, felt judged by the trainer she saw when she first attended a gym, noting that he seemed to judge her for “ruining” her body. Robin

believed that gym users generally “size up” and then categorize other gym users, which is a form of ranking. The majority of women also noted the reverse – they also looked at and occasionally judged those they observed in the gym. This was sometimes for comparison purposes with regard to bodies, but often it was also to see what exercises other gym users were engaged in. The women, particularly Laura, then tried these exercises themselves, or modified them to suit their goals. Regardless of the underlying reasons for observation, the physical design of the gym allowed for constant surveillance, and this surveillance played a role in disciplining the gym behaviour of the women with whom I spoke.

Sassatelli (2010) commented that, when exercisers first begin attending a gym, “frustration, embarrassment and anxiety are indeed common experiences among those starting out, and feeling comfortable does not come easily” (p. 67). The University of Toronto Scarborough Campus fitness centre requires sleeves on all tops worn in the gym, regardless of the sex of the wearer. “Muscle shirts and spandex tops are a form of intimidation, which we are trying to deter” is a quote from the fitness centre’s FAQs page (Frequently asked questions, 2009, para. 7). McMaster University (Frequently asked questions, n.d.) has a similar rule, and their policies page outlines why:

Why no tank-tops? Studies have suggested that tank tops can have a potentially detrimental impact on individuals' exercise adherence and self image (Hart et al., 1989). Put more simply: no tank tops creates an environment where people are more likely to workout, and feel good about it (para. 2)

Do certain types of clothing intimidate other exercisers? According to Sinden, Martin Ginis, and Angove (2003), “exposure to revealingly dressed exercisers can have negative effects on a young woman's self-confidence” (p. 446). Further, the authors (2003) stated, “the type of attire worn by an exercise group can affect women's thoughts and feelings

about both the group and themselves” (p. 447). Cynthia worried about the girls that “show up with their makeup fully done, and, and, their tight little clothes”. She was concerned they were pointing at her thinking, “oh look at that girl, she’s all sweaty”. As a result, she tried to go to the gym when it was quiet so she felt more comfortable. Sandra also commented that the women who wore makeup to the gym intimidated her as well, and several women mentioned feeling daunted by women whose hair still looked great after working out, when theirs was “plastered” to their heads. One of the younger women indicated that she did not want to wear anything revealing to the gym, not even shorts. The clothing that others wore to the gym, as well as others’ general appearances, influenced how the women I interviewed felt about themselves as they exercised.

Carrie, one of the older participants in this study, said that some of her friends who were overweight were too intimidated and shy to go to the gym, because they knew other people would be looking at them, and possibly judging their bodies. I am currently experiencing this very problem. Because I have gained so much weight, I am afraid to go to the gym. I am concerned that people who knew me before I gained weight will wonder what happened and why I let myself go, and that others may wonder why I am bothering since it is obviously too late for me. Despite being a regular exerciser, Helen had also been “intimidated by all those people who seem really fit”. Grace felt it was “overwhelming when you see people around you who are thin and active and fit”, despite currently being the best shape of her life. Jill, who spent her work day in a fitness centre, believed other exercisers are always “judging to a certain extent”. These women were experiencing the effects of others watching them – the gaze being external in this instance. As happens with the disciplining effects of the panoptic gaze, the women with

whom I spoke adjusted their behaviour to reflect what they believe is expected of them. Some chose women only gyms, others chose to exercise when their gym was quiet, and others had to convince themselves to go despite being intimidated.

Carlisle Duncan (1994) posited that, as a result of this inescapable surveillance, women eventually become the subjects of their own “gaze”; the gaze becomes private – “their own personal quest for perfection” – despite the fact that the gaze is “culturally and socially mandated” (p. 50). In this case the women began to watch and discipline themselves according to societal norms. The women now disciplined themselves as though others were still watching them, even if others were not in fact actively observing them. To provide an example, as someone who enjoys heavy weight lifting, I am frequently in the free weight/squat area of the gyms at the University of Lethbridge and Lethbridge College. I refer to it as the “boys’ area”, because it is populated almost exclusively by males. I am often either the only, or one of few, female(s) in that area. The males in this area make great use of the mirrors, watching both themselves and others. Some of the women with whom I spoke also noted the disciplining effects of the surveillance in this area on women who exercise. Jill noticed “a lot of women in the cardio area, not a lot of women always in the weight area”, and believed that the weight area can be intimidating for some women. Nancy, who liked to feel strong, agreed, noting that at her gym “there are maybe two women out of that crowd that will step foot in that area”. Cynthia, despite being very strong and fit, said that she sometimes felt intimidated in the free weight area because “it’s a little nerve-wracking when you have those big guys who are pressing like 300 pounds”. Nancy, despite having been involved in traditionally masculine sports, joined a women’s only gym as she was concerned that

there might have been “big roid ragers” in coeducational fitness centres. Because discourses of fitness indicate that heavy weight lifting is not acceptable for women, and knowing that people can watch them, some women did not use the free weight area, or did not do heavy lifting. They chose to use fitness equipment rather than free weights. The women who chose not to exercise in these ways or in these areas experienced normalization, which will be discussed in greater detail in the next section. They have disciplined themselves to conform to socially constructed expectations for behaviour. Women internalized the gaze of others, meaning they now monitored their own behaviour and conduct in the gym, according to socially constructed discourses and norms.

In an effort to counter the negative effects of the male gaze on women while exercising, there are women’s only gyms to prevent this. In Lethbridge there is one women’s only gym (there were two, but one recently closed), and another gym with a women’s only space within the larger coeducational gym. Cynthia used the women’s only space in her gym to do certain exercises as she knew there would be less chance for observation there. She did not want anyone watching her because she felt her technique was poor. Grace chose her local gym because there were “no huge hulking men lifting weights”, and because she liked the diversity of women attending her fitness centre. In fact, surveillance in the gym has such a strong effect that some coeducational facilities have even developed special programs for women only. Queen’s University offers an interesting example of the awareness and effects of external surveillance that can occur in physical fitness facilities. Queen’s provides what it refers to as “Just for Women” programming. The Just for Women program includes basketball, cardio, and swimming

activities exclusively for women in “a comfortable and exclusive environment” (Just for women, 2011, para. 1). The University of Toronto also provides women-only hours in its strength and conditioning areas, and for swimming (Women only hours, 2010).

Presumably this appeals to women who do not enjoy exercising in front of males.

Providing women only space, hours, and programming removes some of the surveillance that women may find intimidating. In larger metropolitan areas this may also allow women from other cultures who cannot exercise with men equal access to fitness facilities. The University of Toronto’s Department of Athletics and Recreation (1994) developed the Task Force on Gender Equity, which states that women’s only programming is required because:

some barriers to the participation of women in athletics and recreation are not specific to any one program. These can include barriers specific to women of a particular culture or ethnicity, barriers to women in pre-natal or post-natal stages, barriers to women experiencing body image problems, barriers to women who have primary responsibility for their children and barriers to women who are older. (p. 21)

Some physical fitness centres are aware of the potential for surveillance, and have made attempts to counter the disciplining effects of this surveillance by providing areas and times where women can exercise without the male gaze focused on them, and without the resultant intimidation factor that may affect the ways in which the women choose to exercise. Having said that, however, fitness centres benefit from this surveillance in some respects. Reinforcing gym members’ feelings of inadequacies can mean increased use in terms of personal trainers or taking classes. If gyms lose members as a result, there are always new bodies to sculpt. So, while women might experience some negative reactions to the gym environment, and several of the women in my study did, fitness centres are not necessarily likely to change the disciplining aspects of the physical environment

encountered within.

### **Discipline Within the Gym**

Along with the disciplining aspects of the panoptic space and regulation of activities and time, further discipline of bodies can occur within the gym setting. First, docile bodies must be developed. Docile bodies are produced through the disciplining effects of the fitness centre. According to Foucault (1995), docility referred to a body that can be “subjected, used, transformed and improved” (p. 136). Docile bodies are not passive bodies waiting to be controlled by others. In fact, these bodies have agency. Shogan (1999) clarified that docile bodies are capable of specific skills. Training of the body must occur to develop a docile body, but that training produces a body capable of action. Chance (2009) wrote that, “in the production of the ideal body, there is a suggestion of the body subjugated, tamed, *made* ‘docile’ in order to maximize its efficacy and its utility” (p. 98). She further stated that the gym is a “social site where the body can be shaped, trained, re-arranged, remade” (p. 99). Docile active bodies are trained, in part through the theories of discipline outlined in the previous section, to produce certain types of action. In the gym, docility is encouraged through proper use of equipment, proper technique, and proper training – according to fitness professionals. Kim and Cynthia provided examples of docile bodies. Both were elite athletes, and had trained their bodies to be the best at their respective sports. This intense training, and their ability to perform in their sport as well as follow instruction from their coaches, constructed them as docile bodies. Once properly trained, the fit body then becomes a body capable of acting appropriately in the gym.

Related to docility is the concept of normalization, which is when certain behaviours come to be seen as normal through repetition. These behaviours are then considered “natural” in a given society. Once accepted as natural or normal, deviations from the norm will mark a person as other or outsider. To prevent being classed as abnormal, people often choose to behave in the accepted manner. Normalization results from the effects of discipline on docile bodies, and allows for maximum control with a minimal amount of force used. Heikkala (1993) posited, “the goal and effect of discipline is normalization” (p. 399). Foucaultian disciplinary techniques allow normalization to occur, through punishment or reward. Punishments and/or rewards encourage people to behave in certain ways, and thus behaviour becomes normalized. Part of normalization involves internalizing the norms that we see repeated and rewarded. Once norms are internalized we begin to monitor and discipline our own behaviour. For example, because being fat is seen as bad and abnormal for women in our current society, women often undertake body projects to develop a more normative shape. As a result, all of the women in my study were attempting to modify their bodies to appear more normative. All had taken on discourses of femininity that indicate the ideal female body must be fit and toned – hence normalization. Heikkala (1993) further stated that normalization with regard to exercise refers to conformation to the rules inherent in sport. Conformity is rewarded and non-conformity punished, leading individuals to conform more often than not. Conformity, reward, and punishment can be seen in the gym space. There are customs and rules to be followed, and monitoring occurs to ensure gym users are following the prescribed rules. Because successful exercisers have internalized the norms surrounding gym culture, gym users tend to follow these rules to ensure they are not

singled out or censured for inappropriate actions. For example, most of the women I interviewed did not use the free weight area, but used the fitness equipment most frequently as that is prescribed by discourses of femininity. It is important to remember, however, that there are rewards as well as punishments. Rewards can include acceptance into certain groups, feelings of normalcy, or a sense of accomplishment for completing certain tasks correctly. Laura noted this when she discussed how proud she felt when another gym member complimented her on her technique. Thus normalization is not strictly a negative experience.

Another important aspect of discipline is that of confession. Foucault (1990) wrote of confession, “it tended no longer to be concerned solely with what the subject wished to hide, but with what was hidden from himself, being incapable of coming to light except gradually and through the labor of confession” (p. 66). That is, we must first determine what it is we have done “wrong”. In the case of a woman who exercises, this can include becoming aware that her body is not normative, that she is not exercising according to discourses of fitness, femininity, healthism, or consumerism, that she is not self-disciplined or self-motivated, and more. Once our failings are confessed, they must then be interpreted: “to constitute a discourse of truth on the basis of its decipherment” (Foucault, 1990, p. 67). Until we and others understand why and how we have gone wrong, we cannot go about fixing the problems inherent in our bodies or behaviour. Further, “spoken in time, to the proper party, and by the person who was both the bearer of it and the one responsible for it, the truth healed” (p. 67). That is, the confessor must bring to light that which is lacking within her, confess this to someone who is authorised to hear the confession, then undertake some remediation recommended by that authority

in order to correct what is lacking. “Sins” are confessed and “corrections” doled out and followed in order to “fix” the problem. One must atone for one’s sins. Smith Maguire (2008) explained confession this way: “ self-knowledge, through techniques of measurement, examination and confession, must be accompanied by the regular and rational inculcation of behaviors” (p. 138). The gym provides a space for confession, and I have done my share of confessing to my trainer while at the gym: I did not work out when I should have, I ate junk food, I felt unmotivated, and so on. Confession can take many forms, and can be confessed to various authorities. A woman can even confess her transgressions to herself – the mirror acts as a confessional. All of the women with whom I spoke had confessed their “failings” to the mirror at some point. Women who exercise had many opportunities for confessing while exercising, and usually undertook some action as a result of this confession. With regard to her body image as compared to the norm, Grace, after losing a significant amount of weight, said, “I can stand in front of the mirror and tell myself it’s not even close”. Laura explained that she wanted to be able to look at herself in the mirror and see the effects of exercising, and if she did not see the desired effects she knew she had to work harder. The actions undertaken were intended to correct the deficits that were confessed. This process involves problematization, which is the recognition of the discrepancies between our conduct or bodies and established norms. Until we recognize the differences as being problematic in some way, we cannot fix them.

In order to fix our problems we then employ what Foucault (1991) referred to as technologies of the self, which encourage “individuals to monitor and regulate their bodies, thoughts and conduct” (p. 18). For female exercisers, technologies of the self

provide ways for them to make changes to their bodies, should they choose to. With regard to fitness, technologies of the self include consulting health or fitness magazines, dieting, and exercising. Exercise could be broken down further by increasing or decreasing the level or type of activity undertaken. Enlisting the help of personal trainers or other experts could also be considered technologies of the self, as the end result is intended to be a transformation of the body, generally to make it more normative. We consult experts to determine both what our failings are, and how we can best fix them. Each of the women with whom I spoke used some or all of these technologies of the self to change and improve her body through her exercise choices. For example, Nancy, Cathy, and Grace regularly consulted fitness magazines for help for information on how their bodies should look, and how to transform their figures. Kate, Laura, and Robin consulted fitness professionals and followed the exercise programs recommended by the personal trainers. Brooke consulted a dietician for assistance with appropriate caloric intake. With regard to women who exercise, the techniques that can be used to discipline and transform themselves are many.

One way that discipline occurs in the gym is through fitness testing, which invokes most of the Foucaultian theorizations about discipline outlined above. Garrett and Wrench (2008) claimed that fitness testing produces docile bodies that are regulated, transformed, and thus disciplined. With regard to measurement taking in the gym, being measured is a “confession” of our inability as women to successfully exhibit the acceptable female form. Garrett and Wrench (2008) stated, “the process of fitness testing exemplifies the way that individuals can be classified as fit or unfit and constitutes a regulatory mechanism designed to discipline bodies” (p. 18). Smith Maguire (2008)

stated “these mundane measurements not only furnish readers with a knowledge of their body once reserved for medical and sports professionals; they also encourage in individuals an attitude of self-monitoring and calculation” (p. 136). By allowing our bodies to be measured and compared to the ideal, we are admitting our failures and our resultant shame for not doing a better job of self-discipline – we are confessing. For example, when first going to a gym, many members are subjected to having measurements taken, and many of the women with whom I spoke had undergone fitness testing. Weight, measurements of bust, waist, and hips, Body Mass Index, Waist to Hip Ratio, cardiovascular strength, and even food diaries are all examples of the types of measures that may occur. For example, Kim was weighed regularly when she was wrestling to ensure she was always in her appropriate weight category, and admitted to weight cutting if she did not meet the weight requirement. Nancy’s personal trainer did general fitness tests as well as body fat measurements. Nicole had several fitness tests, including maximum heart rate, done when she was training for an Iron Man. Kate, in her fight to lose weight, purchased a body fat scale that she used at home to monitor her measurements on her own. These measurements are touted as important for determining success at reshaping the body. Having initial measurements allows the comparison of measurements as one continues working out at the gym. The end result of using a gym is frequently, though not exclusively, intended to be the development of a body that more closely matches the norm. For women, this would be the slim and toned body that we see reproduced via media, and often in others attending the gym. Being able to quantify one’s progress towards set goals can be an important self-motivator. It is also important to be able to “prove” to others that one is moving toward the normative female form.

These measurements also serve to show women just how far they may be from being normatively feminine. When I asked Nancy how she felt when she was weighed and measured at the gym, she said, “I felt terrible about myself”, and said she felt worse about herself after being measured than she did before because she thought she was in better shape than her measurements “proved” her to be. Although we are often aware that our bodies are lacking when compared to the ideal, seeing and hearing the numbers that confirm just how far from it we are can be devastating. As we compare ourselves to the ideal, knowing our “numbers” makes it easier to see that we lack the discipline and drive to be normatively feminine and/or healthy. Recording measurements and one’s progress towards set goals further disciplines a woman’s body and behaviour. According to discourses of fitness and healthism, this knowledge should provide the motivation required to reshape our bodies through self-discipline. Laura, who was trying to return to regular exercising, said, “it was good to do because then I could see what I really needed to do and to work on”. Cynthia, an elite athlete, described the feeling of being measured this way: “I hated being weighed because even though I knew I was really strong, the number still seemed higher than it should have for a girl my age”, and even spoke of “eyes watching” her at all times, referring to coaches and others involved in training athletes for her sport of choice. Cynthia experienced both an external and internal gaze when measured – she judged herself based on these measurements, but could also feel her coaches’ judgements and continuous surveillance of her body. Robin said that when she was measured at the gym it was “negative because you realise you could have done better over time”, but that it also provided a chance to target problem areas when exercising. After being measured Cathy, who had suffered an injury and gained weight as

a result, said she realised that she had a lot of work to do to improve her body, to be more normative.

For example, after being weighed and measured to determine where she stood physically, Cathy undertook a rigorous diet and exercise regime through the summer, and lost twenty-five pounds. When she returned to school in September she was assessed again, and that time it was a relief because she saw that her self-discipline had the intended effect on her body. Kate worried that she was not disciplined enough to attain the ideal body. She was concerned that she was not going to the gym frequently enough or working hard enough while there to make the desired changes to her body. Janet also believed that she needed to exhibit more self-control and self-discipline to attain a more normative appearance. Brooke had experienced highs and lows with regard to weight, and as a result no longer wanted to be measured in these ways. When it was required, she refused to know the results of the measurements. She wanted to know only how it would affect her eating and exercise habits. Once she had that information she was able to make the required adjustments to her fitness routines. Nicole noted that having fitness testing done helped her to track her progress as she trained, and provided knowledge about her body that she did not have beforehand. She adjusted her training based on the results of the testing. Thus it can be seen that the disciplining effects of technologies of the self affected the way in which some women exercised.

In addition to measurements, another disciplining aspect of technologies of the self within the gym is comparisons made between exercisers. It is often possible to see how much weight someone is using, how many repetitions are being done, or the duration and speed or resistance of equipment use. As a result, exercisers can compare

themselves to others in terms of strength or endurance. If a woman feels that she is lifting too much or too little weight, or lacks endurance when compared to others, it may lead to pushing herself in order to match or exceed what others in the gym can do. Again, because of the panoptic nature of most gyms, we may begin to internalize what we see as norms for the gym, and then act out these norms to better fit into gym culture. Several women commented on this phenomenon during the interviews. Kim liked to look at the weight other exercisers used, and would think “they’ve only done like 95 (pounds)”. Because she knew that she could leg press at least 165 pounds, this made her feel strong. However, the opposite can affect women who exercise. Cynthia, despite her history as an elite athlete, could not do push-ups in the main area of her gym because she was so self-conscious about her technique. She used the upstairs women’s area so that the majority of gym members could not see her. “Sometimes I feel like oh I’m not going low enough” was one of the reasons she gave for being self-conscious. Comparisons based on the norm had occurred, and confession had had taken place. In order to avoid punishment for being unable to perform the exercise correctly, Cynthia removed herself from the panoptic area of her gym. The fact that gym users can be easily observed definitely affected the women with whom I spoke. The potential for observation and resultant judgements by other gym users affected how most of the women exercised.

Some of the women were not intimidated by others in the gym, however. Foucaultian theorization on discipline indicates that it will have positive effects as well. Positive effects are required in order to people to become productive. Constant punishment would engender apathy, whereas Foucaultian disciplinary techniques require action as well as control. For example, Helen felt “motivated when other people are

around”. Laura watched other exercisers to see what exercises she could try, or possibly modify. Additionally, being observed “makes me want to make sure I’m doing the exercises right”, she stated. Grace, who very serious about her exercise regimen, noted that she approached going to gym the same way she approached going to work. She did her hair, wore nice workout clothing, and ensured she felt good about herself going in. She needed a positive image of herself to workout to the best of her ability. Discipline was not always a negative experience for women when they exercised; in the gym discipline sometimes had positive, motivational effects on women with whom I spoke. Heikkala (1993) noted that discipline and normalization can have positive effects on athletes, and these effects can encourage the transcendence of previous performance levels. Some of the women I interviewed experienced a similar effect from comparisons made between exercisers.

### **Discipline and Discourse**

The four discourses noted in the literature as circulating around female exercisers also had disciplining effects on the women with whom I spoke. For example, as seen in the sections above, discourses of fitness and femininity encouraged the women to exercise in ways that would help them develop a more normative form. Women were encouraged to exercise in ways to make them appear more ideally feminine, and to avoid exercising in ways that might cause or allow masculine characteristics to develop. The women with whom I spoke also felt some pressure to avoid choosing exercises that were considered less feminine, such as heavy weight lifting.

In addition, discourses of healthism and consumerism also had disciplining effects on these women and their exercise choices. Because commitment, conformity,

and responsibility are demonstrated through consumptive patterns, the women often chose to consume exercise-related products and services, as discussed in the previous chapter. These ranged from buying magazines, gym memberships, or fitness attire to paying for personal training and fitness classes. Combined with consumerism, discipline resulting from healthism encouraged the women to exercise in specific ways. For example, because we are told that weight-bearing exercise can help to prevent osteoporosis, and cardiovascular exercise can help us keep fat from developing around our middles, most of the women chose to do both types of exercise regularly. “Expert” advice, garnered through consumption, shaped their decision making when it came to exercise choices, affecting the types of exercises in which the women with whom I spoke engaged.

### **In Summary**

The women with whom I spoke experienced, and were affected by, Foucaultian theories of discipline. This discipline did not function independently, however, and was clearly linked to discourses of femininity, fitness, healthism, and consumerism. Awareness of these discourses, as indicated in the previous chapter, affected how theories of discipline affected the interview participants. For example, they experienced the panoptic effects of the gym resulting from the physical construction of it, which significantly impacted their exercise choices. Knowing that observation was always a possibility, the women chose to engage in exercises most “appropriate” for females, given discourses of fitness and femininity. Few engaged in exercise that was considered more masculine than feminine, such as heavy weight lifting. Most undertook a combination of strength and cardiovascular exercise as suggested by fitness experts as

the best way to attain an ideal female figure. All hoped to attain, through exercise, what can best be described as a normative female body. The women did not want to be seen in the “wrong” part of the gym, or doing the “wrong” type of exercise, lest someone see them and judge them as less feminine as a result.

With regard to their appearance, the women all confessed their faults, admitting their failings to themselves and others, looking for ways to improve. Once confession was complete and appropriate penance accepted the women then undertook the measures necessary to improve themselves and their behaviour. Expert opinion and advice was sought out and taken to heart, through measurement, for example. Measurement within the gym had a significant impact on exercise choices. Each of the women who had been weighed or measured subsequently adjusted her behaviour to attempt to develop a more normative shape. This discipline included changing eating habits, exercising more, exercising more frequently, or exercising differently, which represented technologies of the self. The quantification of one’s failure to exhibit the ideal female body was difficult for some women, and clearly led to increased self-discipline as a result.

Thus, what does discipline mean to women who exercise? It means that the pressure to self-surveil is constant. There is the panoptic effect of the gym space itself, allowing gym users to be observed by themselves and others. There is the effect of measurement taking, which brings about both external and internal surveillance. Added to this is the constant bombardment of images of the feminine and healthy norm through media representations and reiterations of the normative feminine ideal. The women with whom I spoke internalized these images, then compared and judged their bodies, and usually came up lacking. Sadly, knowing that the ideal is just that – an ideal – and was

not based in reality did not matter. Further, knowing that attaining the ideal was almost impossible often did not prevent the women from attempting to reach it. Women can be, and often are, complicit in this discipline and surveillance, and the women I interviewed were no different. As a result, the women disciplined themselves, their bodies, and their behaviour to better reflect the norm. Exercises were chosen to assist with sculpting their bodies. Some women stayed away from exercises or areas in the gym that would mark them as less than feminine, to avoid judgements being made about their sexuality. However, some women ignored the “rules” set out for them and continued to exercise in ways that took them away from the norm. Depending on how each woman internalized discourses of fitness, healthism, femininity, and consumerism, discipline was constraining and/or motivating for her.

## **Chapter 5**

### **Conclusions**

After reviewing the literature and noting four discourses that repeatedly circulate around the bodies of women who exercise, I attempted to determine if discourses of fitness, femininity, consumerism, and healthism did in fact have an impact on women who exercise regularly and their exercise choices. Having spoken with sixteen women who were frequent exercisers, and performing a discourse analysis of the transcripts of these interviews, it appears that these women were in fact being influenced by these four discourses. The degree of influence and the manner in which the women took up these discourses varied, but all were affected by and made exercise choices in part based on these discourses.

The women with whom I spoke all expected their exercise choices to affect their bodies in some way. For some it was reshaping it to a more normative form. For others, it was maintenance of their appearance, prevention of disease, or retention of the ability to do various activities. Others still enjoyed exercise for the psychological benefits imparted. For most, it was a combination of all of the above. However, although there were many reasons for undertaking fitness activities, changing the appearance of one's body was often paramount. Sassatelli (2000) states "abstract as the ideal of fitness may be, its characteristics stress certain key values: the instrumentality of the body, the naturalness of fitness in enhancing that instrumentality and the authenticity of the subject who acquires a better body by his/her own efforts" (p. 409). The women with whom I spoke all hoped to change their appearance through exercise, in general to develop a more normative form. In fact, fat and muscular bodies were somewhat silenced in the

interviews. The women acknowledged them as existing, but those bodies were not discussed in a positive way. The only acceptable body for these women was the fit, toned, and slim body as seen in discourses of femininity. Similarly, the majority of the women I interviewed did not recognize heavy weight lifting as being a legitimate exercise choice for women. Although some women did lift some heavier weights, they recognized this activity was outside the norm for women. Most of the women did do strength training, but with lighter weights and more repetitions, as suggested by fitness experts. This type of exercise was purported to lead to a more desirable body – slimmer, and toned but not muscular. When combined with cardiovascular exercise, this type of strength training was believed to assist with weight loss and successful reshaping of the body.

Discourses of healthism influenced all of the women in my study, and each undertook exercise in order to ward off effects of obesity and aging. All had experienced the disciplining effects of healthism, having taken on responsibility for managing their own health, and doing everything possible to prevent health problems from occurring. Exercise was considered to be one of the most effective ways in which to improve and maintain health, and particular kinds of exercise were considered to be most effective in preventing illness. Discourses of healthism frequently affected the exercise choices made by this group of women, and they certainly exercised in ways to improve their overall health and longevity. Inherent within discourses of healthism is the judgement of others based on the assumption that having a normative shape equates to being healthy. That is, one must exhibit the ideal body to be considered healthy, whether one is in fact healthy or not. Based solely on appearance, many of the women had judged others as being

unhealthy, because their bodies were not acceptably slim, fit, or toned. Undertaking exercises that assisted with the development of the ideal body were important as a result, to prevent being judged in a similar manner. Discourses of healthism were clearly influencing the exercise choices being made by the women I interviewed.

The women were compelled to spend money on fitness related activities, products, and services as a result of consumerism, and the confluence of discourses of healthism, femininity, and fitness. In order to be considered an exerciser, a woman had to spend money on fitness products and services. In order to be considered healthy, women must consume fitness related products and services. The same holds true for femininity. To be considered “normal” women must consume socially acceptable products and services. When it came to exercise, consumerism affected the participants’ exercise choices by first encouraging consumption of products like clothing, shoes, gym memberships, or fitness magazines.

However, resistance to discourse was also visible. The women did not blindly subscribe to these four discourses. The women made choices, from within discursively constructed options, based on the desired result of exercising. Some of the women chose to do exercises generally considered to be masculine. Others were less concerned about how closely their appearance matched the norm than I anticipated. It was not surprising that resistance was evident, however, as Foucaultian theories of power indicate that resistance, and indeed action, are required.

Experience is often thought to be produced by individuals through everyday living, however, poststructuralism acknowledges experience as discursively constructed and this was evident and significant within my study. For example, in the case of heavy

weight lifting, the combination of experience and discursive practice indicates that women and weight lifting is an inappropriate combination. Heavy weight lifting has already been ruled out as an exercise choice for women. Because experience is always already in existence, each woman's individual experience of exercise was framed by discursively constructed experience in addition to the influence of discourse and discipline.

Further, discipline had a palpable effect on the behaviour of the women with whom I spoke. Many Foucaultian practices of discipline were visible, such as the production of docile bodies through surveillance and normalization. Confession took place with regularity, leading women to exercise in certain ways to improve their deficiencies. Once the women had confessed their failings, they then utilized various technologies of the self to remedy them. All of the disciplining effects came together to influence the exercise choices made by the women with whom I spoke.

Thus, discourses of femininity, fitness, healthism, and consumerism, when combined with Foucaultian theories of discipline and that of experience, did in fact have an effect on the exercise choices made by the women with whom I spoke. All were influenced by these discourses to some extent, and made exercise choices based on how they took up the effects of these discourses.

Studies such as the one by Pienaar and Bekker (2007) found similar relationships between discourses of health, sexual attractiveness, diet, and consumerism, but my study differed as I looked at the effect on exercise choices, as opposed to motivation to exercise. In addition, while I knew from the literature that a relationship existed among these four discourses, I was surprised at just how intimately these discourses were linked

for this group of women. I did not anticipate this degree of interrelatedness. The conflation of the four discourses is especially concerning when considering the effects on women. Each discourse props the other up, creating a “vicious cycle” of sorts, as everything circles to encourage women to develop normative, feminine bodies. For example, women are encouraged to exercise for health reasons, but the underlying desired effect is the physical change that will result. Discourses of healthism pressure women to be healthy through exercise, but really what is important is that a woman can fit into a pair of skinny jeans as a result of exercising. However, only certain types of exercise and certain bodies resulting from exercise are considered appropriate for women. Doing traditionally masculine exercise or exhibiting a more masculine body often calls a woman’s sexuality into question.

Judgements were sometimes made about women who did not exhibit the normative female form. These judgements were also an effect of the manner in which these discourses prop each other up to emphasize the importance of the normative female form. This is concerning for a number of reasons. One, female bodies that are outside the norm are silenced. That is, women who are larger than is acceptable are either not seen, or are punished for their lack of conformity. Because these bodies are undesirable, we often choose not to acknowledge them, because acknowledging them may begin to give them credibility. These bodies must be viewed as unhealthy and/or unfeminine for discourses of femininity, fitness, healthism, and consumerism to continue to encourage women to be feminine - by looking “healthy”, exercising in the appropriate manner, and being good consumers. Two, the fear of being judged may prevent some women from even attending a gym or beginning an exercise program. Because the larger than ideal

female body is silenced through discourses of femininity in particular, women who do not have a normative shape may avoid the gym space because they are intimidated by, or are concerned about being viewed negatively by, those who do have “better” bodies. The fear of being judged as less than acceptably feminine may also pressure women to make poor choices in order to develop a more normative form. Anorexia, bulimia, or excessive exercise are some possible negative behaviours that may result. The efforts made to develop an ideal body may be based on pressures from these discourses, particularly when they strategically draw off each other to perpetuate the necessity to have a normative body to be considered feminine. Because our society is still currently androcentric, women must conform to male dominated beauty standards. Anything less is considered a failure.

However, a possible benefit resulting from this study is the potential for resistance to these discourses as a result of the awareness of their interrelatedness. Knowing that these discourses essentially prop each other up to encourage women to work toward reshaping their bodies to be more physically desirable can open up spaces or gaps for resistance. For example, many of the women in my study were aware of the need to fight the “requirement” to be normatively feminine, and did attempt to resist this pressure. On occasion the resistance was active, as some women chose to engage in traditionally masculine activities, or accepted their less than normative bodies. Sometimes it was less visible. Simply being aware of the constructed nature of the normative feminine form, and not always taking up these discourses, can affect the degree of impact these discourses have. Others who view this resistance may be affected as well, and may begin to resist the influence these discourses exert on women. It is

possible that this resistance may slowly lessen or change these discourses, reducing the negative influence they have on women.

On a final note, my personal struggle with body image issues resulting from a lack of exercise and resultant weight gain continues, but has been affected by this study. Throughout the study I had been significantly swayed by discourses of femininity, fitness, healthism, and consumerism. I felt bad about myself for being fat, as it meant I was not taking responsibility for my own health. Following discourses of fitness, I had been doing significantly more cardiovascular exercise than weight lifting in an effort to hasten weight loss. I had also been monitoring my food intake closely, also in an effort to lose weight. Moreover, I focussed far more on my appearance than my fitness level at the moment, and chose exercises to assist me in reaching my appearance goals as opposed to fitness goals.

However, after performing this discourse analysis, and seeing how other women who exercise regularly conflate these four discourses, I have become more conscious of the effects of these discourses on my feelings about my body and myself. I have recently begun to worry less about my appearance and focus more on reaching the fitness goals I have set. Although it was concern for my appearance that brought me back to exercising, I realise I actually enjoy the physical activity and want to continue for benefits in addition to appearance. Having a more normative body is important to me, but I now recognize that other results are equally, if not more, important. For example, I want to be able to ride my bicycle for hours at a time again. I want to exercise because I enjoy the process. I will lift heavy weight in addition to doing cardiovascular exercise because I like feeling strong. I am paying for a trainer who helps me avoid worsening existing

injuries. I now actually want to *be* healthier, not just *look* healthier. Having an ideal body will always be important as that is still how women especially are judged and is how we judge others. But fortunately I now feel I can move beyond worrying solely about my appearance to a place where exercise becomes what it once was for me – something I truly enjoyed engaging in. I am not completely resisting discourses of femininity, fitness, healthism, and consumerism as I do believe that is possible, but I am more aware of the effects of them on my current exercise choices. The awareness of how each of these discourses works together to help normalize each other and in the process, encourages women to focus on their appearance may be the most useful result of this study, as it provides room for resistance to, or at least greater awareness of, the potential negative effects the conflation of these discourses can have on women and their exercise choices.

### **Limitations**

There are some limitations to this study. The fact that the interviewees were self-selecting no doubt had some effects. All of the participants who volunteered for the study exhibited a “normal” body shape. By this I mean no participants were at extremes of weight; none was exceptionally thin or overweight. All expressed general satisfaction with their bodies, despite recognizing that their bodies did not match the norm exactly. Two participants referred to themselves as shy, but still felt comfortable enough to provide detailed descriptions of their feelings and experiences. I suspect that women who felt unhappy with their bodies may have been reluctant to volunteer, as doing so would require talking about their body image. Similarly, it is possible that women of certain religious sects may have been excluded, as they may have felt uncomfortable speaking about their bodies. Some religions in the Lethbridge area have strict rules about attire and

behaviour for women. These rules may prevent both attending a gym, and possibly exercising in public in any way. I did not specifically inquire about religious affiliation, and none of the women with whom I spoke mentioned religion in relation to exercise choices. After analysing the transcripts, there was no indication that religion had an effect on the sixteen women I interviewed. However, it is possible that some women were excluded from inclusion in the study as a result of religious affiliation.

Women may also have been excluded from the study based on socioeconomic factors. There is a cost to belonging to a gym, and to purchasing items required for exercising. Because advertisements looking for participants were posted at local gyms throughout Lethbridge, only women who could afford gym memberships had the opportunity to see the posters and volunteer to be participants. At the University of Lethbridge, membership to the fitness centre is included in tuition fees. The Lethbridge College requires students to pay for gym membership, but at significantly reduced rates. However, at both institutions women wishing to use the gym would still be required to purchase items like running shoes and possibly technical clothing. To prevent this exclusion advertisements could have been posted at locations other than fitness centres. However, because I required participants who were regular exercisers, the most efficient way to locate these women was to advertise at gyms. It was thus not surprising that the women all worked in professional arenas, providing disposable income that could be spent on exercise. Being professionals, all of the women had attended or were attending post-secondary institutions. It was not my intention to limit the educational level of the participants in this study to those with post-secondary education, but it appears that happened regardless. The women were graduates or students of the University of

Lethbridge or another university, or of Lethbridge College. It is possible that having attained a particular educational level positioned these women in a specific way in relation to these discourses. That is, exercises choices made by this group of women may have been influenced by their particular combination of education, knowledge, and awareness of discourses circulating around fitness.

The majority of participants considered themselves to be Caucasian, reflecting the general population of Lethbridge. However, women who identify as a different race may be subject to different dominant discourses. It is possible that women of different races do not make exercise choices in relation to the same set of discourses. For example, different standards of femininity and dress requirements may affect the way in which women of different races exercise.

Another limitation of the self-selection process and the manner in which I advertised for participants is that I located only women who were already regular exercisers. Because all of the women in this study were committed exercisers prior to volunteering to be participants, they were invested in exercise pursuits, and considered exercise to be important and necessary for them. However, there are other groups who were excluded because of how and where I attempted to locate participants, such as those who reject exercise for some reason, who choose to exercise outside the gym setting, or who choose to exercise in ways not normally undertaken in the gym. Further study should be done to determine how and why women who reject exercising or who reject exercising in fitness centres frame their involvement or lack of involvement in exercise with regard to discourses of femininity, fitness, healthism, and consumerism.

While it is unfortunate that some women may have been excluded from my study, there was no deliberate attempt to exclude anyone based on any of these characteristics, and any exclusion occurred as a result of the self-selection process. However, it is important to note that the exercise choices of women of different cultural, religious or racial backgrounds, socioeconomic or educational statuses may be affected differently, or by different discourses altogether. Thus these results cannot be extrapolated to women who do not share characteristics similar to those in my study.

### **Future Research**

With regard to future research, attempting to draw some of the women excluded in the current study into participating might reveal additional clues as to how discourse affects women's exercise choices. It is possible that women with diverse backgrounds or different self-images might report being influenced in disparate ways, or by other discourses than the women in the current study.

Further study could be done to determine if other discourses also affect women's exercise choices. With regard to other discourses that appeared within this analysis, discourses of aging appeared with some regularity. Discourses of aging appeared to be linked to the four discourses initially identified in the literature. For example, the normative female form is young, not old. There is no frame of reference for an older, normative, female body. That is unintelligible, as discourses of femininity have ruled out older female bodies. The women with whom I spoke were aware of this, and when describing the ideal female body, all of the women referred to a young body. The women in my study were also concerned about the effects of aging on their health. Even the younger women were concerned that the choices they made when young would

significantly impact their lives as they aged. Here we can see a possible relationship between aging and healthism. Because our health is a personal responsibility, and because aging is considered a negative state in western culture, we must do everything we can to delay aging.

One of the ways we can address aging issues is through exercise, meaning that discourses of aging and fitness may be connected. Women are encouraged to undertake exercise to strengthen their core, as core strength is espoused as a key to preventing maintaining balance, and preventing falls. It is possible that discourses of aging may affect exercise choice as a result. Not surprisingly, discourses of aging may also be related to those of consumerism. We must consume products and services to deal with, and preferably prevent, aging. Women especially may be influenced by discourses of aging and consumerism. The effects of aging on women's exercise choices, particularly when examined in conjunction with discourses of femininity, fitness, healthism, and consumerism, is worthy of future research.

Because all of the women in my study appeared to be heterosexual, with the exception of one who claimed to be "fluid" in her sexuality, further study is warranted to determine if lesbian women are affected differently by these discourses, and make different exercise choices as a result. The concepts of heteronormativity and compulsory heterosexuality mean that exercise choices may be determined in part by the desire to be viewed as acceptably feminine and heterosexual. However, lesbian women may be affected by discourses of femininity in different ways. As a result, the relationship between the four discourses may be different for this group. Further study could be done to determine how the discourses of femininity, fitness, healthism, and consumerism

affect non-heterosexual women, and if there are other discourses at play, affecting their exercise choices.

Additionally, this study focused exclusively on women. Current research indicates that men are now feeling a similar pressure to exhibit an ideal body as well. It would be interesting to speak with men who exercise regularly to determine if they too are affected by dominant discourses of fitness, masculinity, healthism, and consumerism. Do male exercisers exercise in specific ways to emphasise masculinity, to produce a specific body type? Do discourses of consumerism affect the products and services males purchase with regard to exercising? Is it possible that discourses of healthism affect males as well as females? Do other discourses affect men's exercise choices? All of these questions could be researched to determine the effects of discourse on men's exercise choices. It would be interesting to see any similarities and differences in how men's and women's exercise choices are affected by dominant discourses specific to this time and place.

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## Appendix 1

### Interview Guide

#### INTERVIEW QUESTIONS – WOMEN’S EXERCISE CHOICE

1. How old are you?
2. What is your marital status?
3. Do you have children?
4. Do you identify with a particular race?
5. What type of work are you involved in?
6. Would you describe your work as mostly sedentary, somewhat active, or very active?
7. Define “fitness” for me, as you see it.
8. How do you know what “fit” is?
9. When did you choose to begin exercising?
10. Tell me how you started exercising.
11. Describe how you felt when you first went to a gym.
12. What were your initial reactions to the gym itself?
13. Were you weighed and/or measured in some way when you first when to a gym?
14. If so, describe how that made you feel.
15. How frequently do you engage in some type of physical activity?
16. Do you typically choose one type of activity over others?
17. If yes, what type of exercise would that be?
18. Do you avoid any types of exercise?
19. If so, what would that/those be?
20. Do you choose particular types of exercise for a specific reason, based on the effect it may have on your body?
21. If so, tell me what effects you see, or hope to see, as a result of this type of exercise.
22. If no, tell me why you choose this type of exercise.
23. Tell me how you feel about your own body at this moment in time.
24. Describe your image of the ideal female body.
25. What influences your definition of the ideal female body?
26. How closely do you think your body resembles the ideal female body as you have described it?
27. Do you worry about whether your body resembles your ideal?
28. Do you exercise in specific ways to more closely match your ideal?
29. Do you worry that by doing certain exercises your body may look less “feminine”?
30. When exercising, whether in the gym in classes, or elsewhere, do you think others are judging your body?
31. If so, in what ways?
32. If so, does this affect the way in which you exercise when in public places?
33. Does health play a role in why you exercise?
34. If so, in what ways?

35. How do you know what “healthy” is?
36. In relation to fitness, on what things do you spend money? E.g. shoes, clothes, etc
37. What about things like gym memberships, personal training, etc
38. Why do you spend this money?
39. With regard to exercise, what is/are your goal(s)?
40. What is it you hope to achieve through exercise?
41. Do you have any additional comments about exercising, your body, or your “ideal” female body image?

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Please feel free to contact me with any questions or concerns, or additional information you may have. Remember that you can withdraw from this study at any time between now and June 30, 2010.