A Moving Experience:
Exploring Women Runners Embodied Experience
and
Meanings of Body Ideals, Self-care, and Health

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Abstract

This research explores how seventeen women recreational runners experience their bodies through movement and how these embodied experiences influence their understanding of gendered body ideals, health, and self-care practices. I also incorporate my body story as a reflexive strategy to stay present through the research process. Drawing from feminist poststructural theory, I utilized a moving methodology of interviewing while walking or running to explore how the runners experience their bodies in motion. I focus on how they draw from their running practice as a potential pathway for questioning dominant narratives of body ideals that foster new ways of thinking about healthy or athletic bodies. I demonstrate how the women draw from dominant notions of body ideals to articulate the “runner’s body” while also resisting these ideals as they draw from their own embodied experience of running and witnessing diverse running bodies in the community. Two distinct running bodies emerged: the *High-Performance Running Body* and the *Serious Recreational Running Body.* These distinct discursive constructions of who can be “a runner” resisted conventional notions of the runner’s body, which allowed multiple subject positions to become available to claim the runner’s identity. I also present how health and self-care are understood in the context of their running practice. Finally, I provide a discussion related to the importance of body-inclusive communities within physical activity and sports settings.Through this research, I am contributing to the growing body of literature on the benefits of using a moving methodology to engage the body in motion as methodologically generative that bridges a gap between the discursive body and the material body.

General Summary

This research explores how seventeen women recreational runners experience their bodies through movement and how these embodied experiences influence their understanding of gendered body ideals, health, and self-care practices. I also incorporate my body story. Drawing from feminist poststructural theory, I utilized a moving methodology of interviewing while walking or running to explore how the runners experience their bodies in motion. I focus on how running allows them to question societal norms around “ideal,” healthy, and athletic bodies. Additionally, I identify elements of their running practice that support positive embodiment and ways to support women’s engagement in physical activity. I demonstrate how the women draw from societal messages to describe the real “runner’s body” while also resisting these narrow definitions by drawing on their own body and witnessing diverse running bodies in the community. Two distinct running bodies emerged: the *High-Performance Running Body* and the *Serious Recreational Running Body.* The *Serious Recreational Running Body* is described not by body size or shape, but by the fact that the body can run. I also present how health and self-care are understood in the context of their running practice. Finally, I discuss the importance of body-inclusive communities within physical activity and sports settings.

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First, my deep gratitude and acknowledgement of my supervisory committee. I read a study once that said the two most significant predictors of a student completing their graduate work were a deep interest and enthusiasm about their topic (because, at some point, you will become profoundly uninterested and unenthused about the topic) and a supportive supervisory committee. Well, I was fortunate to have both. Natalie, thank you for taking a leap of faith in me, especially when I changed topics midway to align with the first predictor of graduate work success. Your depth and breadth of knowledge gently nudged me beyond my comfort zone, further developing my critical thinking and writing skills. Pam, thank you for the many coffee dates where you grounded and reassured me that this is possible. I appreciate your attention to the fine details and clear guidance on the research process. Your steady presence and guidance in pulling all the pieces together kept the finish line in sight- just one step at a time.

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A Moving Experience:

Exploring Women Runners Embodied Experience and Meanings of Body Ideals, Self-care, and Health

Chapter 1

I begin this thesis by presenting my body-becoming story to reflect on the story that lives inside my bones, muscles, and evolving flesh. My body's story has shaped my professional and academic life. I concur with Ellingson, who posits that “we make sense through our bodies and then reach for language to express our ideas” (Ellingson, 2017, p. 20). My profession as a Dietitian and my interest in pursuing a research project on women’s embodied experiences of movement is an effort to put into language my embodied experience of healing and empowerment through running and other movement-based practices.

With Celeste Snowber’s gentle nudging of “write what you dare not write,” I open with my personal re-collection of re/membering my embodied experience of reconnecting with my body after a period of disconnection. My story may be mundane or ordinary, perhaps alluding to the unfortunate cultural collusion of propagating the “tyranny of slenderness” that females experience (Bordo, 2003). Nonetheless, the power of sharing stories lies in relating and finding ourselves in someone else’s “embodied everydayness” (Throsby, 2018, p. 243). Scholars who bring lived experience into their research emphasize that our stories can be informative, not because we have an extraordinary story; rather, it is our being “commonplace” that is relatable and can illuminate power dynamics in our everyday lives (Crawley, 2014, p. 154).

Beginning with my story lays the groundwork for my efforts to keep “the body” in full view in both my clinical role and academia. In some ways, keeping the body in view is not my choice, as it is often brought explicitly into clinical practice when clients comment that my body “looks” like a dietitian. In this research project, I am including my story in efforts to clearly situate my positionality with both the research and the research participants. It is essential to remember, that in all research interactions our bodies are also intra-acting with participants in ways that we often cannot fully predict based on intersecting aspects of our embodied identity. I hope that this work contributes to the value of pushing beyond the academic imperative of the “disembodied researcher” (Ellingson, 2017) to engage in research that creates a fresh, dynamic, body of knowledge.

So, with humility and vulnerability, I begin with me.

1.1 My Body-Becoming Story

It is 1997. I am in grade seven. My eyes are fixed on the grey sky as I pump my arms and take sharp inhales and exhales while running down Carrick Drive. I am running in a three-mile race; actually, I am racing this three-mile run. It would appear that I am the only girl in my grade who took this event seriously and honestly trained for it—a very early premonition on where my life would eventually head.

As part of our health class, our teacher, who happened to be an avid marathon runner and aerobics instructor, declared that we would have a three-mile run event. The details are sparse in my memory, but I remember a clear voice saying after this challenge dangled in the air, “you are going to win.” So, without knowing how to train for such an event, I set the goal of making it around a 1.5 km loop from my house. I recruited my neighbor as my training partner, who was a year younger but much taller and, on many accounts, the athletic one. I clearly remember one of our ‘training runs’ which was some form of run/walking from pole to pole (which I am pleased to say is a basic running technique called the ‘Fartlek,’ the Swedish word for ‘speed play’) when my friend who went out faster, started to slow down and I passed her comfortably. “Hmmm, this is strange. I thought she was the athletic one"; this became a pivotal moment of experiencing a different kind of potential in my body. The next significant milestone was when I made it around the 1.5 km loop without stopping. I took this benchmark as an indicator of sufficient training for the upcoming race. Unfortunately, I endearingly overlooked the word 'miles' and thought the race was three kilometers when in fact, it was closer to five kilometers.

So back to the big event. I am running down Carrick Drive and comfortably passing all the girls who started way too fast for such an endurance event. For some strange reason, a Care Bears[11] episode from my childhood with the moral of the story being "slow and steady wins the race" was on repeat in my mind. I feel my legs burning. The sensation was all familiar to the spontaneity of childhood play where my racing heart and aching muscles would gleefully impel my body to drop to the soft earth. However, this time was different, my body had a clear aim—cross the finish line. I turned the final corner towards the field for the last lap and knew I had won the race. I crossed the line. That was a pivotal moment in my evolving puberty surging body—an initiation of sorts. I am capable. I can achieve a goal I set my mind to. My previously lanky form that had begun to soften may actually be ok. Perhaps there is something about this body of mine that I can feel grateful for. I still have that Trophy on my bookshelf.

Despite that embodied success, I packed my sneakers away. Fast-forwarding through junior high, my memories comprise mainly of doing what I could to appear like I was participating in physical education class. I was part of the unfortunate trend where girls move from being 'participators to spectators.' The radically inflated sense that everyone is watching me and not wanting to be overly sweaty in the middle of the school day kept me moving gingerly and half-heartedly during the sports-focused physical education class.

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[1] Care Bears was a children's cartoon from the 1980's

In grade nine, my friend and I signed up for a YMCA gym membership and we started going to the gym three or four nights a week. I cannot remember what prompted this decision, but it certainly had something to do with modifying our bodies to look like the girls in our YM magazines (Your Magazine). It also could have been based on the time we were walking home from school and a group of boys from our class drove past us, and one of them (and I still remember precisely who) screamed out the car window, “fat asses.” Going to the gym was another test in navigating an uncomfortable terrain of gaining confidence to use the equipment and feeling like we had a right to take up space among the boys and men. In reality, we probably spent most of the time in the sauna. My friend and I sheepishly grinned at each other when her father commented that we must be working out really hard based on how red our cheeks always were. This semi-committal relationship to the gym and working out would continue for years until grade twelve, when I finally ‘got serious.’

Grade 11. The year 2001. It is Lent[2] and time to make a wholly dissociated from any religious grounding decision of what I should sacrifice this year. Naturally, it falls to what food I will give up. I decided on potato chips and fast food. After piano lessons, I remember sitting in the car eating a KFC chicken burger, knowing it would be my last for a while (well, forty days if my resolve could hold). To this day, I have not eaten a potato chip. A tortilla chip, yes- it is not potato-based, I have my loopholes, so I do not break my twenty-year plus streak. That year, I changed my diet by switching to whole grain bread, not drinking regular soft drinks, and reducing the amount of ‘junk’ I regularly consumed. I continued making minor changes, which I believe stemmed from my growing awareness about the importance of eating more nutritiously. Any nutritional knowledge likely came from my own reading. During that period, the focus of nutrition, physical activity and ‘well-being’ were not incorporated into the school curriculum to the same depth we see today.

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[2] Lent is part of the Christian liturgical calendar of the 40 days leading up to Easter.

Grade 12. The Turning Point. It is September. A family friend comes to the door for my mom, and as soon as she sees me, she says, “Wow…you look great, have you lost weight?” I uncomfortably switch topics but think, “Hmmm, I am hardly even trying to lose weight, imagine if I put my mind to it”. Enter Weight Watchers. At the time, I did not know how to approach intentional weight loss, but luckily for me, my house already contained Weight Watchers manuals that my mother had (note: Mom, I love you and the unfolding of this story is not your fault, rather a reflection of the cultural norm that strategically promote dieting and body dissatisfaction). Beginning a diet program seemed like a completely natural thing to do, an *inevitably of sorts* being a woman. I gathered up all the little Weight Watchers books and pamphlets and the sliding scale ruler that helped you figure out how many points are in a portion of food based on the calories. According to the book, based on my weight and height, my point allotment was eighteen, the lowest possible points because it is essential to point out, I was not overweight by cultural standards. “Ok, so how much can I eat, and what am I not allowed to eat?” This phrase would be on repeat for the following number of years. Scanning the points book, I saw that one tablespoon of peanut butter was eight points. “Eight points!!, there goes peanut butter as it is almost half my day’s allowance”. At that point, fruit and vegetables counted as points (Weight Watchers has continuously changed its food rules over the years, which is a fascinating study in and of itself and for a Foucauldian analysis of the program, see Heyes, 2006). A banana was two points, but an apple only one point. I will stick to apples. Butter, oil, nuts take up too many points. And so, it began. The micro-analyzing every morsel of food that went into my mouth. I interrogated my poor mother on every ingredient she cooked with. I was an absolute nightmare to go with to a restaurant. Churning, acidy stomach- it's ok Holly, only three more hours until suppertime.

January of 2002. New Year's Resolution time. Weight Watchers is working. I have probably lost 15 pounds—time to take it up a notch. Since I am on the lower end of the weight spectrum, I figured I only had ten more pounds to lose. Conveniently, I found a book by Denise Austen called "Lose those Last 10 Pounds" that provided six weeks' worth of meal plans. The food rules start to increase. No white flour, minimal fat, a treat only once a week. Eat breakfast. Lunch is not a minute before noon, a snack can be after 3:00 pm, supper is at 6:00 pm, and no eating after supper (which I remember an Oprah Winfrey show talking about not eating after 7:00 pm). When I say lunch was at noon, it was not 11:57 pm; it was 12:00. It was ok if I ate after 12:00. I just could not start before. Before band practice would start at lunch, I would stare at the time slowly ticking away on the microwave that would grant my self-imposed restriction to allow me to heat my veggie burger. I would let myself suck on sugar-free candies to try to quiet the incessant gurgles in my stomach. I cannot stop thinking about food. I spend hours trying to fit family meals into Denise Austen's meal guide. But hey- this is totally normal right?

Prom time approaches, and I am at my lightest weight. I remember being completely pleased when my aunt came over to see me in my grad dress and she said "jeez you're the size of my leg." Mission accomplished- yet it wasn't. It was never enough. Although I knew I was not 'fat,' now, I was obsessed and fearful of gaining the weight back. This proved to be difficult as an increasing number of family members and friends were making concerning comments about my weight.

May 2002. Turning point. My mother and I are in the grey dingey locker room of the YMCA when she looks at me and says, "Holly, I am weighing you." "Oh no," I thought. I keep on my grey jogging pants and navy-blue Roots sweater in hopes it will support my cause. I step on the scale, close my eyes and hold my breath, praying the stored air may increase my weight. Mom sees the number all she says is “Oh Holly.” Something finally hit me. I think I had gone too far.

Later that day, mom told me that if I did not get to a certain amount of weight, she was sending a referral to the eating disorder program. “That was not happening. I can do this on my own”, my independent self said. And so, it began the long journey back to rebuilding a sense of trust with my body and having to dismantle all the food rules that brought a dysfunctional but beautiful sense of control to my life. Years later, mom would tell me about a time in the peak of my eating disorder when she and my brother were waiting in the car for me after band practice. My usually silent and seemingly non-observant brother said to my mom, “Holly always looks so sad”.

September 2002. First-year University. By this point, I had made some progress with not being *quite* so rigid with my eating. It was brutal at times. My constant travel companion was the fear of loosening the food restrictions and that I would endlessly gain weight without my comforting rules. However, slowly but surely, I challenged some of my food rules. Eat a pita on white bread…ok, I did not explode. I feel hungry at 2:13 pm…just have your snack. That September, for some reason, I decided I wanted to accomplish a running goal. I was always so intrigued with the few runners I would see around town. There was something kind of raw and crazy about them. I wanted in. I discovered the Running Room store and saw they were offering a 10 km Clinic. I told my parents, but they were not overly thrilled at the idea of me potentially becoming obsessive with something else. Interestingly, throughout my eating disorder period, I would exercise but never obsessively. Food restriction was my game, and seriously, half the time I was too physically and mentally exhausted to exert myself. A typical morning,

> *It is 5:30 am, I am standing over the toaster staring at the high fibre, dense bread that I allow myself to have with peanut butter as I read somewhere that it is good to "fuel" before you work out. I am practically salivating since I have not eaten since supper time the night before. Pop! the toast springs up. I snatch it. I have to wait until I sit at the kitchen table to eat it. Another rule. No eating while standing.*

I made an agreement with my parents that I can join the clinic as long as I maintain my weight. On the first night of the clinic, I show up nervously. I walk down the narrow stairwell to the dinghy basement where the group gathers. I look around. Primarily women, and I am clearly the youngest there. I can vaguely hear the instructor talking as I am distracted by the training program that includes a 16 km run. "What the!? 16 km??" I cannot even conceptualize what that distance looked like, let alone how my body will travel the distance. We get ready to go out for our first run. The instructor is unnervingly vague on how long we will be running. I gravitate to a couple of women as we start running in the cloak of fog and impending dusk. We pleasantly fall into chatter as we move together. We run past a restaurant and the smell of deep-fried food smells inviting on this chilly evening. We make it back to the Running Room, laughing and chatting like we have always known each other. Jason, the instructor, says "You just ran seven km!" What, really? How? It did not feel like that bad. I have never run seven km before." Here I discovered that running might appear to be an individual sport, but the companioning of other moving bodies seems to bend the sense of time and distance.

The 16 km run. Another grey day. We are starting downtown and running 8 km towards a local park and turning around. I am nervous. What if I have to pee or my leg cramps? What if I lose the group? We set off for the final long run that will prepare us for the 10 km fun race we will have at the end. I cannot recall most of the run, but I remember crossing the 16 km mark that finished at the downtown Harbour front. I was elated. It may have well been summiting Mount Everest. I reached my goal. My body can achieve a goal when I remain faithful to a plan. Now almost twenty years later, I have run 14 marathons, six ultramarathons, a ½ Ironman and numerous other races, joy-fully and sometimes painfully in the company of others. That 16 km run began the inward journey of focusing on what my body looked like to what my body could do. I became a runner.

1.2 Moving Beyond the Disembodied Divided Self in Clinical Practice and Academia

I am explicitly bringing myself into the research process through engaging with narratives of self to challenge disembodied ways of knowing and the 'author at a distance' stance of more traditional research approaches (Ellingson, 2017; Sparkes, 1999). I identify as female, white, heterosexual, able-bodied, raised in an upper-middle-class family. Currently, I am in my early 40s, have three children under the age of ten, and I am slender in size. I am a Registered Dietitian with a sports nutrition and eating disorders focus. My lived experience of having an eating disorder and finding deep healing through running has shaped my professional life. One example of bringing these worlds together is in 2009, when I started a non-profit program called the *G.I.R.L. Run Club* that provided a safe space for junior high girls to enjoy movement in a body-positive environment. My hope was like my pivotal body shift moment in grade seven, experiencing a sense of empowerment in my body after the 3-mile run; I wanted to provide a space for these young girls to experience embodied joy. At the very least, a seed could be planted of body possibilities.

1.2.1 Personal Experience as Relationally Therapeutic

My ‘insider position’ (Berger, 2015) of disordered eating and negative body image, has shaped my approach to counseling clients, as I situate my therapeutic orientation within a feminist framework (Bloom et al, 1994; Brown & Jasper, 1993) and an embodied approach (see Cook-Cottone, 2020). I also always weigh the benefits of self-disclosure of my history and lived experience within the counseling relationship, being aware of the potential for countertransference. Similarly, within the academic context, Markula (2003) describes a similar struggle and unease with including her body narratives in the academic environment, wondering is this “personal bodily confession a disguise for therapy?” (p. 46). Markula draws from Foucault’s conceptualization of the confessional as a perpetual societal control mechanism. Foucault states, “one confesses one’s sins, one’s thoughts and desires, one’s illnesses and troubles; one goes on telling, with the greatest precision, whatever is most difficult to tell” (1990, p. 59). We see the evidence of the confessional on many social media platforms, when individuals share their transgressions of eating practices (I ate this ‘bad’ food) or sharing ‘before and after’ pictures.

There is an artistry to developing the embodied awareness of forming relationships grounded in deep listening and appropriate self-disclosure. Foucault appears to be missing the human-to-human connection that comes from sharing our story. Our personal stories, when shared with the intention to connect and resonate, can be a source of healing. Sharing stories through research can also become a source of healing that can provide insights that either resonate or perhaps challenge our perspective or experience.

From my lived experience and listening informally to the stories of others who have found a sense of peace and agency in their body through movement, I have incorporated physical activity, when appropriate, into the healing plan with clients. My approach aligns with Hendricks and Plummer's (2013) discussion on re-thinking wellness from a feminist perspective who argue that fitness can be a pathway for individual, community and social empowerment stating,

> One only needs to sit in still and take a few deep breaths to innately feel it —wellness is about physical practice. Inherently selfish, personal endeavours, physical motion and meditation provide pathways to connect the external with the internal, and to revel what can be found in that space. (p.100)

These ideas about wellness will be expanded upon in the sections on self-care and health. A primary impetus of this research is grappling with the important critique of how mainstream fitness, health and wellness are constructed in ways that valorize certain bodies and often lead to the uptake of unhealthy behaviours such as dieting and excessive exercise. Yet, this creates a paradigm that makes it challenging to promote creative, inclusive, supportive, and empowering ways to support individuals in finding joyful ways to move their bodies in empowering ways.

1.2.2 Contributing to the Body of Knowledge: Embodied Research

Just as I approach my professional work with the awareness that I cannot be disconnected from my own body story, this research project also aspires to not fall into the academic trap of becoming as Sparkes (2003) names the *divided self*. As will be expanded on, the choice of a moving methodology was to bring my body-self alongside the participant and move together which fostered a more intimate interaction. This work emerged from my endeavoring to weave the personal and academic together.

Along with bringing my lived experience into my clinical practice, I have also often struggled to see how my experience fits the feminist critical scholarship on physical activity. As Andrew Sparkes (2003) eloquently describes that his shift towards including more autoethnographic approaches to research was premised on his experience that despite his knowledge of the scholarly literature, it did not translate into being able to understand the "the various epiphanies in my life that revolved around issues of embodiment" (p. 61). Similarly, as I reflect on my running practice, I experience it as a source of liberation from a preoccupation with focusing on my body. Yet this runs counter to the feminist critique of physical activity and sports potentially contributing to body dissatisfaction (Gimlen, 2002). Arguably, it could be because I embody the cultural 'norm,' but alas, this is the insidious nature of the cultural norms of the female body. As van Amsterdam (2013) suggests, unlike whiteness which can be understood as an unmarked position that is invisible and escapes attention, slenderness does not work as an unmarked position in the same way. The author argues that "because of the idea that *everyone* is at risk of becoming fat, slenderness as the unmarked position is not effortless. It requires constant self-surveillance and self-discipline to be maintained" (p.165).

Is this what drives the sense of freedom and agency when I revel in my body completing a goal distance? I feel resistance to Gimlin's (2002) notion that physical activity is mainly an act of oppressive 'body work.' Yes, Foucault's conceptualization of the 'docile body,' power, and discipline provide a critical lens to reflect on our intentions, but are we really a bunch of "cultural dupes" (Budgeon, 2003, p. 39)? Though my goal of running is not body modification per se, I would be kidding myself and others to say that my running does not influence my body size and perhaps my perceived or actual flexibility in what I am 'able to eat.' I seem to be in the same predicament as Markula (2014), who attempted to teach Pilates in a way that does not collaborate with the conflation of fitness means thinness.   How do I engage with the critical feminist scholarship on the body while acknowledging my disciplined and often intense running practice without being a "failed feminist" (Longhurst, 2012; Olive & Thorpe, 2011)?

Faulkner (2019) contends that running is a feminist practice that is a fruitful path to exploring women's embodiment. She suggests that exploring women runners' bodily knowledge and perspectives can elucidate dominant cultural messages that in turn shape how women come to make sense of our bodies and specifically who gets to be a "real runner" (p. 114). Likewise, Willer (2021) reflects that since women's bodies are in part constructed and understood through a cultural discursive system, "running is a feminist act that both shapes and reveals myself to me" (p.1181) to provides a productive lens reconcile the divide between the discursive and the material body.

1.2.3 The Material Paradox of the Theoretical Body

Feminist and critical scholars engaged in deconstructing notions of health, risk, aging, and normative body sizes, have contested that physical activity and other health-promoting behaviours are often grounded in neo-liberal ideology, which perpetuates individual responsibility for achieving health and maintaining a youthful appearance (Harjunen, 2017; Murray, 2012; Pronger, 2002; Rail & Beausoleil, 2003; Rice, 2014; Wright & Harwood, 2011). Carol Spitzack has aptly described this as the 'aesthetics of health' (as cited in Markula, 1993).

Furthermore, the prescriptive approach to physical activity within public health, sports, and the wider fitness domains often perpetuate the notion that the body is an object to be "maintained, improved, treated and competed" (Greenleaf & Hauff, 2019). Of notable concern is the documented prevalence of eating disorders among females and males within the sporting context, particularly aesthetically based sports or sports that emphasize leanness (Bratland-Sanda & Sundgot-Borgen, 2013; Sundgot-Borgen, & Torstveit, 2004; Torstveit et. al, 2008) or weight-to-power ratios such as rowing (Gillbanks et al., 2022). Researchers must continue to study the risk factors for eating disorders and body dissatisfaction and the protective factors to create body-positive spaces within sporting and movement-focused spaces (Cooke-Cottone, 2020, Cunningham & Pickett, 2020; Pickett & Cunningham, 2017a, 2017b; Pickett & Cunningham, 2018; Piran, 2017).

1.3 Feminism and Fitness

Appreciating the necessity and value of a feminist critique of health promotion, when looking specifically at physical activity, I align with Brabazon (2006), who contends that she is “still not prepared to leave women’s sporting bodies pathologized in the discourse of eating disorders” and “why is it that the male sporting body is validated, while the female sporting body is medicated?” (p. 65). Likewise, it has been noted that fitness is rarely defined well in feminist social science scholarship. Fitness is often presented as being synonymous with discipline and strict adherence to exercise focusing on the goal of body modification −typically thinness or leanness (Brabazon, 2006; Scott-Dixon, 2008).

As a sweeping generalization, there is a sentiment among feminist thinking that the current societal beauty ideals can be damaging to women. Consequently, in order to not perpetuate the “beauty myth” (Wolf, 1997), Hendricks and Plummer (2013) evocatively argue that “many feminist eschew self-care through physical movement altogether and call it liberation” (p. 105). Furthermore, some may dismiss the “fitness-minded woman as being manipulated by patriarchal beauty norms, seeking to cash in on the social capital promised to the thin and beautiful” (Hendricks & Plummer, 2013, p. 104). Conversely, Scott-Dixon (2008), a recreational strength athlete, posits that the feminist critique of fitness often does not engage with the primary literature in physiology but draws on secondary data published in mainstream media sources. In sports science milieus, fitness is defined as the ‘power to do’ that enables one’s capacity to complete a specific set of tasks (Siff & Verkhoshanksy, as cited in Scott Dixon, 2008,

p. 25). Scott-Dixon (2008) suggests that framing fitness as the ‘power to do’ is a more productive entry to theorize fitness and physical activity possibilities for women.

Literature from diverse sports and leisure activities finds a similar connection between the ‘power to do’ or the embodied knowing of ‘I can’ as a liberating experience for women. Examples include adventure training in firefighting (Yarnal, Hutchinson, & Hsueh-Wen, 2006), functional fitness programs such as CrossFit (Dawson, 2017), rock climbing (Chisholm, 2008), rugby (Chase, 2006), triathlon (Cronan & Scott, 2008), and strength-and-power based sports (Mayoh, Jones, & Prince, 2018; Scott-Dixon, 2008).

1.3.1 Tyranny of Slenderness: When Critique and Compliance Collide

This dismissal of physical activity is illuminated by Robyn Longhurst (2012) who identifies as a critical feminist scholar who critiques discourses of body ideals for women and advocates for the Health at Every Size model. In her autobiographical account of her paradoxical experience of critiquing the tyranny of slimness while at the same time desiring to be thin, she honestly reflects on her experience of weight loss, primarily achieved through dieting and a self-acknowledged hypervigilance of her eating and weighing herself, saying “My own behaviors—being acutely aware of every scrap of food or sip of drink that enters my mouth, getting on scales daily and feeling incredibly anxious about regaining weight—mark my body paradoxically as both compliant and resistant, disciplined and disordered” (p. 880). Due to the relevance of her reflections on my research, it is worth quoting her at length as she reflects on her focus of food but not exercise:

> I was determined to shed kilos and while I disciplined my body with an iron will in relation to food, I did not do the same in relation to exercise (meaning work out at a gym, take part in an exercise class, play sport, run, jog, cycle, or swim) which is widely touted

> as having health benefits. I became a highly disciplined subject who for all intense purposes could be seen to be living within the bounds of a highly repressive regime in relation to food, but not in relation to exercise. […] When people asked if I had been exercising to lose weight I took pleasure in voicing my resistance explaining that while I was prepared to eat less in order to reduce my body size I was not prepared to exercise despite the supposed health benefit. (p. 211)

Throsby and Gimlin (2010) also grapple with their own embodied experiences of conducting research within a feminist orientation with their article aptly called "Critiquing thinness and wanting to be thin." They contend that "feminist epistemology or politics should be understood not so much as a standard that we must compel ourselves to conform to, but instead, as an effort to balance our integrity with that of the research data" (p. 114). Despite the critiques, it is evident that with intentionality, physical activity, and sports can become a space for fostering empowering bodily experiences and positive embodiment.

Notwithstanding the empowering possibilities, the literature on wellness, fitness and sports "occupies a murky space that is simultaneously feminist and anti-feminist" (Hendricks & Plummer, 2013, p. 101). As such, my research explores how engaging in the specific movement of running may facilitate agency for resisting cultural norms of the female body. I will now provide an overview of the research purpose and objectives of this research.

1.4 Research Purpose

This research explores how female recreational runners experience their bodies through movement and how these embodied experiences influence their understanding of gendered body ideals, health, and self-care practices. Through a feminist poststructural framework, I utilized a moving methodology to "engage the force of the moving active body" (Markula, 2014, p. 283) to explore how women recreational runners experience their bodies through movement to gain insight into which, if any, body experiences become the basis for questioning dominant narratives of body ideals and may result in new ways of thinking about healthy or athletic bodies. I am contributing to the growing body of literature on the benefits of using a moving methodology to engage the body in motion as methodologically generative that bridges a gap between the discursive body and the material body.

1.5 Research Objectives

1. To explore women's experiences and meaning-making of their running practice;
2. To explore how women who run negotiate dominant discourses on body ideals, health, and self-care practices;
3. To identify elements of running that foster spaces for negotiating dominant discourses on body ideals, health, and self-care practices;
4. To identify aspects of running practices that may support positive embodiment and alternative/subversive discourses on women's experiences of physical activity.

1.6 Significance of Research

My proposed research will contribute to the continued theorization of using a feminist poststructural approach to the texts that emerge from moving bodies and positioning the moving body as the focus of analysis. Focusing on the moving body creates space for embodied knowledge to arise and may provide fresh insight into the discourses women are drawing from and also resisting when describing their body experiences, self-care, and notions of health. This work aims to contribute to a gap in the current body of knowledge on the nuanced ways taking up the running identity shapes women's experience of their own bodies and how they construct and negotiate the "runner's body." As a clinician who works with girls and women to develop a positive relationship with food and physical activity, this research aims to contribute broader insights into how physical activity can be conceptualized as a healing modality. This research also explores the value of bringing our complex and often chaotic embodied selves into the entire research process, including being as transparent as possible in my own body story.

I return to Pirkko Markula's provocative question of whether it is possible to "practice movement differently beyond the biopolitics of neo-liberalism"; I hope this project will contribute to a deeper and more nuanced understanding of the ways that women struggle, negotiate, grapple with, and resist oppressive body ideals, through their lived experience of moving in their bodies. I aim to contribute to the expanding *body* of work that gently reminds us that we indeed have bodies, and the significance of being transparent in acknowledging that our bodies bring research to life. Our bodies are never silent or invisible in our research interactions (Kannen, 2013). Since "researchers begin with the body," the courageous act of honouring our own embodied presence and an active engagement with embodiment can, according to Ellingson (2017), "enhance scholars' ability to produce high quality research and enlarges our capacity as public intellectuals to spark positive social change" (pp. 1, 2). On this note, I invite you to join me on the messy, joyful, chaotic, and sweaty embodied journey of textualizing the moving body.

Chapter 2

Literature Review

Physical activity is widely accepted as an important contributor to physical and mental health and is a common target for health promotion (Blair & Morris, 2009; Brown, et al., 2007; Faulkner, et al., 2015; Lee, et al., 2012; Penedo & Dahn, 2005; Warburton et al., 2006). It has been suggested that physical activity benefits individuals and the broader community by building the capacity to thrive and flourish (Faulkner et al., 2015). Participation in movement-based practices or sports has also been widely shown to be an avenue for women's empowerment and has been an active target for feminists who have been working toward increasing opportunities and access for women (Birrell & Cole, 1994; Bolin & Granskog, 2012; Costa & Guthrie, 1994; Kennedy & Markula, 2011; Mansfield et al, 2018; Roth & Basow, 2004; Theberge & Birrell; Yarnal, Hutchinson, & Hsueh-Wen, 2006).

2.1 Feminist Approaches to Studying Physical Activity and Sports

Generally speaking, feminist research on female experiences or participation in sports and physical activity has taken two approaches (Markula & Kennedy, 2011). The first approach has been a critical examination of textual and visual discourses circulating among popular media (Duncan, 1994; Dworkin & Wachs, 2009; Jette, 2006; Markula 2001; McGannon, et al., 2012; Seyidoglu, et al., 2022) or fitness and health promotion material (Eskes, Duncan, & Miller, 1998; Rice, 2014). In today's hyper-connected world, increased attention has been paid to social media's proliferation of images and messaging in the form of "Fitsperation" that targets women (Toffoletti & Thorpe, 2021). Analyzing these popular media texts and images presents the 'ideal' female body as thin, youthful, and toned and explicitly conflates the slender body with the healthy or 'fit' body.

Even prior to the emergence of online social media, circulating images of body ideals were still widely circulated. Duncan (1994), for example, applied a Foucauldian analysis to the popular *Shape* magazine and suggested that these normative images serve as a form of panopticon power that diverts women's surveillance and gaze toward their bodies and behaviours. Additionally, the 'confessional' style narratives of women's weight loss stories from Duncan's (2004) research reinforce the necessity of public confessions of uncontrollable eating behaviours or lack of exercise as an essential component to achieving the perfect female body.

The second approach in feminist research of sport and physical activity has shifted from textual analysis to exploring women's lived experiences of movement-based or sports practices (Kennedy & Markula, 2011; Markula, 2003). These explorations employ diverse methodological approaches, including ethnography (Beal, 2018; Griffin, 2012), autoethnography (Throsby, 2013, 2016, 2018; Markula, 2011), narrative inquiry (Bennet, Clarke, Kowalski & Croker, 2017), participant observation (Humberstone & Cutler-Riddick, 2015), and phenomenology (Allen-Collinson, 2011; Mayoh, Jones & Prince, 2018). There has also been a focus on the lived experience of aging women's engagement in physical activity and leisure. Examples include a focus on menopause or midlife changes (Parry & Shaw, 1999; Piran, 2017), exercisers who identify as large (Mansfield, 2011; Sniezek, 2001; Sykes & McPhail, 2008), classified as 'elite veteran' runners (Tulle, 2007), competitive athletes (Dionigi, 2005, 2006), fitness instructors over the age of fifty (Poole, 2001), and women over the age of sixty who identify as physically active (Benett et al., 2017; Kluge, 2002; Phoenix & Orr, 2014; Phoenix & Bell, 2019).

Additional studies have occurred within an exercise setting such as the gym (Paulson, 2005; Tulle & Dorrer, 2012) and with women participating in yoga classes (Humberstone & Cutler-Riddick, 2015) or outdoor adventure activities (Wharton, 2018). Critical feminist research has also examined women’s negative experiences within cultures of sports and physical education, often stemming from weight-stigmatizing messages and body-oppressive practices (Pickett & Cunningham, 2018a; Russell, 2020; Sykes & McPhail, 2008) that also situate some groups as “Other” (Baldwin, 2023; Williams et. al, 2022).

Taking these two predominant areas of focus, Markula and Kennedy (2011) suggest that an inadvertent binary may have emerged: a binary between the oppressive media images and the construction of the exercise experience as an innate act of resistance. In other words, the embodied exercise experience has become a more authentic representation of femininity than that of media representations. The authors suggest that this may misconstrue lived experience as an act of resisting feminine bodily norms by not acknowledging the complex negotiating of discourses that women continuously navigate. They also point out that these embodied ‘acts of resistance’ have had minimal impact in changing the dominant discourses of the fitness industry.

There is a push towards understanding body size and health as a social construction, yet in the words of Wellard (2019) we are left with “abstract bodies in text” (p.66) versus the sensuous, breathing, sweating, enfleshed body that experiences pain and pleasure. The literature explored for this study aims to pull threads from discursive constructions of bodies and health while also weaving in the “heavy materiality of embodiment” (Norman & Moola, 2019, p. 498) by including studies drawing from lived experience.

2.2 Overview of Chapter

This chapter presents the literature that provides the foundation for this study. It identifies literature that examines how female runners experience their bodies through movement and how these experiences influence their understanding of body ideals and their construction of their running selves. Additionally, it draws in literature focused on how identifying as a runner shapes the meaning-making of health and self-care. The literature is presented in six distinct sections: 1) theoretical background guiding the research that incorporates postsructuralism, feminist theory and feminist theories of the body, body image, and embodiment, 2) health and self-care, 3) biopower, biopedagoies, and the healthy subject, 4) conceptualizing physical activity through the lens of resistance and agency, 5) intersectionality, and 6) research on women runners. Specific to this study, I highlight the literature that guided the critical examination of discourses pertaining to women's meaning-making of their running and how this shaped their understanding of body ideals, health, and self-care.

The first section presents the theoretical approach that guides this research to help situate key concepts that are interwoven throughout the dissertation. I draw from a feminist poststructural orientation. I then move into Michel Foucault's concepts of power, agency, biopolitics, and the docile body. It is essential to note that I am drawing from helpful concepts from Foucault, but do not limit this research to a Foucauldian analysis. Next, I moved into my discussion, called "Feminist Theories of the Body, Body Image, and Embodiment," I provide a general overview of body image and discuss how 'the body' is conceptualized from different theoretical perspectives, such as phenomenology and poststructuralism. I particularly emphasize the feminist poststructural approach that provides the framework that shapes my methodology. I include a selection of definitions of embodiment that are helpful touchstones for this research as I explore avenues to support positive embodiment.

After situating my understanding of embodiment, in the second section called "Embodying Health, Self-care and Physical Activity"*,* I draw heavily from the work of Niva Piran and colleagues' Developmental Theory of Embodiment (DTE). I pay particular attention to how the DTE conceptualizes positive embodiment and the potential role of physical activity in women developing a sense of agency and freedom in their bodies. This section will continue to explore the DTE, emphasizing the construct of "Freedom in physical engagement and movement" as a pathway to positive embodiment. I also provide additional research that suggests the skills and embodied knowledge gained through physical activity and sports, creating an empowered embodied sense of "I can" in women. I then move to literature related to discourses of health and self-care that serve to situate the women's discussion of their own sense of health and well-being within the broader cultural discourses.

In the third section, called "Biopower, Biopedagogies and the Healthy Subject" I return to examining health, self-care and physical activity from a poststructural orientation, drawing from Foucault's writing on biopower biopedagoies,and the healthy subject. In the fourth section, "Physical Activity: Exercising Discipline and Resistance" the questions that guide this section included "what does a feminist fitness look like?" (Scott-Dixon, 2008) and can we "practice movement differently beyond the biopolitics of neo-liberalism?" (Markula, 2014, p.483). Drawing critical insights from Markula and Pringle's (2006) in-depth application of Foucault's work in the field of sports and exercise, I discuss agency and resistance, which are essential concepts in this study as I am interested in how running may facilitate agency and resistance to gendered norms of body ideals.

In the fifth section, I outline vital concepts on intersectionality to lay the context for different focal points to understand a feminist perspective of body ideals, health, and the gendered aspects of physical activity and the fitness domain. I include literature primarily on fat scholarship, and aging but also socioeconomic status. An intersectional lens acknowledges the complexity of the relationship of intersecting identities and how these shapes lived experience.

Finally, the last section, “Women and Running,” focuses explicitly on literature examining women and running. I provide a brief history of the increase in the number of women, specifically white women, running globally and an overview of the positive and negative impacts of running on well-being. I shift into a deeper focus on the meaning and motivation behind why women choose to start and continue to run. This section concludes by providing a more thorough discussion of research that draws specifically from a poststructural approach focusing on running, identity construction, and body ideals.

2.3 Theoretical Background: Feminist Poststructuralism

In this section, I begin with an overview of the theoretical perspectives guiding this research and situate certain concepts discussed throughout this dissertation, such as discourse, subjectivity, power, resistance/agency, and docile bodies. In the literature, these concepts are often built from Michel Foucault's work.

Certain scholars have argued that poststructural theory does not lend itself to the emancipatory aim of feminist theory or is a “contradiction in terms” (Baxter, 2003, p.14). For example, feminists who draw from standpoint theory who focus on women’s lived experience as the foundation for feminist knowledge and contend with the “postmodern assault on the subject” since their critique of male hegemony and patriarchy is based on the authority of women’s subjectivity (Rail, 1998, p. xiv). However, drawing from the work of Weedon (1997) and Baxter (2003), we can see how feminist poststructural theory can be efficacious in understanding women’s lived experiences by equipping feminist researchers to “‘see through the ambiguities and confusions of particular discursive contexts where females are located as simultaneously powerful and powerless” (Baxter, 2003, p. 32). This paradoxical position of powerful and powerless is critical to understanding the complexity of dominant discourses constantly being negotiated.

I begin with a general overview of poststructuralism which provies the theoretical framework for this research. I then describe feminist theory which situates my focus on the body and embodiment. I conclude by giving an overview of the literature that explores physical activity and health through a poststructural lens.

2.3.1 Poststructuralism

In this section, I discuss the broad principles of poststructuralism: the skepticism towards a universal cause, the contestation of meaning, and the discursive construction of subjectivity (Baxter, 2003). Drawing from feminist and poststuctural theory provide the foundation to be able to ground the literature on “the body” and embodiment that provides a lens to explore the complex interactions of women’s embodied experiences and cultural discourses on body ideals, health, and self-care (Wellard, 2019).

Poststructuralism covers a wide range of theoretical positions with a common thread of a focus on language, meaning, and subjectivity (Baxter, 2003; Gannon & Davis 2007; Rail, 1998; Weedon, 1997; Wellard, 2019; Wright, 2004). Historically, poststructuralism stems from the postmodern movement, which critiques the paradigm that universal ‘truths’ or ‘real’ knowledge exist and can be objectively measured. Specifically, poststructuralism focuses on how language can be the ‘site’ for creating and contesting social meanings (Baxter, 2003).

As will be discussed, feminism centralizes women’s lived experiences as a site for political struggle. Poststructuralism offers feminist theory one possible avenue to support political transformation through its focus on the discursive construction of meaning that is historically produced and culturally specific. Weedon (1997) states that “feminists make language as the site of a struggle over meaning which is a prerequisite for political change" (p.9). Additionally, three elements of poststructural theory that are important to understand are discourse, power, and subjectivity.

Discourse

Beginning with the notion of discourse, according to Foucault's (1972) discourses are the "practices that systematically form the objects of which they speak" (p. 139). Drawing from more contemporary work, Azzaarito and Solomon (2009) conceptualize discourses as,

> created by the multiplicity of meaning that constitute individuals' way of being, thinking, and the performance of physicality (i.e. display of the body style, actions, size, shape, and muscularity)…through discourses, individuals' meaning making is inscribed on and ascribed to the body-consciously and unconsciously, intentionally or unintentionally […] (p.175).

Markula and Pringle (2006) state, discourses should "*not* be considered as a simple translation between reality and language but as *practices* that shape perceptions of reality" (p. 31, italics in original text) and that based on our social location we draw on different discourses to construct meaning. Although language is often thought of as discourse, it is not equivalent to language. Rather, choices in language is often shaped by broader cultural and societal influences.

Power and the Body

Critically, for Foucault, the body is the site where power is enacted or materialized. In a Foucauldian sense, power is not necessarily an oppressive force that is acted upon someone; rather, "power is exercised rather than possessed" (Foucault, 1977, p, 26). Power in a Foucauldian sense refers to relations between people; thus, people are both exercising their power, while simultaneously being enacted upon. The notion of power relations is important because it reveals opportunities for agency and resistance. Foucault posits that “power is exercised only over free subjects, and only insofar as they are free,” and with this, “the possibility of resistance, for if there were no possibility of resistance […], there would be no relations of power” (Foucault, 1987 as cited in Markula & Pringle, 2006, p. 36).

The negotiation of power is valuable because it draws our attention to why certain discourses seem to have more power than others. For example, the way we ‘read’ certain bodies as healthy or unhealthy is informed by certain discourses that position the thin body as the healthy body. Although counter-discourses from such movements as the Health at Every Size argue that a wide diversity of body sizes can be considered healthy (Bacon, 2008), these discourses may not be readily taken up. This illustrates the ‘production of truth’ that is predicated on the notion of power which can also be understood as how society influences how we come to see what forms of knowledge are valid. As Wright (2004) deliberates, discourses provide an understanding of what resources are available for people to make sense of the world, but do not explain why certain discourses are taken up more readily than others or why the same discourses are understood differently. The linkage between power and discourse or the “power-knowledge” nexus (Foucault, 1977, p.27) are the rules of formation that shape perceptions of social reality, which Foucault conceptualized as *productive* in that they produce subjectivities (Markula & Pringle, 2006).

Subjectification

The notion of subjectivities brings us to the third core element of poststructuralism. Subjectification was a foundational concept from Foucault that draws attention to what discourses individuals draw from to turn themselves into particular subjects. Subject positions can be understood as ‘ways of being,’ and subjectivity is always discursively produced (Baxter, 2003). Rather than viewing an individual's personality or characteristics as existing outside of a cultural context, as in a humanist perspective, which suggests there is an internal *essence* that is fixed, unique and coherent; poststructuralism contends that individuals can never step outside cultural influences or discursive practices (Weedon, 1997). Instead, individuals become 'subject' to them and identities are determined by a range of 'subject positions' which are "approved by their culture, and made available to them by means of the particular discourses operating within a given discursive context" (Baxter, 2003, p. 25). The concept of subject positions can be challenging to grasp because individuals do not move succinctly from one subject position in a clear, categorical fashion. Instead, individuals often draw from competing discourses based on their age, gender, socioeconomic status, or ethnicity and, therefore are shaped by multiple possible subject positions.

Poststructuralists are particularly interested in how certain subject positions seem to possess more power than others. For example, the 'healthy' subject position is viewed as more empowered, often resting on neo-liberal notions of individual responsibility for health (Crawford, 2006; Halse, 2009; Wright & Harwood, 2009). Circulating discourses that place health as a result of individual choices, such as nutrition and physical activity, compete for other discourses such as the social determinants of health, which emphasize issues such as socioeconomic status, education, food insecurity, and early childhood development as having a far more significant impact on health (Raphael et al., 2020).

2.3.2 Feminist Theories of the Body, Body Image, and Embodiment

Feminist Theory

Feminism draws from diverse theoretical traditions to support the fundamental goal of addressing patriarchy's role in creating unequal and inequitable power imbalances between men and women or those devalued as “Other” (Ahmed, 2017; Hobbs & Rice, 2013; Mansfield et al., 2018). One aim of the feminist movement has been to emphasize that individual experiences of women’s oppression are not a ‘private’ matter but a collective issue based on structural (i.e. political) forces. The well-known slogan “the personal is the political” is a thread underlying feminist advocacy work that continues to be quoted today (Hanisch, 1970). However, Weedon (1997) contends that we do not want to over-emphasize experience unproblematically and that we want to recognize the importance of women’s subjective experience as a starting point for understanding power structures in society.

One core value of second-wave feminism is the ‘common voice’ that builds from the universal cause that influences a collective experience of power imbalance. Feminism, like other social movements, has attempted to shift power imbalances and challenge patriarchal structures through a unified and coherent voice. This was viewed as necessary to provide information and reasoning internally to women, and to speak coherently to external forces to confront sexist and oppressive policies that maintain patriarchal structures (Baxter, 2003). Though reasonable in theory, one of the contentions of a female ‘common voice’ is that it remains grounded in assumptions of biological sex as a natural category (Baxter, 2003). On one hand, this is viewed to be a strength in that it allowed feminists to speak out on behalf of women. However, an exclusionary female voice can become a restraint if it downplays the differences between women.

The notion of the ‘common voice’ is not without warranted criticism. Black feminist theories challenge notions of the ‘common voice’ for masking the systemic oppression of black people through colonial practices. For Black feminist theorists, race cannot be separated from gender; this omission of the intersections of race, class, and socioeconomic within current feminist thinking reflects ‘woman’ as generically White and middle-class (Ifekwunigwe, 2018; Hill-Collins, 2000; Strings, 2019). Critically, current feminist theories acknowledge the intersections of class, age, race, religion, and sexual orientation that must be considered, not reducing all lived experiences under the universal category of ‘woman’ (Ahmed, 2017; Davis, 2008; Hobbs & Rice, 2013; Lutz et al., 2011). Currently, feminist scholars continue to debate and theorize biological sex versus gender identity. This reinforces the pertinence of centralizing an intersectional lens that highlights the ways that “bodies are always embodying multiple categories and identities” (Ellingson, 2017, p. 63). I will deepen my discussion of feminist theory when I present literature on bodies and embodiment.

Feminist Theories of Bodies

Feminist scholars have shown that for many women, what we think about our bodies is central to how we feel about ourselves due to the intertwining of beauty, health, morality, and virtue with body weight and size (Bordo, 2003; Piran, 2017; Rice, 2014; Strings, 2019; Wolf, 1997). Western patriarchal ideals have objectified women’s bodies as “ornamental surfaces for the male gaze” which compels women to engage in “natural” bodily practices to conform to cultural standards of femininity (Threadcraft, 2016, p. 207). Accordingly, extensive research has been conducted on body image and the negative consequences of body dissatisfaction that is attributed to these unrealistic standards of femininity and beauty.

Importantly, scholars grounded in Fat Studies and other interdisciplinary fields also argue that the incessant focus on pathologizing fat and revering thinness is grounded in the continued oppression of racialized and Indigenous bodies (Ellison et al., 2016; Friedman et al., 2020; McPhail, 2016a; Robinson, 2020; Strings, 2019). Strings (2019) that our cultural and medical obsession on regulating body fat has less to do with health than an effort to legitimize race, class, and gender hierarchies.

Within feminist theory, the body is a central focal point for analysis (Grosz, 1994; Price & Shildrick, 1999; Rice, 2014; Young, 2005). Despite the broad array of possibilities for analyzing the body within feminist theory, the focus on bodies is not without tension. With the push to dismantle dualistic notions of mind/body as symbolic representation of male (rational)/female (irrational), the focus on the body has been somewhat contentious within feminist theory, specifically, that this could contribute to reemphasizing sexual difference and biological reductionism (Fausto-Sterling, 2013). Threadcraft (2016) summarises the tensions within feminist thought positing that "by celebrating embodiment, feminists have naturalized sexual difference, by calling for its transcendence, they have reproduced somatophobia" (p. 207). It is essential that the body is not dismissed as this can have material consequences.

The body conceptualized as being discursively produced suggests that it is not the material body that creates meaning but how cultural discourses shape how we make sense of bodies. A common critique of poststructuralism is that it denies the fleshy materiality of the body due to its emphasis on 'discourse' that is often understood as language and associated with the linguistic turn in the most radical sense (Larson, 2014). However, applying a Foucauldian perspective, discourses have material implications through how they shape the practices we engage in (i.e., specific physical exercises or patterns of eating) that have material consequences on the body. In other words, from a poststructural perspective, the body itself becomes a sign that displays cultural values based on how we 'read' certain bodies, such as how a thin body may be read as healthy versus a larger body read as unhealthy. Using the example of how bodies are signs indicating health status, a person in a larger body is read as 'unhealthy,' and thus is likely to subjectively feel that they are unhealthy, regardless of their health indicators and behaviours. Thus, the healthy subject position is not available to them. Consequently, discourses are not simply patterns of meaning but how these circulating meanings become translated into practices that have implications that shape the material body (Markula et al., 2008). Subsequently, that particular meaning becomes re-inscribed back onto the subjective experience of one's body.

Importantly, not only is the body a sign of cultural norms and practices, but the body is also the pathway to self-knowledge and how we come to experience the world. In the words of Elizabeth Grosz (1994), we cannot stand back from our body; rather, "I have access to knowledge of my body only by living it" (p. 86). Grosz attempts to dismantle the mind/body, material body/discursively produced body by suggesting the model of the Möbius strip in which a straight strip of paper can be attached at the ends through a half-twist so that there is only one side that continuously loops. In other words, one cannot easily identify which is clockwise and counterclockwise turns. This intertwining of the outside/inside leads us to the concept of embodiment.

Embodiment

An essential element to understanding the role of physical activity in shaping women's experience of their bodies is understanding the term embodiment. Embodiment emphasizes that the mind and body are not separate but intimately intertwined since all thoughts and sensory experiences happen in and through the body (Hockey & Allen-Collinson, 2007; Rice et. al, 2021). Embodiment from a phenomenological sense has been articulated as the "experience of the body as an essential part of ourselves through which we experience the world as opposed to valuing it as an object, which exists outside of who we are" (Mayoh et al., 2018, p. 2). According to Cook-Cottone (2020), embodiment is a "way of being (non-dualistic conceptualization self) in which being is understood as residing in and manifesting from the body as one experiences the internal, external, and existential dimensions of life" (p.1). Exploring embodiment can also help address the gap in moving beyond thoughts *about* our bodies to our experiences *in* our body (Mayoh et al., 2018; Piran, 2017; Rice, 2014; Rice, 2015).

Further research is critical to understand what cultivates and supports a positive experience in our bodies in response to the prevalent levels of body dissatisfaction. Accordingly, Tylka and Piran (2019) emphasize that an exclusive focus on negative body image creates limitations on the field of eating disorders, health, and overall well-being. Next, I will explore body image and how this construct is conceptualized and critiqued.

Body Image: Positive and Negative

I will begin with defining negative body image which is quite distinct from positive body image. Positive body image and negative body image are not simply at opposite ends of a spectrum (Tykla & Wood-Barcalow, 2015a). Negative body image is defined as a "persistent report of dissatisfaction, concern and distress that is related to an aspect of physical appearance" (Thompson et al., 1999, p. 11). Negative body image has been identified as a risk factor for disordered eating, excessive exercise, and other weight control behaviours (Shagar, et al., 2017).

Negative body image and body dissatisfaction have traditionally been perceived as an issue primarily for young (white) females; however, research has confirmed that the pervasiveness of body dissatisfaction spans a variety of ages, races, gender, and socioeconomic status (Cameron et al., 2018; Neumark-Sztainer & Eisenberg, 2014; Norman, 2011; Piran, 2017). Research indicates that Black girls and women appear to generally have a more positive body image then White girls and women when it comes to body size and shape (Buchanan et al., 2019). However, westernized constructions of beauty that privilege lighter skin, smaller noses and lips, and straight hair are reflective of colonized histories of degrading Black women's bodies as the racialized "Other" (Buchanan et al., 2019; Strings, 2019). Additionally, though this research is focused on women, it is pertinent to note that boys and men are also under similar oppressive standards of ideal bodies and also engage in 'body work' (i.e. physical activity and eating practices) to embody cultural constructions of masculinity (Coffey, 2016; Pronger, 2002; Wellard, 2019). Importantly, further research and insight is essential to understand body image and embodiment in individuals who identify as nonbinary or gender fluid (Ogle et al., 2023).

As mentioned, positive body image is its own unique construct and has been defined comprehensively as an,

> overarching love and respect for the body that allows individuals to (a) appreciate the unique beauty of their body and the functions that it performs for them; (b) accept and even admire their body, including those aspects that are inconsistent with idealized images; (c) feel beautiful, comfortable, confident, and happy with their body, which is often reflected as an outer radiance, or a "glow;" (d) emphasize their body's assets rather than dwell on their imperfections; and (f) interpret incoming information in a body-protective manner whereby most positive information is internalized and most negative information is rejected or reframed. (Wood-Barcalow et al., 2010, p. 112)

This definition was constructed through research using a mixed-methods approach which included interviewing fifteen college-aged women and five body image experts (Wood-Barcalow et al., 2010).

Given that different shapes and sizes have culturally assigned meanings, impacting how women subjectively experience their bodies, Carla Rice (2014, 2015) proposes a body-becoming theory that aims to expand the body's possibilities, suggesting that we cannot predict with any certainty what the body will become and, in turn, what the body can do. This theory creates spaces for bodies that may not fit the culturally prescribed norm by broadening conceptualizations of bodies, not as static, mechanistic, and predictable but as emerging through the interactions of social, physical, and personal contexts (Rice, 2016). More recently, Rice et. al. (2021) who are contributing to feminist disability studies in an effort to think "differently about difference" and problematize the "mythical norm" through a feminist materialist disability lens, emphasize body image as a dynamic process, not a static concept. Hence, body image evolves and transforms in relationship to how our changing physical bodies interact with the social and material world. As such, there has also been a push by scholars to move beyond just the thoughts one feels *about* their body, i.e., body image, to how one feels *in* their body by ways of different conceptualizations of embodiment, with a significant gap noted in the literature of positive ways of inhabiting the body (Mayoh et al., 2018; Piran, 2017; Rice, 2014; Rice, 2015).

Developmental Theory of Embodiment: Bridging the Gap

Piran (2017) conceptualizes positive embodiment as "[e]xperiencing the body as a comfortable site from which to engage with the world with embodied agency, connection to desire, attuned self-care and engagement in meaningful pursuits while resisting an objectified lens" (p. 11). This definition stems from Piran and colleague's *Developmental Theory of Embodiment* (DTE), based on interviews of the lived experience of diverse girls and women over twenty years (Piran et al., 2009; Piran et al., 2007; Piran et al., 2009). Cooke-Cottone (2020) also created a model of embodiment called the Attuned Representational Model of the Self (ARMS) that attempts to articulate a pathway to creating an integrated self through the relationship between the inner and outer world. Similar to Piran's conceptualization of embodiment in which ruptures or 'corseting' can contribute to a sense of disconnection from our bodies, Cook-Cottone

(2020) also situates embodiment along a spectrum where mindful self-care can contribute to overall well-being grounded in concepts such as flourishing (see Seligman, 2011).

Recent research has shown that positive embodiment is correlated with life satisfaction which alludes to embodiment's role in overall health and well-being and warrant's further research (Gattario et al., 2020). In a narrative review of literature on positive embodiment, which included Piran (2017) and Cooke-Cottone's (2020) conceptual models, the author (Munroe, 2022) emphasized the necessity to further explore embodiment and its correlation to overall well-being and how it applies to more diverse populations in terms of gender, sexual orientation, and culture.

2.4 Embodying Health, Self-care, and Physical Activity

2.4.1 Health

According to the World Health Organization, health is defined as "a state of complete physical, mental, and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity" (World Health Organization, 2021). The definition is broad which perhaps is reflective of an attempt to capture not only objective measures of health (e.g. blood pressures) but more subjective experiences of well-being that likely are influenced by factors such as culture. Health promotion has been heavily critiqued due to the focus on health messaging targeting individual lifestyle behaviour changes (Fullagar, 2009; Halse, 2009) especially as it relates to "fighting obesity" (Ward et al., 2016). Since the release of the Ottawa Charter of Health Promotion in the 1980s (Iannatuono & Eyles, 1997), a notable shift from treatment of disease to prevention of disease began to emerge in the form of Public Health policy.

Critical health scholars posit that medical and public health discourses are not politically neutral. In health-related discourses, neo-liberalism permeates how individuals "achieve" health, since neo-liberalism is a worldview that posits “we live in a world where all individuals are born with equal chances into systems that give us equal opportunity to thrive” (Aphramor, 2018, p. 775). This orientation disregards the systematic barriers and injustice based on race, class, gender identity, sexual orientation, and body size that these factors have on health. Fortunately, the Social Determinants of Health has become a vital framework in shifting sole attention on individual behaviours towards the broader environmental and social factors that play a critical role in health including, for example, socioeconomic status, education level, food security, and health services (Rapheal, et. al., 2020).

Crawford (1980) coined the term “healthism” in the 1980’s to represent the shift towards individual responsibility for health within a neoliberal capitalist society. Furthermore, Crawford (2006) argues that the “imperative of health” has become a signifying reflection of the self and that being health-conscious is a rational choice of the moral citizen (p. 403). The “choice” of health is a contentious concept. However, a sole focus on public policy and the Social Determinants of Health can diminish the potential that an individual can make positive lifestyle changes (Peel et al., 2021). That being said, an overemphasis on health being a choice can inadvertently result in “moralistic views of bodies” that shifts attention away from health inequities (Petherick & Beausoleil, 2016, p. 248).

2.4.2 Self-care

The Developmental Theory of Embodiment (DTE) has been instructive in remaining faithful to the challenge of bridging a poststructural orientation that provides insight into the discursive constructions of the body with other theories that are more focused on the material lived experience of the body (Piran, 2017). Embodiment is conceptualized under three broad social domains: The Physical Domain, The Mental Domain, and the Social Power and Relational

Connections Domain. Centering in on the Physical Domain, the DTE differentiates between Physical Freedom and Physical Corseting. The domain of Physical Freedom is composed of four constructs: (1) Freedom in Physical Engagement and Movement, (2) Safety for the Body Territory, (3) Care of the Body, and (4) Freedom of Desire. Aptly, as the name Physical 'Corseting' implies, the opposite of these domains in this category includes 'Neglect of Body Care,' where corseting depicts a restrictive and limiting mode of embodied subjectivity.

Attuned Care of the Body is described as a "positive connection with the body as a worthy site, support for its desires, and the internalization of a stance of body attunement throughout one's life journey" (Piran, 2017, p. 20). The DTE's concepts of 'attuned self-care' distinguish between body-anchored or body-disconnected experiences. Attuned self-care fosters the ability to become aware of an individual's internal needs and then practicing self-care in light of these needs. These concepts contribute to a more nuanced and, importantly, practical conceptualization of health and self-care. Additionally, it avoids a morally dichotomous positioning of either being enlightened or a failed feminist based on engaging in health-promoting behavious and self-care (Hendricks & Plummer, 2013; Longhurst, 2012; Olive & Thorpe, 2011; Scott-Dixon, 2008).

This challenges the sentiment that those who engage in physical activity are inevitably perpetuating Gimlen's (2002) notion of oppressive acts of 'body work'. Critically, attuned self-care can be conceived as a radical act as it challenges the capitalist agenda of fostering body disconnection. Additionally, a focus on physical activity and developing strength can also be seen as resistance to patriarchy that often emphasizes selflessness and care for others as epitomes of womanhood.

In Hendricks and Plummer's (2013) work on feminist wellness and holistic fitness they maintain that,

> [e]mbracing the physical requires a great deal of permission to be selfish. An exercise regimen is an investment in the self; athleticism requires a great deal of time and personal commitment. For a woman to embrace this level of physical activity may not just require a reevaluation of self-care priorities and reclamation of her time, but also a feminist, holistic approach to fitness. (p. 106)

A holistic approach to fitness suggests that we turn our gaze inward to discover what feels nourishing and joyful. This is a very individualized view of wellness that rejects the "one size fits all" approach to finding a physical activity practice. This aligns with Piran's (2017) conceptualization of attuned self-care.

Attuned self-care focuses on building skills and awareness to become responsive to our body's unique needs. Convincingly, Piran (2017) argues that 'Care of the Body' is "centrally related to structural and social inequities that privilege some bodies and disenfranchise others" (p.213). A clear example of this is the evidence that socioeconomic status and race are strongly related to health outcomes (Strings, 2019; Williams, Priest, & Anderson, 2019).

2.4.3 Physical Activity

Physical activity and sports offer a space to explore how the social, physical, and personal contexts intertwine. Embodying the subtle movement of a particular sport creates a body that becomes what the movement represents within a specific cultural and social context. In other words, embodying a subject position is a process in motion. Carla Rice's (2015) evocatively ponders, "how might a body-becoming pedagogy invite us to see physical activity as ascetics rather than solely as a science of the body?" (p. 395). Aligned with the notion of 'body becoming' (Rice, 2014, 2015), Mayoh et al. (2018) suggest that physical activity can provide positive embodied experiences that create an "invigorating awareness of bodily potential or physical capabilities" (p.10) that contribute to the embodied sense of 'my body can.' Likewise, the DTE also identified experiences of 'Freedom in Physical Engagement and Movement' as central to embodied agency and a positive connection to one's body. This is depicted by being able to move freely and safely in the private and public spheres, as well as feeling free to take up physical space through body size, movement, or comportment (Piran, 2017; Piran & Teall, 2012).

Gleaning insights from alternative approaches for women to experience their body in motion is critical since a significant barrier for women to participate in sports or recreation is feeling uncomfortable in their bodies (Cronan & Scott, 2008). Aligning with Piran's emphasis on movement, sports, and other forms of active leisure may facilitate a positive sense of embodiment through acquiring skills and habitual knowledge (Barbour et al., 2020; Mayoh et al., 2018). This corporeal knowledge allows a more meaningful sense of embodiment. Drawing from the work of Merleau-Ponty's (2003) theoretical orientation of phenomenology, this experience of potential in our bodies 'in the world' along with positive bodily experiences can move one towards the corporeal stance of 'I can' (Liimakka, 2011; Mayoh et al., 2018).

This 'I can' orientation in the world compliments the crucial work of Iris Marion Young (2005). Despite criticisms that Young overgeneralized and overstressed gendered assumptions (Chisholm, 2008), her insights remain relevant in understanding the cultural influences on how women relate to their bodies (as objects) and therefore move in their bodies. In her essay *Throwing Like a Girl,* she discusses the cultural conditioning that shapes women's bodily engagement in the world. Young (2005) proposed that a significant contributing factor to this lack of full bodily engagement and hesitancy is the cultural conditioning that has taught women to experience their body as a *thing.* Young's work also preludes the current emphasis outlined above on the necessity to move beyond women's thoughts about their bodies and how one feels *in* and *moving through* their bodies. Young's analysis of why we have such insults as 'throwing like a girl' reinforces the vital role that sports and leisure can have in dismantling gendered ideas of what it means to move like a woman or, in the words of Young, to change the pathway where girls learn to "actively hamper her movements" (p. 43). Evidence is mounting on the benefits of providing women with sport and leisure opportunities that teach physical skills which foster a sense of empowerment and self-efficacy, which have the power to overcome gendered (Yarnal et. al., 2006) and aging stereotypes (Cronan & Scott, 2008; Wharton, 2018).

However, it is not just about increasing access to sports and leisure opportunities, but understanding the discourses shaping the playing field so that physical activity and sports do not continue to reproduce hegemonic femininity and oppressive body standards. Likewise, Cronan and Scott (2008) suggest that the "study of bodies, particularly bodies in motion, is arguably a study of gender" (p. 19). This negotiation of power leads us to the next section on biopedagogies, which explores how socially constructed discourses on health are taken up by individuals as a means to become a particular type of subject.

2.5 Biopower, Biopedagogies and the Healthy Subject

The writings and theoretical perspectives on health and self-care are diverse. As this research draws from a poststructural approach, I will provide a framework for conceptualizing health and self-care from a selection of Foucault's ideas while acknowledging that his work notably lacks a gendered focus (McLaren, 2002). Specifically, I will discuss his concept of biopower, which contributed to developing the concept of biopedagogies (Harwood, 2009).

Biopower

As stated, certain discourses hold more power, and those appearing as ‘commonsense’ or ‘natural’ become the dominant discourses that reproduce existing power relations (Blood, 2005). For Foucault, the body is both ‘object and target of power’ where discourses “systematically form the objects of which they speak” (Foucault, 1972, p.49). In other words, by drawing from particular discourses, individuals materialize these discursive constructions that produce a particular type of subject. For example, embodying the ‘healthy’ subject appears commonsense in most Western cultures as it is interwoven with being a ‘responsible citizen’ (Crawford, 2006; Halse, 2009). Here, we can see the influence of neoliberal rationality in trying to make the responsible moral citizen congruent with the economic, rational individual (McDermott, 2011). The focus on bio-power began in the *History of Sexuality Volume One (*1990), where Foucault describes the notable shift in sovereign power as the right to *take* life, to bio-power, which had an emphasis on ‘life,’ more specifically, the power to conserve or protect life (Harwood, 2009). Bio-power regulates and controls life through power being directed at the body, with the important caveat that it is not by force. Instead, power is enacted through the act of self-formation where one *becomes* a subject through the types of actions one engages in.

This is the innocuous effect of bio-power‒ an individual is seemingly free to choose a particular action or behaviour. Yet, these choices are contained within a field of possible actions or the knowledge available that are socially constructed. Through the government’s focus on regulating populations, which Foucault termed ‘bio-politics,’ this act of governance does not operate by force or direct control. Rather, its power lies in its more insidious nature in which it is both voluntary and coercive. Accordingly, Grigg & Kirland (2016) argue that to “invoke health is to invoke authority‒the power to regulate and to define normal and abnormal, good and bad” (p.328). Through establishing parameter's around 'normalcy' (for example, BMI categories), governance relies on an individual's capacity to make choices that appear for their own self-interest, yet as McDermott (2011) suggests that the boundary between 'governing others' and 'governing ourselves' becomes blurred in that "individuals become both subject *to* and a subject *of* power (p. 202)."

Biopedagogies

Biopedagoies can be understood as instructions that govern bodies through the promotion of certain practices about how to "do" health. In other words, what to eat, how much to eat, and how to move. Articulated another way, biopedagogies are the "biophysical markers of health that ultimately shape how people see and feel about their bodily experiences" (Petherick & Beausoleil, 2015, p. 5). For example, quantitative measurements such as getting 10,000 steps a day has become a common measurement of achieving the 'right' amount of activity, but do we know where this benchmark came from?

One way bio-power has been theorized to be enacted is through 'biopedagogies,' which is the "art and practice of teaching of 'life" (Harwood, 2009, p. 21). For example, feminist critical obesity scholars have explored how health interventions that are founded upon the governmental focus on obesity reduction and prevention become 'pedagogized' within the school contexts (Beausoleil & Ward, 2009; Evans & Rich, 2011), family (Burrows, 2009; Fullagar, 2009) and within healthcare (Ward et al., 2017). The integration of biopedaogies within a school system, in turn, makes it very difficult for students to resist or question the discourses that teach certain bodies are healthy (i.e. thin) and that there are parameters that should be constantly monitored, such as steps taken per day or caloric intake (Petherick & Beausoleil, 2015, 2016).

One example that illustrates how bodies become read based on circulating discourses is the Body Mass Index (BMI), calculated based on weight and height Halse (2009) describes the BMI as a ‘virtues discourse’ as the “values, beliefs, practices and behaviours that establish regimes of truth and shape subjects and subjectivities by articulating and constructing particular behaviours and qualities as worthy, desirable and necessary virtues” (p. 47). Thus, the classification of ‘obesity’ points to bodies being read in a particular way (unhealthy) regardless of actual health measurements. This focus has been noted to create a sense of “health panic” among women (Rail & Beausoleil, 2003) and to re-edify othering of racialized bodies (Robinson, 2020; Strings, 2019).

In turn, biopower and engaging in biopedagoies contribute to identity formation of the “healthy subject.” Returning to the instructive concept of subjectivation, Foucault contended that we are not born subjects; instead, we are transformed into them (Rabinow & Rose, 2006). One of the ways he suggested this happens is through the concept of subjectivation, where an individual turns him or herself into a subject. By drawing from particular discourses and practices, individuals transform themselves into a specific type of subject. At face value, there appears to be an element of agency in this process in that an individual is choosing particular actions or engaging in certain behaviours; however, as mentioned earlier, certain discourses hold more power and appear to be more common sense, such as the healthy or fit subject. According to Rabinow and Rose (2006) bio-power becomes operationalized through subjectivation in the ways that people are brought to work on themselves, under some sense of freedom and authority, and in the name of their health.

2.6 Physical Activity: Exercising Discipline and Resistance

The notion of agency is another construct that is widely debated in feminist theory (McNay, 2016). From a Western orientation agency denotes the ability to act freely in a manner that appears to be relatively independent or autonomous, which could be described as the "sovereign agency" (McNay, 2016). However, acknowledging the Social Determinants of Health (Rapheal, 2020), a universal capacity for agency does not equate to all people having equal status or power, within a particular cultural context. The next section will provide an overview of how Foucault's conceptualizations of discipline, power, agency, and resistance can provide a framework to understanding the cultural influences that shape our embodied experiences. I will be providing examples of research from the sport and leisure context that have drawn from Foucault's specific focus on how power operates through the body.

2.6.1 Feminine Fitness: A Guilty Pleasure?

Despite physical activity and sports being an avenue to engage in empowering possibilities for girls and women, physical activity and sports remain a contested area for some feminist scholars and researchers. Some scholars argue that the fitness and sports industry reinforce oppressive feminine body ideals and gendered ways of moving the female body (Dworkin & Wachs, 2009; Kennedy & Pappa, 2018; Markula, 2001; Scraton, 2018). Unfortunately, this may have contributed to the unintended consequence of scholars who critique the thin ideal feeling propelled to hide their participation in physical activity (Kennedy & Markula, 2011) predicated on the notion that being a 'good feminist' necessitates an outright objection of body ideals and norms (Scott-Dixon, 2008). When grappling with "reflexivities of discomfort" (Pillow, 2003, p. 175), feeling propelled to conceal one's exercise or movement practices while identifying as a feminist can contribute to feeling like a 'failed feminist' (Olive &

Thorpe, 2011). For example, Samantha Murry (2010), the notable fat scholar discussed earlier, writes about her loss of academic credibility after choosing to go through gastric bypass surgery.

Using the lens of Foucault's notion of governmentality and power, scholars have argued that 'fitness' is a mechanism for achieving 'docile bodies' through self-surveillance and engaging in 'techniques' or practices of body discipline to achieve a particular body shape or size (Halse, 2012; Harwood, 2012; Markula, 2014; Markula & Pringle, 2006; Rabinow, 1984). As discussed earlier, these 'techniques' or practices have been theorized as biopedagogies (Harwood, 2009). Being active or productive can take on numerous interpretations. One meaning is that being physically active and engaging in self-care practices centers around maintaining health and physical functioning. Markula and Pringle (2006) propose the dominant discourses derived from biomedical and exercise science milieus drive health promotion rhetoric and the meaning of exercise. These discourses include that being physically fit is indisputably equated to being healthy, and hence, the fit body becomes read as an 'illness-free body.' As such, physical activity recommendations and fitness tests are disciplinary techniques that often go unquestioned under the guise of health promotion.

Examining physical activity and sports through the lens of 'power,' 'discipline,' and 'docile bodies' is necessary to elucidate how power is played out through the "direct grip that culture has on our bodies, through the practices and bodily practices of everyday life" (Bordo, 2003, p.16). However, this critique may have overgeneralized how movement-based practices are actually experienced by individuals (Crossley, 2004). This generalization may also lead to missed opportunities to explore and conceptualize experiences of 'healthful' exercise practices that move away from perpetuating the conflation between health, fitness, and achieving a particular body size. This invites the question “what does and, should, a feminist fatness and fitness look like?” (Scott-Dixon, 2008, p.23). Provocatively, Scott-Dixon (2008), argues:

> If feminists wish to provide women with the substantive means to make choices and resist oppression, they must move beyond critique alone toward providing alternatives strategies, and tools that are not only grounded in feminist consciousness but also based on informed judgements of the (admittedly imperfect) physiological data. (p. 24)

Moreover, as Holly Thorpe (2014) cautions in her call for new forms of theorizing the complex relations between the biological and social in sport, that “female exercises themselves become marginalized, they are assumed to be dupes to dominating discourses” when drawing from more social theoretical approaches (p. 675).

Accordingly, Shilling (2007) argues for the necessity of privileging the embodied experience as “something that is irreducible to dominant discourses, and in reconceptualizing women’s epistemic agency by acknowledging that there exists some space in which women are able to undertake intentional action informed by what it means to inhabit a particular body with its own needs and capacities” (p. 12). Shilling (2007) articulates an empowering perspective that acknowledges space can exist for women to make intentional choices that honour their preferences and abilities. Yet, from a poststructural perspective, it could be argued that one cannot step outside of the dominant discourses guiding the choices made, even if based on embodied experience. Foucault's often contentious concepts of ‘docile bodies’ and ‘discipline’ will be examined next to acknowledge both the capacity of individual agency while still being immersed in the culturally influenced discursive field.

2.6.2 Exercising Resistance

It has been suggested that sports can offer women an opportunity to challenge gendered ideologies of women's capacity by facilitating empowering bodily experiences (Yarnal, Hutchinson, & Chow, 2006 Wharton, 2018), in particular, sports that demand strength, power, and aggression. Examples in the literature include boxing and martial arts (Velija, Mierzwinki at al., 2013), rugby (Chase, 2006,) or hockey (Theberge, 2003). However, it could be argued that evaluating empowerment through hegemonic masculine ideals may not be moving the feminist agenda along.

For example, McDermott (1996) provides an avenue for reflection, suggesting that physicality's conceptualization may play a significant role in the gendered nature of sports. The author contends that current understandings of the sporting body are often based on hegemonic masculine norms of physical*ness* founded on dominance, aggressive body contact, and confrontation. A useful perspective offered by McNay (2016) is that there is "no blueprint for emancipation," and the pathway to freedom cannot be anticipated in advance. This open-ended, creative orientation does not mean feminists have to outright object all types of femininity as inherently oppressive. Certain feminist scholars conceptualize women as neither passive victims nor active agents; instead, women are continuously negotiating a multitude of discourses that impact their embodied subjectivities (Markula & Kennedy, 20011; McDermott, 1996; Poole, 2001). The continued focus on the empowering possibilities of sports and leisure that emphasize hegemonic masculine ideals warrants further exploration of sports that may not be traditionally perceived as masculine, such as running.

Fitness can be understood as being desirable because it reflects neoliberal notions of self-improvement and productivity. From a Foucauldian perspective, the practices and knowledge are transmitted through biopedagogies or in the words of Pronger (2002), “technologies of physical fitness,” yet, these discourses can be actively resisted. For example, researchers who explore alternative approaches to experiencing the body in motion (eg. somatic dance classes) have found that women can actively resist the self-improvement and outcome driven imperative of Westernized neoliberal culture be taking part in physical activity opportunities that allow for “movement for movement’s sake” (Barbour et al., 2019, p.6). This can help to disentangle movement from the neoliberal self-improvement agenda and shift focus towards experiencing enjoyable movement as an act of well-being. Returning to the ‘cult of the body’, an alternative understanding of how women embody the virtues of self-control, self-discipline and willpower can also elucidate alternative discourses that may not necessarily align with the dominant critiques of health promotion. There is a need to understand further how resistance is enacted in a leisure/physical activity context.

2.7 Intersectional Bodies of Knowledge

In this next section, I will expand on the different social locations that are relevant to this study acknowledging that research grounded an intersectional approach cannot adequately capture all dimensions of the messy complexity of embodied beings that move through limitless experiences in relation with others. As such, the research in the following section will have a strong focus on gender as it relates to those who identify as women. I will then add in other possible categories that intersect with gender to help inform the focus of this research that is exploring how women who identify as being a runner shapes their understandings of health, self-care and body ideals. I will begin with a focus on the socioeconomic/classist nature of sport and leisure before moving into body size which intersects with race. I conclude with literature on aging within the context of sport and leisure.

The term “intersectionality” is attributed to Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989, 2011) who argued that feminist theory and activists that spoke from the ‘universal’ voice of women (i.e. white, middle class) ignored the lived experiences of Black women by not acknowledging how the category of race played a significant role in their reality of oppression. Important to this research, Watson and Scraton (2013) contend that embodiment and intersectionality have not been thoroughly researched in leisure scholarship and suggest that leisure studies could positively contribute to the debate around intersectionality. The complexity of identity emphasizes how the body can ‘display’ the entanglement of social categories.

2.7.1 The Luxury of Leisure

“Healthy bodies and thick wallets” is how Smith (1999) aptly names his analysis on the relationship between health and socioeconomic status. Despite a wide range of quantitative data indicating associations between health outcomes and socioeconomic status, the direction of causation remains under exploration. Nevertheless, a recent Canadian study examining the socioeconomic disparities in life and healthcare expectancies, shows that despite an overall increase in life and health expectancy, these gains are not shared equally across groups situated in the lowest education and income categories (Bushnik et al., 2020).

There has been increased attention to how “thinking intersectionally” needs to be further developed in the area of feminist leisure studies (Watson & Scraton, 2013). The very nature of leisure is meant to be voluntary and part of one’s ‘free choice’ in how and where one spends their time, leisure remains a political project evidenced that inequalities remain on what bodies are welcomed and have access to different leisure spaces (Baldwin, 2023; Girgrah, 2023; Rose et al., 2018; Williams et al., 2022). Additionally, leisure is also imbued with politics because at its very core it is tied up in resource allocation, with certain people in a position to decide who gets access to what and at what cost (Rose et al., 2018).

Socioeconomic class is foundational in understanding who gets the choice to freely participate in what. Leisure time and activities is built on the foundation of how one wants to use their “free” time, however, engaging in leisure time assumes one has the time and resources to do so (Baldwin, 2023). Despite the common adage “you only need a pair of good shoes to run,” this gravely oversimplifies the realities that support individuals to have an active leisure hobby including social support, childcare, financial resources, and autonomy over how one chooses to spend their time.

2.7.2 Exercising in Bodies that ‘Don’t Fit’

There has been increased attention to how women use spaces of leisure and sport as a site to contest gendered notions of the body and femininity. Conceptualization of leisure as a political act (Shaw, 2001) can draw attention to women’s lived experience of *having* and *being* a body such that “embodiment is not neutral but can work to sustain social inequality through the inscription of values on different bodies” (Francombe-Webb & Toffoletti, 2018, p.49). The notion of (de)valuing different bodies is evident in the work of fat scholars who illustrate how bodies are deemed ‘inhabitable’ (Lebesco, 2004). This concept of an ‘inhabitable body’ aligns with Goffman’s (1963) foundational conceptualization of stigma as “an attribute that is deeply discrediting” which demotes an individual, “from a whole and usual person to a tainted, discounted one” (p.3). The dominant discourses of neoliberal health messaging as well as socially constructed norms of beauty, generally create a body hierarchy in which thin is the norm (unmarked) and fat is the aberrant (marked) position (Brownell et al., 2005; Rothblum & Solovay, 2009; van Amsterdam, 2013).

Critically, it is essential to acknowledge that any discussion of body fat and body ideals cannot be disentangled from racial oppression and in particular, the denigration of women of colour and Indigenous women (Lebesco, 2004; Parker et al., 2020; Rinaldi et al., 2020; Robinson, 2020; Stings, 2019). In her compelling book exploring the racial origins of fat phobia, Strings (2019) masterfully demonstrates the evolving ways that body ideals reflect shifting cultural and medical meanings that justify the continued oppression of racial and ethnic groups. Strings (2019) contends that feminist theorization of the body has often separated racial oppression from oppressive standards of body ideals. As a result, despite the collective effort from feminist scholars and advocates to dismantle the "thin-ideal" there is less acknowledgement on how or why body ideals developed. Rinaldi et. al. (2020) effectively articulate the intersectionality of body size stating, "the presence and history of fat is deeply embodied and deeply emotional but is also bound up in other structural zones of oppression and privilege" (p.1).

Accordingly, van Amsterdam (2013) argues that body size needs to be added as an axis of signification in intersectional research based on how widespread the focus is on body size and shape in the public and private spheres. van Amsterdam (2013) contends that body size should be considered an axis of signification based on intersections with other social categories that "shape *power differentials*, *normativities* and *identity formations* and co-produce *inequalities*" (p. 158, italics in original). From the vast body of literature on the negative impacts of weight bias and stigma, norms of body size create power differentials that result in physical, mental, and social inequalities. Interestingly, the author also argues that due to the often-cultural ambiguity on body size norms, there is no clear boundary between who is marked and unmarked. Furthermore, unlike other social categories such as race, everyone is *at risk* of becoming fat, hence, “slenderness as the unmarked position is not effortless” (2013, p. 154). Here we see the culture of self-surveillance that is fostered by the neoliberal health discourses of individual responsibility for health that is generally categorized based on body size (Halse, 2009). A dominant focus of promotion in the health and wellness arena is physical activity.

Weight Bias in Physical Activity and Sports Settings

It is essential to include research on weight bias when discussing physical activity, health, and bodies in general. Unfortunately, physical activity spaces such as gym settings or sports fields are often sites of oppression and discrimination against larger body sizes (Dworkin & Wachs, 2009; Groven et. al, 2011; Inderstrodt-Stephens & Acharya, 2018; Mansfield, 2011; McGannon et al., 2011; Rice, 2007; Scott-Dixon, 2008; Seal et al, 2022; Skyes & McPhail, 2008; Zanker & Guard, 2008). Bodies who are deemed outside “the norm” are often stigmatized in the health and the fitness industry for a number of reasons. Namely, fatness has erroneously come to automatically signify and mark ill-health and disease, rendering it impossible for the fat body to be identified as fit or healthy within the dominant discourses (Cunningham & Picket, 2020; Gard & Wright, 2005; Groven et al., 2011; Rice, 2007; Scott-Dixon, 2008; Zanker & Gard, 2008).

There is a collective “knowingness” about fatness in which assumptions of being lazy, undisciplined, and pathological can be placed upon certain bodies solely based on size and shape (Murray, 2009). The impact of weight-based stigma has shown to decrease participation in physical activity (Pickett, 2019; Pickett & Cunningham, 2018; Puhl & Suh, 2015; Seal, et al., 2022; Vartanian & Novak, 2011). It is critical to note that physical activity has been shown to have numerous health benefits and, importantly, this is regardless of body size (Bacon, 2010; Mansfield & Rich, 2013).

Within public health and policy, physical activity continues to be situated in a weight-centric framework, and according to Rich and Mansfield (2019) “promoted as a panacea to the pathologized problems of ‘obesity’ and ‘overweight’” (p.99). Unfortunately, the dominant cultural positioning of physical activity and exercise as primarily for weight loss mitigates the beneficial physical and mental health impacts, while also reinforcing the stigma that larger bodies do not belong in fitness spaces (Cunningham & Pickett, 2020; Manfield & Rich, 2013; Pickett, 2019; Pickett & Cunningham, 2018; Seal et al., 2022, Rich & Mansfield, 2019) or that those in larger bodies cannot rightfully embody the role of fitness instructor or leader (Pickett & Cunningham, 2018b). For example, recent research that explored women who were currently physically inactive, expressed that a significant barrier to physical activity participation is a fear of judgement about the way that their body looks or does not look (Seal et al., 2022). These wider socio-cultural norms and expectations of the “modern cultural idealizations of thin bodies have created a climate in which fat individuals are stigmatized in physical activity spaces” (Pickett & Cunningham, 2017b). This stigma creates a systematic barrier for those in larger bodies to feel safe participating in sports recreational spaces.

Seal et al. (2022) findings also suggest a more nuanced understanding of the fear of judgement not just of bodies but *active* bodies in which the normal physiological markers of exertion such as breathing hard or looking red-faced is viewed not as positive signs of moving their bodies but as a sign of a lack of fitness. Indeed, the actual act of exercising that generally leads to the natural bodily responses of increased breathing, sweating, flushed sweat, and flesh that will move with the momentum of movement often reinforces the weight-bias that fat exercisers are displaying a lack of fitness; hence, the double standard that what is revered in thin people is demonized in fat people (Flint & Reale, 2016; Meadows & Bombak, 2019).

2.7.3 Sporting the Aging Body

In recent years there has been a closer examination on the role that physical activity plays in aging women's understanding of their bodies, especially as it relates to the predominant cultural pressures to maintain a youthful, productive, and 'ageless' body (Bennett et al., 2017; Liang & Luo, 2012; Sandberg, 2013). It has been speculated that physical activity and leisure could act as a counter-narrative to the dominant narrative of decline associated with the aging body (Diongi, 2006; Phoenix & Griffin, 2013), whereas others point to the devaluing of older bodies as physical activity and exercise is often endorsed for ameliorating the bodily changes of aging; think, the "middle-age spread" (Abbas, 2004, p. 163). As this research project focuses on women's conceptualization of health and body ideals, understanding how age also shapes their meaning making is crucial.

Research exploring women's experience of physical activity in later life do indeed show how women may draw upon their physical activity practice as a form of resistance to cultural messages surrounding aging bodies, in which physical activity fosters a more positive perception of their body and sense of self (Henwood et al., 2011; Sims-Gould et al., 2010). However, by no means is the relationship between engaging in physical activity as a form of resistance towards cultural norms around the aging body a clear path. The act of resisting discourses of the aging body as an inevitable site of decline, may also perpetuate the discourse of healthy aging as individual responsibility (Grant & Kluge, 2007).

Indeed, studies have found the intertwining of resistance to certain cultural norms inadvertently reinforces other norms. For example, Diongi (2006), using a poststructural approach, explored the motives and experiences of 28 master games athletes (female and males, ages 60-89). This research found that engagement in competitive sports offered a way to challenge age-related stereotypes and fostered a sense of pride in their abilities, which constructed an empowered and capable self-image. Simultaneously, many master athletes drew from mainstream discourses often found in health promotion, such as the adage of "use it or lose it," as a driver to maintain their physical activity levels. These adages were framed within the understanding that being active would delay the onset of age-related diseases and the undesirability of 'deep old age,' characterized by sickness, disability, and immanence of death. Diongi (2005) also explored resistance to cultural discourses of competition in later life. The author focused on older adults who engage competitively in sports and how these adults who are 'competing to win' negotiate the assumed passivity that older adults engage in physical activity just for fun, fitness, or friendship.

Research has also found seemingly contradictory emotions when examining the narratives of aging women's body and physical activity stories. A relatively recent study showed that aging women experience anxiety/fear, shame, guilt, and pride related to their body and engagement in physical activity (Bennett et al., 2017). Like the negotiations discussed in Diongi's (2005, 2006) studies, these authors found that women resisted the narrative of decline by attempting to slow down age-related bodily changes while simultaneously accepting and adjusting to body functioning and health status changes understood as an inherent part of the aging process. Yet, the participants also reported experiencing shame and guilt if they perceived they were not embodying cultural norms of youth and health. These examples provide insight into the complexity and seemingly contradictory ways individuals negotiate meanings around bodies, health, and identity.

Despite the increased focus on the lived experience of physical activity, Griffin (2012) suggests that studies tend to categorize participants into discrete life stage 'categories' (for example, 50+, 65 +, veterans) and the voices of non-elite female exercisers of a variety of ages warrants further attention in the research. As such, this study will focus on the ‘everyday’ female who engages in running. By ‘everyday’ runner, I would be mindful that non-elite does not imply non-competitive as many individuals may categorize their running practice as ‘serious leisure’ (Stebbins, 2001). The following section will explore the literature specific to running.

2.8 Women and Running

The sport of running has seen an exponential growth in popularity, beginning with the running boom of the 1970s (Gorichanz, 2016; Inderstrodt-Stephens & Acharya, 2018). There has also been a notable increase in women’s participation in running in both the recreational and professional domains (Burfoot, 2016; Faulkner, 2018). Though it is difficult to accurately capture the number of women running, there is a notable increase of women-focused running blogs, magazines, and even women’s only races (Faulkner, 2018). Crucially, despite an increasing rise of recreational runners and the assumed accessibility of running, most participants in the running community are white and predominately middle-class (Abbas, 2004; Baldwin, 2023; Williams et. al, 2022).

2.8.1 Running for Wellbeing and Health

Running as a medium for physical activity has been shown to be beneficial for physical health (Hespanhol et al., 2015), mental health (Oswald et al., 2020; Leedy, 2009), and self-esteem (Bond & Batey, 2005; Shipway & Holloway, 2010). Research exploring women’s participation in running suggests that running has a positive impact on physical and mental health (Bond & Batey, 2005; Giorgi & Boudreau, 2010; Hanold, 2010), sense of belonging (Faulkner, 2018; Griffin, 2012; Griffin & Phoenix, 2016; Hanold, 2010), empowerment (Falkner, 2018; Hanold, 2010), self-care and maintaining a sense of identity in motherhood (Faulkner, 2018; McGannon & McMahon, 2017, 2022; McGannon, et al., 2017, 2018; Willer, 2021), and body appreciation (Faulkner, 2018; Hanold, 2010). Of course, these findings are nuanced and remain nested in the complexity of navigating competing discourses on gender, identity, race, femininity, body ideals, health, and athleticism.

Despite the plethora of research demonstrating the benefits of running, concerns have been raised, such as running can be a form of addiction based on its use as a coping strategy (Leedy, 2000) or exercise addiction (Ertyl et al., 2018; Malchrowicz-Mośko, & Poczta, 2018). However, rather than running being framed within a dysfunctional paradigm of addiction, Leedy (2009) found that women described running as therapeutic, empowering and an experienced an improved sense of well-being.

When exploring the literature on physical activity and sports related to health, it is prudent to include research that has examined body image and eating disorders. In a review exploring the association between body image, physical activity and sports, positive body image has been associated with higher participation in physical activity and sports, whereas negative body image has been found to be a barrier to participation (Sabiston et al., 2019). Research specifically looking at elite female runners also showed higher rates of eating disorders than similarly aged women, with the demands for leanness being the primary risk factor for developing an eating disorder (Hulley & Hill, 2001). The connection between body composition and performance would likely not be a foreign concept to recreational runners; as the linkage between running performance and small stature and low body fat has traditionally been viewed as advantageous to distance running (Legaz & Eston, 2005). Therefore, the pressure to achieve the "runner's body" could also contribute to body dissatisfaction and disordered eating.

2.8.2 Research on Women who Run: Meaning Making and Motivation

Research exploring women's meaning-making or lived experience of running have drawn from diverse theoretical frameworks, including poststructural (Carey, 2022; Esmonde 2019, 2020; Hanold, 2010; McGannon et al., 2017;), grounded theory (Carey, 2022), phenomenology (Allen-Collinson, 2011, 2013; Giorgi & Boudreau, 2010), narrative (Bond & Batey, 2005; Griffin, 2012; Griffin & Pheonix, 2014, 2016a, 2016b; Leedy, 2009; Ronkainen et al., 2018), poetic inquiry (Faulkner, 2018) and discursive psychology (McGannon et al., 2017; McGannon, & McMahon, 2017).

For example, using narrative inquiry, Griffin (2012) explored the intersections of women's experiences of health and aging within the context of a women's learn-to-run club. The author presented a comprehensive picture of the *if, how, why,* and *when,* women engaged with health and 'active aging' messages across their life course. Of particular note was the barrier relating to being able to 'identify' as an active person often stemming from a childhood of either inactivity or not identifying as an athletic person. A significant barrier, or as Griffin (2012) posits a 'foreclosed narrative,' was the women's grappling with *who* can actually be a runner and how participating in a fun, non-competitive (an essential element for many) women's only running group, fostered the necessary ground for the possibility that these women could also be 'hailed' into embodying new identities as runner's or athletes.

Griffin and Phoenix (2014, 2016) further elaborated on the critical elements that support women moving from a foreclosed narrative to one of possibility as they tried to understand what moves women from the awareness of the benefits of physical activity to actually running. Situating the women's narratives within the broader discourses of health consciousness (Rail & Beausoleil, 2001) and 'active aging' (Higgs & Jones, 2009), the authors identified several elements that supported women in moving from foreclosed narratives to one of broader possibilities that are worth expanding on for this study. The elements included healing messaging, embodied learning, and social identity. I will expand on these themes in relation to the other research on running.

First, the focus of healing messages. Griffin and Pheonix (2016) noted that the women's running club was promoted for 'all ages, all sizes, all abilities', with a strong emphasis on a non-competitive atmosphere. They noted that the participants experienced the message as a healing narrative. Of particular interest, Griffin and Phoenix (2016) discussed the intentional choosing of the 'everyday' or 'average' woman as part of the program's promotional material and Success Stories. These insight highlights the delicate balance of creating messages and images that are both relatable (as in the average woman overcoming hardships or creating time for themselves) yet just slightly beyond their current subject position, which prompts a call to move towards embodying this possibility.

This aligns with other research showing that women need to see other 'average' women, as opposed to professional athletes, engaging in recreation and sports to open the door towards their own sense of possibility (Cronan & Scott, 2008; McGannon et al., 2017; Ohlendorf et al., 2019; Ronkainen et al.,2 018; Yarnal et al., 2006). Inderstrodt-Stephens and Acharya (2018) also emphasized the importance of supporting body diversity within a sporting context. In their research with "overweight" endurance athletes, they found that a common source of stigma articulated by their research participants is the notion that they do not 'look the part' of an athlete.

The second element articulated by Griffin and Phoenix (2016) that supports women in starting and staying involved in physical activity was embodied learning. Through the structured and supportive environment of the running club, the women learned strategies for training, clothing, nutrition, and injury prevention. Participants also experienced new bodily sensations, such as understanding the line between soreness and injury. In the case of gaining credibility to be part of the running community and to be able to uptake the runner's identity, requires the ability to engage in 'running talk' (Allen-Collinson & Hockey, 2007) and a shift in lifestyle behaviours such as eating habits, sleeping patterns, and time spent with family. Embodied learning can also be understood through biopedagoies as discussed previously.

The third element Griffin and Phoenix (2016) discussed is the social identity formed through being part of the running group. By being part of this physical and social context, the continued sharing, support, and encouragement helped the participants shift towards adopting the 'running identity,' which the authors note is remarkable considering such a shift was deemed initially impossible for the participants. Similar findings were found in a study examining a mixed-gender running group in China (Xie et al., 2020), and within ultrarunning communities (Cohen & Hanold, 2016; Quicke, 2017).

2.8.3 The Running Body and Identity

Of particular interest to this study is how identifying as a runner shapes women's understanding of the running body and the ideal woman's body. A pertinent study by Hanold (2010) utilized a Foucauldian framework, specifically his concept of 'technology of the self,' to examine how the female ultrarunning body is created and understood through discourses of the normative running body, the ideal female body and pain. The author's findings suggest that in comparison to the literature on distance running, ultrarunning is a sport that creates more diverse subjectivities, specifically around what is an 'ideal' ultrarunning body, which in the case of these runners, the 'ultrarunner' body served to destabilize the normative runner's body which is lean and toned. In this study, the athletes pointed out that many different shapes and sizes have success within the ultrarunning community. Hanold (2010) states that the participants were "aware of the presence of the normative running body in their thoughts, but consciously chose to create their bodies according to "what works" rather than on the "lean and muscular" shape of the normative running body" (p.170). The author also posits that within the discourses of the ideal female body, the participants also engaged in critical awareness by focusing on what their body can do, rather than what their body looks like.

Two additional studies on runners that utilized a Foucauldian framework provide further insight into how the disciplining effect of the normative running body shapes the production of multiple subjectivities (Bridel & Rail, 2007; Chase, 2008). First, Bridel and Rail (2007) examined gay marathon runners' discursive construction of their body, paying specific attention to how they articulated or resisted discourses of physical activity, running, and dominant representations of the male body within gay culture. Like Hanold's study (2010), the participants could clearly articulate the 'optimal' marathon body, muscled yet lean and sleek, while also acknowledging a diversity of possible marathon bodies. In contrast to the female ultrarunner's, Bridel and Rail's study participants articulated weight loss as a primary motivator to achieve the normative runner's body. However, Bridel and Rail (2007) argue that though these runners were drawing from discourses of the normative running body, they were simultaneously resisting the normative body of gay "buff" culture. They proposed the notion of the gay marathon body being a "hybrid body" resulting from the multiple and often conflicting bodily discourses which allowed the marathon runners to situate their bodies within discourses of athletics, health, and aesthetics.

The second study drawing from a Foucauldian framework was by Chase (2008), who explored the Clydesdale runners who self-identify as “large” or “fat” runners. Chase (2008) described how fat running bodies simultaneously represent resistance to the normative running body yet remain a site of control. The participants noted that the fat body is not fully embraced as a ‘proper’ running body among the broader running community even though these runners can run marathons successfully. Chase (2008) contends that the disciplinary effect of the normative running body shapes the runner’s meaning-making of their own body and perceptions of their acceptability as a runner and how the broader community responds to the larger runners.

This elucidates the powerful, dominant discourse of what constitutes the “proper” runner’s body and shapes what bodies can claim the running identity. The “distance runner” category has also become a normalized category imbued with representing valued virtues. The notion of self-empowerment was articulated in all three of the above studies, which have also been found in other studies exploring the meaning or experience of running (Boudreau & Giorgi, 2010; Leedy, 2009; Reischer, 2001; Shipway & Holloway, 2010).

2.9 Closing Thoughts

In the literature review I drew from a diverse range of theories and research to situate my study that attempts to pull together the areas of body image and embodiment, physical activity, health and self-care. Since I am drawing from a feminist poststructural orientation, I primarily focused on feminist approaches to understanding the body, physical activity, and health from a critical perspective. I also included research that presented these themes from a more mainstream approach that also helped lay the groundwork for broader understandings of dominant discourses of bodies, health, physical activity and self-care.

I began with my theoretical approach which is feminist poststructural. I discussed Foucault’s conceptualization of discourses, and how power and agency is enacted through the body. Next, in “Feminist Theories of the Body, Body Image, and Embodiment” I delved deeper into how feminist theories situate and conceptualize the body. I provided definitions of body image, both negative and positive, and then moved into exploring the broader term of embodiment. I elaborated on Niva Piran’s (2017) Developmental Theory of Embodiment which I draw from throughout this research as it situates the body from a material, cultural, and social perspective.

In the second section “Embodying Health, Self-care and Physical Activity” I provided definitions of more mainstream conceptualizations of health, self-care and physical activity. I also reviewed literature on the Social Determinants of Health which brought me into more critical explorations of health and well-being of Crawford’s (1980, 2006) notion of “healthism.” I drew from the Developmental Theory of Development (2017) domain of Physical Freedom to show how freedom in physical engagement and movement can contribute to the DTE’s Attuned Care of the Body. This allowed me to share some of the contention within the feminist literature on self-care of the body through physical activity and other movement practices is not necessarily an act of “oppressive body work” (Gimlen, 2002). I then provided examples of how physical activity can provide a pathway towards an empowering “I can.”

In the third section “Biopower, Biopedagogies and the Healthy Subject” I situated health from a critical poststructural perspective drawing from Foucauldian influenced concepts of biopower, biopedagogies, and the healthy subject, or in other words, what knowledge or practices do we draw on to “be healthy.” Importantly, this section emphasizes that health and who can “be healthy” is often cultural situated. Next, I moved into how physical activity can be understood as engaging in resistance or agency when individuals or groups engage in physical activity in ways that either actively disrupt gendered norms on how a body “should” look or move. This is an area rife with complexity in how people negotiate socially constructed dominant understandings of body ideals.

In the fifth section “Intersectional Bodies of Knowledge” I provided a brief overview of literature that examines what is intersectionality and how we can strive to think intersectionally through the entire research process. In order to understand how the variety of social categories all influence each other to produce different social categories of power or oppression. I specifically focused on gender which with socioeconomic status, race, body size, and aging.

Finally, in the section “Women and Running” I presented a comprehensive overview of the literature that pertains to the increase in popularity of running among women (notably, white women), the influence of running on health and well-being, and the motivations and meaning of running. I then present pertinent research on the running body and identity which primarily draws from a poststructural orientation which illuminates how individuals draw from dominant discourses to describe what is a “real” runner looks and how they actively resist these dominant discourses to creative alternative subject positions of who can be a runner.

2.10 Conceptual Framework: Embodied Poststructuralism

I am primarily drawing from feminist poststructural theory in tandem with an embodiment lens and suggest the knowledge is embodied and created between inter-acting bodies. This allows me to hold the academic tension between the discursively produced body and material body together. Tami Spry (2011) reminds us that “embodied knowledge is knowledge that is gained by paying close somatic attention to how and what our body feels when interacting with others in contexts” (p.64). The literature presented weaves together critical feminist scholarship along with more mainstream orientations towards understanding physical activity and wellness to bring together the strengths of multiple theoretical perspectives. Ellingson (2017) says that power can be understood as embodied which helps us to focus on how "discourses of power position different bodies and how those bodies are read or made sense of by ourselves and others" (p.20). Interweaving these theories and concepts together has created a conceptual framework that has guided my research, which I call *embodied poststructuralism,* and holds me theoretically accountable for keeping our bodies at the forefront of analysis.

Bringing together a poststructural orientation alongside the Developmental Theory of Embodiment (DTE) derived from a more developmental psychology framework is not without tensions. To begin with, their epistemological foundations differ in terms of subjectivity and concepts such as empowerment and resistance. As discussed, poststructuralism builds upon the premise that knowledge or truth is a social construction that is situational, fluid, and relational. This includes our understandings of empowerment, resistance, and the body. Although the DTE draws from a constructivist lens to make sense of women's narratives, fundamentally, the starting body for understanding the body is through women's lived experience of their body. The theory was developed under a developmental psychological framework and analyzes women's narratives through time, suggesting that embodiment unfolds sequentially. In this way, the DTE suggests a stable and developmentally predictable sense of subjectivity that is understood through privileging lived experience.

Perhaps the most challenging, yet potentially fruitful tension, is with the notion of what is meant by "positive embodiment" or the empowering possibilities of physical activity. A poststructural orientation centers on dismantling dualistic concepts. So it could be argued that the concept of "positive embodiment" automatically means there is a counter "negative embodiment." Poststructuralism would accentuate the cultural discourses that determine what constructs our understanding of what positive embodiment even means and what type of body or lived experience is read as an empowered body. Is empowerment simply another neoliberal guise for discipling the body? Conversely, as I have argued, a too heavy emphasis on the social construction of the body undermines the materiality of the body, which is intimately linked to our health behaviours and environment. I aim to bring these two seemingly diverse orientations together to provide a deeper analysis of how cultural norms discursively shape women's understanding of their bodies *and* how women subjectively experience and feel in their bodies.

2.11 Rationale for this Study

There is a noted gap in the literature on understanding women's exercise experiences and the multitude of sociocultural factors that impact women's initiation and continued participation in physical activity (Bond & Batey, 2005; Faulkner, 2019). While a number of studies have explored women's meaning-making of their running practice (Allen-Collinson, 2011, 2013; Bond & Batey, 2005; Bourdreau & Giorgi, 2010 Esmonde 2019, 2020; Faulkner, 2018; Griffin, 2012; Griffin & Pheonix, 2014, 2016a, 2016b; Hanold, 2010; McGannon et al., 2017), there has been no research conducted in this particular setting (Newfoundland and Labrador). Thus, studying this population can offer valuable insights into the motivation in choosing this his particular activity.

While, to date there has been research drawing from a poststructural framework examining running within the context of self-identified larger runners or 'Clydesdale runners' (Chase, 2008), gay male marathon runners (Bridel & Rail, 2006), and competitive female ultramarathon runners (Hanold, 2010); however, my research explores how women who take up the running identity within a serious leisure context influences women's experience of their bodies as well as their understandings of body ideals, health and self-care. Additionally, the aim is to contribute to understanding how physical activity may foster positive embodiment, an exploration that has been lacking in the literature.

Chapter 3

Methodology: Gathering Data on the Run

> *If you allow the body with its senses into research, data collection, analysis and reflection, there may be a new "academy"- an academy of the flesh available to you.*
> (Snowber, 2016, p.6)

In line with feminist research practices, it is vital to pay heed to women's *lived bodily* experiences of being in and moving their bodies. This orientation shifts the focus from "objectively assessing the body to grasping the meaning of the subjectively lived body" (McDermott, 1996, p.26), with insights potentially informing how women can become empowered through movement-based practices and physical activity.

The primary focus of this research is to explore how female recreational runners experience their body through movement and how these embodied experiences shape their understanding of gendered body ideals, health and self-care practices. A secondary focus is on the methodological approach to gathering data. Through a specific emphasis on *moving bodies,* I used a moving methodology to focus on the inter-*action* between my body and the participant's body to see how the individual, collective, and social body becomes materialized. As elaborated in this chapter, I draw from poststructural theory and engage in a moving methodology that provides an organic enfleshed (Woodward, 2016) approach to textualizing moving bodies. This orientation can contribute to understanding the moving body as methodologically and theoretically generative when we consider "how movements make bodies matter" (Larsson, 2014, p. 637).

I chose running as I self-identify as a runner and carry an embodied knowledge of the sport's movement, culture, and particular language. Through engaging reflexively and with awareness of my own embodied experience and assumptions, my 'insider position' (Berger,

2015) both informed the research process and supported me in developing rapport with participants (Allen-Collinson, 2009; Finlay, 2006; Rice, 2009; Thorpe, 2014).

This chapter is divided into six sections. First, I provide an overview of the setting, recruitment, and selection process. Second, I describe my choice of qualitative methodology, situating my research within a feminist poststructural framework, and how this guided my research design. Third, I move into an in-depth discussion on moving methodology and the value of centralizing the moving body. I provide an overview of why and how I engaged with a moving method to "engage the force of the moving active body" (Markula, 2014, p. 283). This provides the rationale for my approach to data generation, which included moving interviews. Finally, I describe my data analysis process, which includes thematic analysis, narrative inquiry, and discourse analysis.

3.1 Overview of Research Context

3.1.1 Ethics

The Health Research Ethics Board approved this research. I will outline the consent process which took place before each interview. After being contacted by the potential participants primarily through email, I sent them an electronic copy of the consent form for initial review. In the email, I asked them to review the consent form to assess whether they had any initial questions or concerns before setting up an interview. I outlined the options to the participants, such as conducting a moving interview or a traditional interview at my office. If the participant agreed to proceed, we arranged a meeting time and the location. I brought a paper copy of the consent form (see Appendix B) for questions and final review before obtaining signatures. I reminded the participants that they could stop the interview at any point, and if they said something they did not want included, I could remove it from the transcript before analysis.

If the participant chose the moving interview, I reiterated that I could not guarantee confidentiality because we were moving in a public space. However, if we passed someone either of us knew, I said I would not indicate that we were doing an interview. I will explain in further detail later in this chapter how we navigated meeting other people on the trails.

3.1.2 Setting

This research took place in an urban setting in the province of Newfoundland and Labrador. This setting provides a unique opportunity to explore women's meaning-making of running for two reasons. The first is that there has been a notable increase in women's participation in running over the past ten years. This likely reflects a global trend of increased involvement of women in organized running races (Faulkner, 2018). Within the local context, many factors could contribute to the increase in the number of women running. One notable possibility, which was also reflected in the research interviews, is learn-to-run courses offered by franchises such as the Running Room and local coaches and gyms offering running programs. Second, the population of Newfoundland and Labrador has been identified as a 'problem population,' often reflected by statistics showing high levels of chronic disease and obesity with low levels of physical activity and fruit/vegetable consumption (McPhail, 2013, 2016; Petherick & Beausoleil, 2016). Public health campaigns from the provincial government target these health behaviours, with a strong focus on increasing physical activity and decreasing sedentary behaviour with school's being a focused target for teaching health-related messages (Petherick & Beausoleil, 2015, 2016).

3.1.3 Recruitment of Participants

I invited individuals who self-identify as women over the age of 19 who have been running for at least six months and who maintain a regular running routine of two to three times a week. The rationale for the criterion of at least six months was to ensure that participants were past the beginning stages of learning how to run and had likely achieved increased cardiovascular fitness (Warburton et al., 2010), allowing them to be more settled in the actual bodily movement of running. This allowed for reflection on why they began running and whether their intentions for running had changed.

I began recruitment in June 2019 by placing posters in areas where physical activity occurs, such as the university's recreation complex and local gyms. I also emailed the recruitment poster to two of the main organized running groups in the urban centre, each comprising 150-200 members. This resulted in the most significant uptake of participation. I also relied on the snowballing technique for data recruitment (Bowling, 2002). I completed sixteen interviews between June 2019 and September 2019, with one additional interview in December 2019. Each interview lasted between 45 minutes to two hours. On average, the interviews lasted about 90 minutes. All participants identified as women, Caucasian, and their ages ranged from mid-20s to early 80s. I did not explicitly ask about sexual orientation or socioeconomic status (as it felt invasive to me); however, insights into these topics generally voluntarily emerged through the interview by the participants. I created pseudonyms for each participant. All the women were heterosexual, and the majority were of middle to upper socioeconomic status. Only one participant explicitly discussed her lower socioeconomic situation in significant detail and how it impacted her running practice.

Participants were incredibly willing and enthusiastic to participate in the research project. Of the seventeen interviews, fifteen were conducted while running and/or walking, and two were held in my office. I will further detail my experience conducting moving interviews in the moving methodology section. Briefly, I found that moving interviews were extremely valuable in fostering the conversation of how the women felt in their bodies *during* movement, yet, it also heavily relied on my level of fitness as there were weeks when I was doing two interviews a day which may have added 10-20 km of additional mileage to my training for a 100 km ultramarathon.

3.2 Situating the Research: Qualitative, Feminist Poststructural

I explored women's lived bodily experiences drawing from qualitative methodology. This approach provides the means to generate rich data on complex issues and value women's stories from their perspectives (Bowling, 2002; Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015). Qualitative methodology does not necessarily aim to mine for a pre-given truth or to make generalizable claims; instead, the design is "flexible and responsive to context, characteristically being described as emergent" (Fossey, et al., 2002, p. 723). Accordingly, when engaging with qualitative methods such as the interview, knowledge is produced and actively created through the interaction between the interviewer and interviewee (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015). This does not mean that narratives alone cannot provide valuable knowledge; understanding an individual's story can be seen as mirroring social reality (Andrews et al., 2008). As such, I am drawing from feminist poststructural theory to understand what discourses women draw from when describing body ideals, health, and self-care and how they align with or resist the hegemonic messages circulating within society. Poststructuralism is situated within diverse theoretical traditions with the central idea that language is constitutive of reality and shapes the production of truth and power relations (Baxter, 2003; Markula et al., 2008; Weedon, 1997; Wellard, 2019).

I situate my research within a feminist framework that recognizes the importance of women's lived experiences and values their perspective as a legitimate form of knowledge and power (Barbour, 2018). One significant focus of feminism is challenging the Western epistemology (the theory of knowledge), which often situates knowledge as objective and universal while lending itself to the dualistic categorization of knowledge, for example, male/female, good/bad, mind/body, object/subject, knowledge/experience (Barbour, 2018; Weedon, 1997). Feminist epistemology questions these universal 'knowledges' and guides us towards critical reflection on how we come to know what we know. In other words, what counts as knowledge, what can be known and who can know? Additionally, a feminist standpoint challenges tacit knowledge claims and privileged forms of power with the hope of creating rich new meanings and alternative perspectives as a path to disrupting these taken-for-granted 'truths' (Baxter, 2003; Hesse-Biber, 2007) or beliefs that appear to be innocuously 'common sense' (Weedon, 2007). This approach also seriously questions the positivist theoretical perspective of 'value-free' science and objectivity, instead engaging in knowledge production as co-created, subjective, partial, and situated (Hesse-Biber, 2007).

A poststructuralist framework does not provide a specific method per se; instead, it guides our thinking around notions of binaries, identities, discourses, and agency. Poststructuralism is part of the 'linguistic turn' that pays particular heed to the constitutive power of language and discourse, or in the words of Gannon and Davis (2007), how the "subject is discursively produced and the very body and its desires are materialized through discourse" (p.80). Furthermore, subjectivity can become understood not as biologically determined, but as socially and culturally produced, thus, the 'subject' is an "unstable, fragmented and fluid notion, rather than a single and unified identity constant over time" (Barbour, 2018, p.212). Understanding subjectivity and identity as fluid and shifting allowed me to enter the women's narratives of their running story with the ability to hold the tension of what often appeared as contradictory or competing discourses on how they articulated their embodied experience.

3.2.1 Reflexivity: Embodied Narratives

The concept of reflexivity is generally well-accepted in qualitative research (Berger, 2015; Pillow, 2003). As inherent in a feminist methodology, I practiced reflexivity to make explicit my location and position within the research and how my embodied presence with participants contributes to the co-creation of knowledge (Hesse-Biber, 2007; Ellingson, 2017). Feminist methodologies are grounded in reflexive practices that elucidate the researcher's positionality concerning the research. Accordingly, Bridel and Rail (2007) posit that the researcher's experience should not be considered less relevant when trying to understand a particular social phenomenon. Pirkko Markula (2001) describes this reality in her attempts to resist cultural norms of the ideal feminine body, stating, "I am faced with my inability to disrupt my own disciplinary gaze" (p.28). Hence, although we attempt to make explicit our embeddedness in cultural norms such as gender, we cannot truly escape our embodied situatedness even with politicalized awareness of such boundaries. This reflection aptly illustrates cautionary tales of researchers engaging with more autonarrative approaches becoming confronted with feeling like a 'failed feminist' (Olive & Thorpe, 2011). It can be challenging to discover if one's feminist ideals and actions are not congruent and require consideration of *and if* to share this realization in the public and academic realm (Dashper, 2013).

Despite the focus on the body in feminist research, Ellingson (2017) suggests that many qualitative researchers are still unsure how to embody the research process, thus reinforcing the mind/body split and the "disembodied researcher" who presents research as though knowledge were produced without the involvement of "unruly bodies" (p.6). She contends that the performance of the "disembodied researcher" has become so widely accepted and repeated that it "functions as a set of naturalized norms that privileges a masculinist rationality as the only form of knowledge, accorded only to those with sufficient social privilege to deny their feminine unruliness" (2017, pg. 6).

It is important to note the use of the phrase 'feminine unruliness,' as other feminist theorists have written extensively on the gendered nature of the mind/body split where the mind is seen as masculine and the body associated with the feminine (for example, Bordo, 2003; Grosz, 1994; Young, 2005). Consequently, when bodies are made transparent in the research process, gendered notions of the body as irrational, unreliable, and uncontrollable challenge the scientific paradigm of "value-free" and objective science.

Similarly, I took the challenge of not reproducing the "disembodied researcher." I incorporated a moving methodology as a central component of this research project to maintain sight that the body, mine included, is fundamentally implicated throughout the entirety of the research process. As researchers, we are already implicated in our study when we explore bodies and identities, whether we acknowledge them or not (Kannen, 2013). One intention of feminist research is to create spaces for women to share their stories, especially their body stories. This can be viewed as a political act that disrupts most Western ontologies of defining what is "knowable," yet "the body is a prime site for silences and secrets" (Throsby & Gimlin, 2009, p. 105).

Throsby and Gimlin (2010) commend attempts to 'bring the body back' in social science research; they insist that excluding the researcher's embodied self does an injustice to the study and the research participants. Regarding researching women's embodied experiences, they argue that "privileging researchers' thoughts and beliefs over their bodily desires and practices ultimately reifies the same mind-body dualism that feminists have long been trying to overcome"

(p. 106). Hence, engaging in methodologies that attempt to keep the body in view through the entire research process can help address our reinforcement of the mind/body dualism.

As Woodward (2016) suggests that, it is important to be "attentive to the relationship between the researcher and the subjects of research and the diverse materialities that constitute embodied experience" (p.8). Our bodies are the site where we experience the world through a continuous flow of sensory input; hence, there is no division between where your body ends and where the world begins. Perception and consciousness cannot be disentangled from our bodies.

Attempting to remain faithful to my goal of embodied transparency and acknowledging my active role in the research, rather than presenting my experience as separate from the participants, I shared my narrative in the opening to enhance reflexivity and to remain transparent throughout the research process. My personal narrative also provide insight into where my experience aligns with the participants and perhaps where we differ.

3.3 Moving Methodology

Akin to the 'linguistic turn' that emerged alongside postmodernism (Gannon & Davis, 2007), a 'mobilities turn' is carving a path as a methodology. According to Büscher and Urry (2009), it allows for investigation of "movement, blocked movement, potential movement" (p.99), enabling researchers to expose how 'moves' create and shape social and material realities. Several studies have used walking with participants as a methodology which has made particularly rich qualitative data (Anderson, 2004; Brown & Durrheim, 2009; Doughty, 2013; Dubé et al., 2014; Esmonde, 2019; Evans & Jones, 2011; Francombe, 2013; Hein Rickets et al., 2008, Miaux, et al., 2010; Palmer, 2016).

Research utilizing this methodology focuses on the importance of interviewing 'in place' to explore people's meaning-making, associations, or experiences of spaces and places (Hein

Rickets et al., 2008). Moreover, because this method attempts to take into account the experience of the body in movement (Miaux et al., 2010), utilizing a method that is ‘on the move’ researchers can “immers[e] themselves in the fleeting, multi-sensory, distributed, mobile and multiple, yet local, practical and ordered making of social and material realities” may gain an understanding of movement not as governed by rules, but as *methodically generative”* (Büscher & Urry, 2009, p. 104, emphasis added). Conceptualizing movement as methodically generative offers a fruitful starting place for researchers seeking to understand people’s meaning-making of physical activity beyond the more traditional studies of the biomechanics of movement. I continue to build from other studies who utilized a running moving method (Esmonde, 2019; Palmer, 2016). Research in communications and media have built upon the concept of ‘datawalking’ as a methodology which threads walking as a practice that incorporates the human body (embodied), being-in-motion anchored in a particular place and time (situated), and empowers the subject as part of the research process (generative) fostering a more dynamic orientation towards data gathering (Van Es & Lange, 2020).

Much of the research discussed previously has used movement as a method to gather rich data on various topics. However, the focus of the research does not explicitly situate the moving body *as* the site of interest for research. There is a notable gap in sports and physical cultural fields, addressing the ontological and methodological implications of studying bodies, especially from the perspective of the researcher. Palmer (2016), cited earlier on her use of GoPro™ to capture women’s experiences taking part in a charity run, noted the implication of a moving methodology on the researcher’s body, which for her was weight loss. She shares:

> My body was fit and healthy, and this gave me a pause for thought as to its centrality in accessing the field, collecting date and ultimately leaving the field. My fit and healthy

> body functioned as a performative instrument through which to gather empirical material. (p. 232)

I align with Palmer's reflection. My able-body and fitness level allowed my ability to do a running interview, and my confidence in my fitness level did not create a barrier to being able to run/move for as long as the interview lasted.

Situating the body as the instrument aligns with Francombe (2013), who suggests that we should consider not only the "evidence that matters" but also the "body that matters" (p. 257). Although she acknowledges the increased theorization on the body, she calls a centering of the "tacit, sensuous body, its fleshy sinews, its movement and its (in)activity as a locus within more creative and meaningful method(ological) trajectories" (p. 257). This research contributes to this gap by centralizing both the methodological implications of centralizing the moving body and the practical implications of engaging with a moving methodology.

3.3.1 The Moving Body

Though the body has attracted much attention from scholars in a variety of disciplines, Francombe (2013) questions why "when we research into physical, sporting, inactive experiences, do we refrain from putting the body to work? Why do we not theorize the body through the moving body?" (p. 256). Building from Foucault's description of discourses as "practices that systematically form the objects of which they speak," it could also be stated that, *movement systematically form the objects of which they speak*.

Likewise, Larsson and Quennerstedt (2012) suggest that limited attention has been placed on the moving body as the starting point for analysis and has much to offer a poststructural framework, as what it means to move is always a social and collective process. Building from the work of Foucault's theorization of discourses, they suggest viewing *movement* as signs and the "structural relations between movements performed in a specific context are seen as discourse" (p.285). Therefore, it opens up ways to use discourse analysis to maintain sight of the material body while exploring the meaning-making associated with movement. Furthermore, based on Foucault's theoretical position that subjectivity is embodied and socially constituted, the body becomes a site of power struggles and a site for resistance based on what discourses individuals draw upon (Francombe, 2013; Wright, 2004). Usefully, Gannon and Davies (2007) direct attention to both our immersion in discourses and also that "possibilities for shifting discourses, for taking up new ways of thinking and being, that is *agency* in the world, become possible in the contractions and mo(ve)ments within discursive regimes" (p. 83).

Therefore, what does the movement of running represent for women if, as Michael Gard (2008) suggests, "how we move and how we choose to move are tied up with who we are and who we want to be"? (p. 217). Furthermore, how does this specific movement shape women's understanding of their bodies if this particular physical act is "inextricably linked to the desire to be(come) precisely the kind of person who moves in such and such a way"? (Larsson & Quennerstedt, 2012, p. 288). When studying movement and physical activity, this notion of 'mo(ve)ment' sparks imaginative possibilities of alternative ways of engaging in embodied physical mo(ve)ments to negotiate dominant discourses that shape our understandings of ourselves. Our understandings and meaning-making of discourses are co-produced and contingent on the *moment* we are culturally situated in. What does 'moving like a runner' mean for women within our current cultural context of discourses emphasizing the glorification of the thin ideal and individual responsibility for health and wellness?

I will close this section with Franombe's (2013) inspiring call for researchers to push their methodological boundaries with a "focus on the flesh" because,

> through the moving body a plenitude of societal conditions and possibilities become comprehensible and our research encounters need, implicitly, to be grounded in an incentive to work with and for these bodies and to disseminate, exchange and transfer knowledge in dynamic, illuminating and meaningful ways. (p. 270)

My research prioritizes answering this challenge by honouring the moving, sweaty, fleshy body. In the following sections I will discuss how I captured "data on the run" through moving interviews.

3.4 Data Generation

3.4.1 Mobile Methodologies

Mobile methodologies have the potential to contribute to the growing emphasis in the social sciences on the intertwining of place, materiality and movement (Hein Rickets, 2008), which acknowledges that as embodied beings, we are all situated in a particular place at a particular time. Drawing inspiration from those who have used moving methodologies, along with scholars such as Larsson and Quennerstedt (2012), who encourage researchers to consider centering the moving body as the starting point of analysis, I wanted to engage with the participants while moving our bodies. This resonates with Wacquant's (2015) articulation of making data through "carnal-know how" in that knowledge production is not merely a disembodied intellectual act but emerges from *acting in* and *upon* the social world (p.3). Daza and Huckaby (2014) also insist that research is an embodied process and suggest that to "recognize how we do and do not already use movement as inquiry is to begin to understand how movement might be more purposely applied as a method of inquiry and to recognize that movement has implications for reading/analyzing the world" (p. 807).

I planned to conduct individual interviews with 10-12 women with the invitation to participate in multiple interviews. As outlined above, I conducted seventeen interviews (fifteen moving and two seated in my office). For the moving interviews, I recorded the interviews while moving, a combination of running and walking based on the woman's comfort and preference, and with added 'pitstops' such as bathroom, water, and stretch breaks.

From experience, moving alongside one another also recreates a common experience for many runners namely, showing up to a group run, often with people who are not a close acquaintance. Instead of trying to find common ground through social or professional connections, conversations often flow from the present-moment experience of moving together. As Lauren, a participant in her 20's, noted when I asked her to elaborate on her comment that "the community sucked me in." She reflected on the shared memories created as a group saying:

> The company and people who you wouldn't overwise interact with. Like one person who I ran with for a while left and he's like a man in his 60s and I was really sad when we moved away. It was like I can't think of another part of my life where that would be the case.

Other participants also related this insight that you are often running with people of a wide age-span, and people's professional backgrounds are not known immediately.

The following sections will detail my experience gathering data on-the-move. First, I will explore interviewing as an embodied relational experience. I will examine the experience of moving bodies and the 'talking-whilst-walking' (or, in my case, running), which include the dance of personal space and boundaries, being in-tune with the participant's pace through listening to their breathing rate and leg turnover. I share my approach to capturing field notes in light of the choice of a moving methodology. Second, I will outline the technology's role in capturing the interviews, including the benefits and considerations of adequately capturing audio interviews while moving outside. I will then examine how the terrain and environment shaped the conversation and the movement patterns and how I needed to be familiar with the trails and terrain. Finally, I discuss this method in terms of confidentiality and navigating the inevitable encounters with other bodies.

3.4.2 Enmeshed Bodies-Interviewing

I chose to conduct semi-structured interviews to understand how women runners make meaning out of their running practice and how this, in turn, influences their conceptualization of body ideals, self-care, and health. Interviews are a research method that can foster insight into people's lived experiences through listening to how they describe and make meaning of a particular phenomenon (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015). Hearing how women understand their running practice and what discourses they drew from when describing its meaning in their life, I was hoping that this would contribute to a deeper understanding of physical activity's role in contributing to a positive sense of embodiment.

The knowledge created in an interview or *inter-view,* as emphasized by Brinkmann and Kvale (2015), is based on the inter-action and the inter-change of dialogue and views between the interviewer and interviewee. The notion that knowledge is co-created aligns with a poststructural orientation in that language is to be understood as situated and fluid with knowledge being co-created between the researcher and participant (Phillips & Hardy, 2002). Furthermore, Burns (2006) suggests that researchers must be aware of how meaning is co-created through the interviewer's embodied subjectivity in relation to the participants. I understand this as our embodied presence is already imbued with meaning yet often remains unspoken. The value of keeping the body 'in view' throughout the research process is eloquently described by Finlay (2006), who suggests "[f]or all its inevitable, inescapable ambiguity, the body reveals, informs and discloses" (p. 29).

Ellingson (2017) reminds us that our embodied experiences of one another are neither entirely subjective nor fully objective, instead, are, "intermingled, reciprocal, and enmeshed" (p.21). Through an embodiment lens in research, we can shake off the rigid posture of the value-free objective researcher and acknowledge that we are literally touched and shaped in the inter-action of our bodies.

I chose semi-structured interviews to stay grounded by the core questions while maintaining a flexible stance to the order in which I asked the questions and prompts based on the conversation flow (see Appendix C for Interview Guide). Each interview lasted between 60 to 120 minutes. Since I was potentially entering into sensitive territory with my focus on experiences of the body, to build trust and rapport, I structured the interview questions to begin with more general questions such as "How long have you been running for?" "Do you remember why you began to run?" or "Do you generally run by yourself or with others?" I was very aware that participants may share intimate or sensitive details about their relationship with their body; thus, I strived to create a trusting, safe space between us.

Interviewing is not only an embodied interaction but also an emotional interaction (Finlay, 2006). Ezzy (2010) states that an interview can be experienced as either a "conquest or communion," depending on the approach taken by the interviewer. Additionally, interviews can be understood as "emotional and embodied performances" and warrant extra care and mindfulness in engaging with the participants (Ezzy, 2010, p. 163). Not taking for granted that performing an interview is a skill or "craft" (see Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015), throughout the seventeen interviews, I was able to "refine my craft" by becoming more aware of how I worded questions, allowing for more silence and space between comments, and discerning when it was appropriate for me to share or provide insight.

As I am working from a feminist perspective, I strive to minimize the inherent power imbalance between the researcher and participants in the research; thus, when appropriate, I shared my viewpoint or story when prompted by the participant (Berger, 2015; Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). I was often asked about balancing family life with running or my experiences at a particular race. Although being asked questions by participants is likely quite common, we are often caught off guard in how to respond by practicing reflexive self-disclosure. Kannen (2013) suggests that because our bodies are “never silent or invisible to the interactions that we are involved in” (p. 189), we could try to be more mindful of not getting lost in the roles of “

Understanding the interview as an embodied emotional interaction, I did not attempt to bracket off my emotional response, which, as Ezzy (2010) insists, “the idea of an emotionally neutral interviewer [is] doomed to fail” (p. 168). There were many instances where participants became tearful either when reflecting on a challenging life experience or a sense of gratitude and I felt my body respond with tears or warmth. Perhaps a moment of “communion.”

3.4.3 Moving Interviews: The Logistics

Being mindful of the inherent and unavoidable power dynamic in the researcher/participant relationship, I intended to invite participants to choose the route for the interview to help shift the power imbalance and formality of the interview experience by meeting on more ‘neutral territory.’ Ultimately, the decision on where to meet was often based on my recommendation of a suitable trail depending on what part of the city the participant was working from or where they lived. The importance of choosing well-sheltered, low-traffic areas due to the negative impact that background noise had on the quality of the recording became evident. One potential downside of this method is that high winds, traffic, and other users on the trails impact the recording quality.

In order to try to minimize the background noise and awkward mechanics of holding a recorder while running or walking, I rented two microphones with headsets that allowed the microphone to be positioned as close to our mouths as possible. Another technical consideration is that each interview contained two recordings (participant and interviewer). Consequently, while transcribing, I would have to move painstakingly back and forth between the two recordings if the microphone did not pick up on both of our voices (generally due to high winds or how close our bodies were next to each other). However, all these technical concerns aside, the choice of a moving methodology was worth the effort (physically and mentally!). Importantly, it was well received by the fifteen participants who chose the moving methodology option. I will expand on the recordings and transcriptions below.

Fleshy Fieldnotes

I identify myself as a runner and have a consistent running practice, which may resonate with the growing numbers of women runners. I approached reflexivity in this research in two ways. First, I began this dissertation by including my personal narrative to weave my embodied experience at the forefront of this research. Second, I kept a research journal of my personal running experiences and reflections throughout the data-gathering and analysis phase. Throughout the interviews, I did not take notes, partially not to detract from the researcher-participant interaction but primarily out of the logistics of moving while interviewing. I wrote reflective notes or recorded myself orally before and after each interview. Before each interview, I noted where we were meeting, the weather conditions, and how I felt physically and emotionally. After each interview, I would make additional comments, reflections, or reminders for myself. Listening or reading field notes in tandem with reading the interviews can help prompt memories of details that could be easily forgotten and invoke surprise or guide researchers to conceptualize or observe the interview creatively (Ellingson & Sotirin 2020). For example, while transcribing my first interview, I wrote,

Field Note: Working on transcript #1 and while typing I feel this sadness in how many times participant describes running as a focus for taut muscles or body modification. I don’t relate. When I listen to my voice saying ‘right’, ‘yeah’, ‘hmmm ok’, it is sounding like I am agreeing but it is so I don’t shut down the conversation.

Ellingson and Sotirin (2020) conceptualize field notes as lively and dynamic rather than “inert, static, or contained on the page or limited to one stage of the research process” (p. 30). Throughout all stages of the research process, I took notes and often made notes to myself while transcribing or analyzing to ‘keep myself in view’ as a reflexive practice. I did not analyze the fieldnotes separately but reread or listened to my fieldnotes to help deepen my analysis by adding nuances that may have been lost in transcription.

Moving Technology

Following in the footsteps of many qualitative researchers' approaches to capturing oral data, I recorded the interviews with a digital recorder (Caronia, 2015; Fernandez & Griffiths, 2007). As we listen and transcribe interviews, it warrants a reminder that digital recordings are capturing a specific moment, during a particular time, and at a specific place. Yet, recordings may still be assumed to be ‘unbiased’ and ‘naturalistic’ even among those who believe that knowledge is co-created between researcher and participant (Ellingson, 2006; Ellingson & Sotirin, 2020). Accordingly, Nordstrum (2015) suggests that we need to be more transparent in acknowledging that “recording devices have become normalized materialized-discursive practice” and “not so innocent anymore” (p.388). As I will expand more in the transcription process, I acknowledge my continued power over constructing the data assemblage in that transforming the audio data into the written word was an act of translation, not dictation (Ellingson & Sotirin 2020).

In hopes of capturing our voices while moving, the participant and I held a digital recorder. I recognized that holding the microphones up to our mouths would be cumbersome and unnatural to the movement of running or walking, which usually entails hands swinging parallel to hips. To address this, I rented two microphone headsets that let the microphone be positioned directly by our mouths and the recorder held in our hand or a pocket. Researchers may hope that the participant will forget about the recording device to create a more ‘natural’ conversational atmosphere, though this is highly unlikely and negates relating to the digital recording as part of the research assemblage (Caronia, 2015; Ellingson & Sotirin 2020). The notion of assemblage situates research as an act of creating or making, in other words, an act of assembling both human and non-human objects together to bring data into being (Ellingson & Sotirin, 2020). For me, the recording device became an extension of my body-research-assemblage.

This little innocuous black box held the irreproducible interaction assembled through two moving bodies conversing over a particular terrain, weather, mood, and bodily state. As I am guided by an interpretive approach, meaning that there is no pregiven truth waiting to be extracted and uncovered (Denzin and Lincoln, 2011), each interview sent my body into hypervigilance, knowing that the dialogue created through our embodied interaction could not be reproduced even if guided by the same questions. I was dependent on that technology not failing, which included my ability to ensure everything was working correctly.

Moving Terrain

Engaging in moving interviews was a worthwhile method for exploring experiences and meaning-making of movement. As discussed in the *Moving Methodology* section, 'talking-whilst-walking' brings the embodied act of moving into the research process and the landscapes our bodies move through. As Esmode (2019) notes, the locales where running takes place are inseparable from the act itself in that the "entanglement of bodies and their environments is inescapably apparent in the act of running" (p. 804). Our bodies are moving in relationship to the terrain, which is meant in the most literal sense- our bodies are constantly adjusting to the landscape, whether shortening our stride and pumping our arms going up hill or leaning back and staying centered on a descent. The moment-by-moment conversations were happening in tandem with navigating rocks, people, cars, ducks, rabbits, dogs, lawnmowers, squirrels, and ascending and descending hills.

Although I initially aimed to have the participants choose the location to meet, generally, it was a joint decision based on where they lived or worked. As I mentioned earlier, our temperamental climate was always a factor. I quickly learned that choosing well-sheltered trails that blocked the wind would minimize the background noise on the recording. I was mindful of whether the route was particularly hilly and encouraged the participants to set a pace that allowed them to feel comfortable talking. There was a building of trust as I encouraged them to follow their own embodied knowledge of their general fitness and their body's comfort level, allowing the participants to say, 'I'm going to walk this hill' if they predicted it would impact their breathing rate.

I also discovered that a critical component to conducting a successful moving interview was familiarity with the trail and terrain so that moving through the landscape does not distract from the conversation. There were many moments during the interviews when you heard me say, “let’s go this way” or “we’ll turn here” as I navigated towards more sheltered and private areas. I often asked to pause the conversation if we were approaching a deafening background noise. I often struggled with the balance of disrupting the flow of dialogue and my concern of not being able to hear what they were saying on the recording, so being familiar with the terrain and trails was vital to making quick decisions on where we could go to mitigate disrupting of the conversation. As we moved and talked, I decided how far we should keep going before we turned around based on where I was on the interview guide or what loops we could do to give us the ground needed to cover the questions.

The landscape also offered prompts for the participants to share memories of recent runs or where they went for hill training or speedwork. During one interview, Catherine began to veer towards a bench with a dedicated plaque for someone. When we were close to the bench, she said, “we got to touch this bench, this is my sister’s husband’s bench.” When I saw the name on the bench, I realized I knew her sister very well, which shifted the conversation for the next few minutes. Throughout the interviews, it was common that a landmark would prompt a memory that guided the conversation down a different path. During another interview, Tammy and I were walking around a campground when she said,

Tammy: This is the hill we ran this morning.

Holly: Oh nice!

Tammy: This one. No no the second loop. That’s where we do our hill training.

The participants could draw from the terrain to bring richness to our conversation and bring to life many of the stories they were sharing.

Encountering Other Bodies

There is an ethical consideration of conducting an interview outside in that privacy or confidentiality cannot be guaranteed the same way as in an office. It was inevitable that the participant or I would run into someone that we knew at some point. Before starting, I discussed with the participants that if we met someone they knew, it was their choice to disclose what we were doing. Several times throughout the interviews, we passed someone that one or both of us knew through the running community (or elsewhere). I had to navigate the social cues of politely saying hello without encouraging a significant interaction.

Encountering other bodies on the trail also added visual prompts when discussing idealized notions of women’s bodies and the runner’s body. Although we never discussed any[body] as we passed people, there were moments when there was a sense of an unspoken acknowledgment of seeing bodies of diverse shapes and sizes walking and running and how it was relevant to the current conversation. Here is an example from my fieldnotes,

Fieldnote June 20, 2019: During the run, we passed three women runners with larger bodies as we talked about ideal body for runners. There was a noted shift in the energy between us. Almost an unacknowledged knowing what the other was thinking. It was interesting having the visual presented. I believe my body is making a difference because I don’t think people would be as willing to discuss the normative thin body if I were larger. I can’t be too sure but it must impact their openness.

Despite some of the challenges or logistics of conducting a moving interview, this method was worth going the ‘extra mile(s).’ The combination of engaging in the movement we were discussing and moving alongside each other on familiar trails appeared to facilitate a comfortable space for women to share their moving stories.

3.5 Data Analysis

In this final section, I discuss my approach to data analysis. I approached data analysis guided by a crystallization framework. Crystallization differs from the more recognized concept of triangulation, which uses multiple methods to' validate' the data (Denzin, 2012). Richardson (2000) argues that triangulation constricts possibilities to 'three sides' rather than acknowledging that there are far more than 'three sides' to approach the world, and our research.

I begin this section by discussing my transcription process, which may be perceived as rather lengthy. My aim to be fully transparent with the transcription process is an effort to be responsive to the implication that transcribing is often viewed as a "clerical task" (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015) and is often brushed over so that we can get on with data analysis. Often, what goes unacknowledged in the transcription process is that the aliveness of the interaction is now sitting on an inert piece of paper. Next, I provide my approach to reflexivity, namely, embodied reflexivity, which is taking reflexivity beyond being explicit about our positionality as a researcher but how very 'body-ness' is already speaking for us in both subtle and subtle ways.

Through cultural meanings of what different types of bodies represent, my body's presence will arguably influence and shape the interview. I provide specific examples of how my body became a site for the participants to 'flesh out' their responses. I also explore how I paid particular attention to shifts in my bodily sensations as cues during the interview and data analysis. Finally, I outline my data analysis process, which I drew from multiple approaches: thematic, narrative inquiry, and discourse analysis. I provide examples from the transcripts to demonstrate my approach to embodied reflexivity and data analysis.

Tactile Transcriptions

The interviews were digitally recorded and I transcribed them. Not only did this allow a deeper immersion into the data, but I also felt it was imperative for accuracy that I performed the transcriptions due to the often poor quality of the recording. Accordingly, Brinkmann and Kvale (2015) remind us that transcription is not simply a “clerical task;” instead is an interpretive process. Furthermore, they warn that “by neglecting issues of transcription, the interview researcher’s road to hell becomes paved with transcripts” (p.203). Traditionally the phrase ‘transcribed verbatim’ describes the transcription process and would be gleaned over at this point. However, I agree with scholars who remind us that going from oral to written data is translation and not dictation, as often implied in the phrase ‘transcribed verbatim’ (Ayaß, 2015; Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015; Mishler, 1991; Tessier, 2012).

Ellingson & Sotirin (2020) challenge researchers to keep in view the inherent power dynamics implicated in converting someone’s speech into the written word. Countless decisions are being made that are often taken for granted, including people not speaking in sentences; we impose that onto the reported data from a grammatical standpoint by our decisions about when and where to insert punctuation marks. Transcribing is part of the method and although we set intentions of accuracy and fidelity to the participant’s narrative, we must acknowledge that the transcript is not objective (Avaß, 2015).

I also entered the transcription process as a significant part of the process, not as the step before the analysis. As I listened and typed, I would make notes in the margins as common themes appeared between transcripts or contradictions within the same interview or between interviews. I would move back and forth between transcribing, reading, and reflecting and attempt to maintain a stance of curiosity and wonder~~.~~ Moreover, rather than interacting with our data as inert and lifeless, we can often notice a felt sense or a shift as we engage with the data by paying attention to our bodies.

Jogging My Memory

Listening to the audio recordings became an embodied experience and also ‘jogged my memory’ with vivid details about the particulars of the conversation based on background noise or conversations about where we were at a given moment. Like a familiar smell evoking a memory, hearing the tractors and bulldozers roaring as Catherine and I approached a wharf under construction brings added details of the overcast grey skies and looming rain during that interview. As participants and I moved through the trails, they often pointed out a particular hill they had just run on for hill training. I can hear other people’s voices entering our conversation with a friendly hello or bumping into someone we know and needing to navigate personal encounters. While transcribing, I strained to hear the participants' words during a particularly windy run; I lean my body forward, press the headset into my ear, and close my eyes (which somehow, I believe, makes my hearing more acute). I can hear dogs barking, birds chirping, and cars driving by. There was a moment during one interview where a participant stopped mid-sentence to listen to the beautiful singing bird on a tree and I remember exactly where we were at that moment. The other two rhythmic constants were the sound of the participants' breath and footsteps. I can hear the increased pace of inhales and exhales if we were going up a hill, causing words to come out in shorter whisps when breathing is laboured. As we move uphill, the cadence of our leg turnover becomes quicker, and the sound of the gravel crunching becomes steadier. Going downhill, our strides stretch out with louder thumps on the gravel.

Listening to the interviews multiple times in parallel with reading the transcript invites various senses into the data engagement experience. Importantly, Ellingson (2017) reminds us that recordings are not stable but lively and are not concrete representations of what ‘actually happened,’ but rather “intra-act to produce a slice of a dynamic world that exceeds researcher’s questions and intentions” (p. 135). Indeed, the recording captured a slice of the world beyond my questions and intentions, reflective of the dynamic world we were moving through.

3.5.1 Keeping the Body in View: Embodied Reflexivity During Data Analysis

I will now discuss how I engaged in reflexivity during data analysis. Feminist practices emphasize the transparency of power dynamics and the politics of representation, where researchers are encouraged to think deeply about their positionality throughout the entire research process (Hesse-Biber, 2007; Pillow, 2003; Rice, 2009). As Hesse-Biber (2007) suggests, a feminist praxis takes into account our positionality in the research process, which challenges the idea that “research is the ‘view from nowhere” (p. 16). Furthermore, being transparent and reflexive contributes to conducting research ethically and with integrity.

Reflexivity requires us to consider how our positionality, including gender, age, socioeconomic status, sexual orientation, dis/ability, personal experiences, race, political and theoretical orientation, spiritual beliefs, and body size, impact the entire research process. These aspects of ourselves are generally easier to name or ‘see,’; however, we do not fully acknowledge our unconscious beliefs and biases that will also shape our perspectives (Rice, 2009; Warkikoo et al., 2016) or weight bias (Puhl & Heuer, 2009). Rice (2009) suggests a form of reflexivity of “embodied engagement,” which considers how our body histories and shifting embodies influences research activities (p. 257).

To add to the complexity of understanding our positionality and critically reflecting on how we engage with others, the critical concept of intersectionality draws awareness to the “interaction between gender, race, and other categories of difference in individual lives, social practices, institutional arrangements, and cultural ideologies and the outcomes of these interactions in terms of power" (Davis, 2008, p. 68). Hence, as researchers, although we often examine these different aspects of ourselves in separate categories, we need to be aware of how they interact with each other in complex and uncertain ways. The core of this challenge for researchers is to be aware of how "different bodies produce different knowledge differently (Daza & Huckaby, 2014, p. 802). Rice (2009) also emphasizes that because subjectivities are neither "disembodied nor detached" researchers' own personal histories and physicality's will influence the research process, even from the very fact that our bodies (including perceptions and emotions) are the main "instrument" of data creation and analysis (p. 246).

I am taking heed to Rice et al. (2019) invitation to continue to return to the question, "what do I recognize, and not recognize, because of the position I occupy?" (p.415). Put in another way, privilege can be thought of as the "freedom to ignore things that other people are forced to confront" and struggle with daily (Combs, 2018, p. 61). One axis of signification that this research has not recognized from my able-bodied position is the implied 'able-bodiness' of my research question and methodology that may be inadvertently accentuating the "problem" of difference (Rice et al., 2021) as I emphasize the potential benefits of physical activity and movement as a pathway towards positive embodiment. I aspire to remain committed to staying aware of the "boundaries of silences" permeating this research topic, recognizing that we are situated in "racist and ableist systems and data collection/interpretation [which] always operate within these networks of power" (Rice et al., 2011, p. 415). I am studying a movement-based practice and acknowledge that the findings cannot be generalized to all women. With this in hand, I continued to attend to my bodily reactions in conjunction with the literature throughout the research process, including data analysis, which I will elaborate on in the next section.

3.5.2 Crystallization: Analyzing from Multiple Approaches

As alluded to earlier, my approach to data analysis did not unfold in a linear forward path. Instead, analysis is an ongoing circular process that interwove itself through conducting the interviews, transcribing, going back to the literature, writing, reflecting on the fieldnotes, re-listening to the interviews, and being with the ever-evolving stacks of transcribed data that are marked up and decorated with sticky notes to capture a fleeting insight.

Narrative Analysis

One of the approaches I engaged in with the data was narrative analysis. This type of analysis focuses on the stories that participants tell (either prompted or spontaneously), paying particular attention to the plot line, chronological order of the story and the social structures embedded in the narrative (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015). The narrative itself is the object of analysis and asks us to pay attention to "why the story was told *that* way?" (Riessman Kohler, 2002, p. 218, italics in the original). Due to the potential identifying elements of presenting the data in full narratives, I was mindful that each participant shared a meaningful narrative; therefore, it felt reductionistic not to honour their unique running story.

McGannon et al. (2011) suggest that examining narratives from poststructural perspectives can allow us to explore "subjectivity in process" and in which certain subjectivities are "adopted, reiterated, and enacted while others are resisted" (p. 108). Accordingly, just as poststructural positions knowledge as co-created and there is no pregiven truth, participants decide what to include or not include in telling their story. Narratives cannot necessarily be understood as a direct path to truth, nor are they fiction. Rather, how someone 'stories' their experience provides insight into how they make meaning and communicate the experience to others (Rice, 2009). Although each story was unique, a general cadence could be traced when the women described why they began to run. The question “do you identify as a runner?” led to rich stories on the pivotal moment when they each felt they could claim the runner’s identity. This identity often revolved around reaching a particular milestone such as crossing the finish line of a race or feeling a sense of belonging to a running group. For example, here is Sandy, who had been running for almost sixteen years on her own before joining a running group when she moved to a larger city,

> **Holly:** Would you identify right now as a runner?
>
> **Sandy:** Yes.
>
> **Holly:** Ok and what does mean for you?
>
> **Sandy:** ha [laughs] You’re a part of a cult no [laughs].
>
> **Holly:** Well you kind of are [laughs] Yeah it’s true!
>
> **Sandy:** I think it’s kind of cool you know, that you can say that you’re a runner right…
>
> **Holly:** How many years before like when did you kind of take on that identity, like how long was it?
>
> **Sandy:** No, it wasn’t right away. I think maybe when I did the first Tely, I felt like, OK, I’m a runner now.
>
> **Holly:** And what do you think kind of made the switch for you, like, how would like even before you first started running and running in the group, running was maybe economical or convenient with childcare and if you saw runners out on the road, like what was your perception of runners at the time?
>
> **Sandy:** Just like, wow, I wish I could do that, right. And not feeling that I was ever capable of it because I thought their fitness level would be, you know, they'd be very efficient runners and breathing and all that kind of stuff….

Holly: And what was it about the Tely that then do you remember if there was almost a moment of like I am a runner or was it more just this kind of evolves over time and once you did the Tely?

Sandy: I say probably not only the Tely, but once I did a couple of races, I felt like I was a runner then, I was a part of a group.

I also noted other pivotal moments in their story or 'game-changing moments' when there were moments when the participants described a shift in relationship to their bodies. My interview prompts are attempt to capture the sequence or chronological path toward the runner's identity. Narratives also provide an entry point into understanding how individuals make sense of past experiences or actions and the meaning they make of the experiences while recognizing that how they tell their story may shift over time given the current social context (Riessman Kohler, 2002). For example, the women's narratives on how they feel they can claim the runner's identity is also embedded in wider social discourses in how certain bodies can be read as 'fit' and 'healthy.'

Thematic Analysis

The second approach was looking at the data thematically to address my questions about how the participants conceptualized health, self-care, the ideal woman's body, and the ideal runner's body. I used Lichtman's (2013) Three Cs: Coding, Categorizing, and Concepts, as a general guide to approaching the thematic analysis. Lichtman (2013) proposes a six-step process that guides the data analysis process to move from raw data into meaningful concepts. These steps include:

1. Initial coding. Going from responses to summary ideas of the responses
2. Revisiting initial coding
3. Developing an initial list of categories
4. Modifying your initial list based on additional rereading

5. Revisiting your categories and subcategories
6. Moving from categories to concepts

In step 1, I read each transcript with its corresponding field notes and made initial summary statements or phrases in my own words. I underlined keywords or phrases and summarized the essence of how the participant answered the question. I did not look at each sentence in isolation but rather in “chunks” of what appeared to be a complete thought or when I replied or asked another question. I proceeded with this initial coding for the seventeen interviews and then moved onto step 2. For step 2, I reviewed the notes, types of sentences, or phrases I underlined, but this time, I tried to note connections or discrepancies between participants. In this step 2, I aimed to identify commonalities among the interviews. This round of analysis guided the process of moving from codes to categories.

In step 3, I created two different tables to organize codes into more comprehensive categories. In the first table, I drew from my research question to guide a more nuanced analysis. At this stage, I used a combination of inductive and deductive coding. Drawing from the previous literature and research questions, I assigned codes and underlined quotes focusing on particular concepts I was trying to understand as I read through each transcript. For example, categories included “why do they run,” “do they identify as a runner? Why?”, “How do they define the healthy body?” “Define self-care?” and “Define health.”

Next, in step 4, I returned to the transcripts and placed direct quotes from the transcripts or codes under the categories to analyze the data across the seventeen transcripts and refine the themes. I put them in a table to create an overview of how the participants discussed specific topics to note either consistency among the participants or where differences occurred. This process moved into step 5 where I continued to refine the categories. For example, under ‘how the “defined health”, I could subcategorize it into physical and mental well-being, as well as the impact of running on their assessment of their current health status and their focus on future chronic disease prevention. This step moved the analysis from the categories into broader concepts, which is how we make meaning from the data.

In the second table, categories that were more inductive in nature were developed, such as how the participants described their experience of their body or general notions of bodies. Initially, I had coded for the following bodily subjectivities but refined these further as I removed redundancies and created subcategories:

> Community Body, Running Body, Healthy Body, Ever-diligent Body, Gratitude Body, tolerated/problem body, Aging Body, Medicalized Body, Sports Science Body, Pain-ful Body, Thin Ideal Body, In-tuned body, 'I can' Body, Mind/Body Split

Given the variety of ways that the bodies were discursively constructed, I returned to my research question to help refine my focus. In this thesis, I elaborate on the Running Body, the Healthy Body, the "I can body" and the Community Body. I engaged with discourse analysis in my analysis of the discursive construction of bodies.

Discourse Analysis

After identifying general themes, I engaged with critical discourse analysis to understand how these themes are situated within the dominant discourses that are often taken for granted or how they identify alternative discourses being articulated. I also utilized discourse analysis to understand how women make meaning out of their running practice and focused on how shifting identities are constructed through discourses. Drawing from more subversive discourses can point to how the women are *"exercising* agency via the tactical usage of discourses" (McGannon et al., 2011, p. 106) to negotiate a new or alternative subject position. I am not using Fouculadin Discourse Analyis, but I do draw from some of his helpful concepts. The word discourse in this context draws from Foucault's work, where language merges within a social context to produce a particular meaning that “systematically form the objects of which they speak” (Foucault, 1978, p. 49). Since language is always grounded in discourse, it can be analyzed to understand how people make sense of themselves and the world. In this sense, language is understood as situated, with meaning being created constitutively within social relations (Phillips & Hardy, 2002).

As mentioned previously, it is essential to note the centralizing of the body in Foucault’s theorization of power/knowledge. Foucault’s conceptualization of disciplinary techniques focuses on the body as the “object and target of power” and that a body is docile when it can “be subjected, used, transformed and improved (Foucault, 1991, p. 136). We can see how this focus on the body and notions of transformation and improvement, which are often the goal and primary purpose of physical activity and sport, become fertile ground for scholars drawing from Foucauldian theory to make transparent the social and cultural politics of the body (Markula & Pringle, 2006).

For this research, examining discourses on health, body ideals, physical activity, running, and self-care can provide insight into how people make sense of their everyday practices that shape how they feel about themselves and others and what specific ‘practices’ do they engage with that have bodily consequences. As Markula et al. (2008) emphasize, discourses have discursive implications for the body and material/concrete implications for bodies and embodiment. For example, with the prominent conflation of thinness with health and fitness (Bordo, 2003; LeBesco, 2004; Wright, 2009; Zanker & Gard, 2008), how do women runners whose bodies are larger than the normatively thin body discursively construct their ‘fit selves’? Another question that has material implications is how conceptualizations of nutrition are constructed in relation to running? Throughout the interviews, women distinguished between dieting and fueling for running, which has implications for the types and timing of food deemed ‘appropriate for fueling.’

The critical element of this type of analysis provides a pathway to explore relations of power and domination and how particular identities or subject positions become available or marginalized based on the dominant discourses available within a societal or cultural context (Francombe, 2013). The potential agency that arises from this understanding of subject positions is significant to this research. One can also engage with alternative discursive practices that embody more subversive discourses that may create broader possibilities for women. Returning to one of the research objectives of identifying aspects of movement-based practices that may support positive embodiment and alternative/subversive discourses on women’s experiences of physical activity, I paid attention to how (if any) body experiences from running, become the basis for questioning dominant notions of healthy and fit bodies and if alternative ways of thinking about bodies appear in the women’s narratives.

3.6 Closing Thoughts

In this chapter, I provided an in-depth discussion of the methodology, the methods for data gathering and the approach to data analysis used for this research. Drawing from a feminist poststructural foundation and intentionally keeping a “focus on the flesh” (Francombe, 2013), I aimed to bring together the ‘sweaty moving body’ with how women negotiate the discursive cultural construction of women’s body ideals, and health. I also intentionally emphasized my body throughout the entire research process, which, in the case of most research, goes unmentioned. Furthermore, as we moved or sat together, I attempted to pay attention to the inter-action between my body and the participant’s bodies. My choice to conduct a moving interview aims to contribute to the growing field of scholars creatively exploring ways to capture the experience of the active, moving body.

I am hoping this work contributes to the call from sport sociologist Pirkko Markula (2015), who encourages researchers working within a feminist poststructuralist framework to move towards creating alternative fitness practices that materialize the theorization and well-justified critiques of the fitness industry. Markula (2015) argues that, to date, the critique has not provided an alternative to the "ideologically constructed, narrowly defined fit body ideal or the neo-liberal individualization of health" (p. 549). Concurrently, I aim to contribute to the gaps in understanding what contributes to positive embodiment as outlined in Niva Piran's Development Theory of Embodiment. To revisit her work, one of the constructs from this theory was "Freedom in Physical Engagement and Movement," where physical activity and sport can play a vital 'practical' space for women to begin developing skills and lived experience that can contribute to a positive embodiment.

Discussion Chapters

Overview of Discussion Chapters

I present the results from this study by integrating and expanding the overall findings within the four discussion chapters. This aligns with feminist poststructural approaches to present findings with other research or theoretical writings on dominant discourse to contextualize how women construct the running identity and understandings of bodies, health, and self-care. As discussed in the Methodology chapter, in keeping with a poststructural approach and theoretical orientation that there is no pre-given truth and that interviews are a co-construction of knowledge, the discussion that follows captures how the women responded to my questions on that given day. Although their responses are of course valid, it is most useful to see their responses as reflective of the wider circulating discourses that they draw from to make meaning of their experience.

In chapter four, I present how the participants construct the runner's identity and their understanding of what it means to be "a runner." I propose that shifting from "I run" to "I am a runner" is an empowering subjectivity that grounds the women's ability to problematize narrow cultural ideals of the runner's body. I also discuss why the women began to run and what keeps them running.

In chapter five, I take the thematic findings from chapter four that explored what it means to "be" a runner and apply a poststructural lens on how body ideals are constructed and problematized. Two predominant bodies are presented including *Serious Recreational Running Body* and the *High Performance Running Body.* This chapter focuses on women's discursive construction of body ideals. My findings suggest that women can resist cultural constructions of the runner's body, but gendered notions of body ideals are more resistant to destabilize.

In chapter six, “Running is the Foundation of My Health”, I present the findings related to how the participants understand health and self-care, specifically as it relates to their running practice. I analyze their narratives guided by Foucauldian concepts of biopower and biopedagogy to help garner insight into how societal and medical discourses shape how women make sense of their health practices.

Finally in Chapter 7, “I can do it + You can do it Integrating Positive Physical Experiences Within a Supportive Community”, I bring together the overall findings from the research and suggest five pathways to creating body inclusive spaces. I also demonstrate the relationality of embodiment. It proposes that the “I can” experience is a path towards positive embodiment that requires reinforcement through a supportive, body-positive community's "You can do it” stance. The value of social belonging and joyful moving experiences is also discussed.

Chapter 4

Discussion: Construction of the Runner's Identity

"I am one of those crazy runners"

In this chapter, I present my findings on the meaning of being "a runner" and whether the women claimed this identity. For those who claim the runner's identity, I specifically asked how they shifted from "I run" to "I am a runner." I suggest there is a critical embodied difference between the two. I will then move into the "why" they started to run and what keeps them running, in other words, their meaning-making of running. One of the objectives of this research was to understand the meaning women ascribed to their running practice, especially within the context that their running could be placed in the category of recreational or engaging in the act of "serious leisure" in which a considerable amount of time and quite often finances are invested in the activity (Stebbins, 2001; Lev & Zach, 2020).

As mentioned in my methodology, I engaged with multiple data analysis approaches. As such, I present the women's stories by engaging in narrative analysis (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2016; Kohler Riessman, 2008). In the subsequent chapters, I applied a poststructural lens to illustrate how they draw from dominant discourses on the runner's body, women's body, and notions of health and self-care. I also provide examples of how the participants draw from resistance discourses of body ideals to counter these predominant sociocultural discourses and where embodied resistance emerged.

4.1 Moving from Limiting Conceptions Towards Embodied Knowing:

"Runners were crazy people…now I get what they're going for"

In this section, I focus on how women describe what it means to "be a runner." Their preconceived conceptualizations of a runner's characteristics and physical form elucidate how their participation in this activity shifted their conceptual knowledge to embodied knowledge. It was rewarding to hear the women's stories on how they often surprised themselves with what they could accomplish and the sense of purpose and connection that running brought to their lives. Although some of the women discussed challenges with running (e.g. injury, periods of burnout), among the participants the overall experience and relationship with running is positive which clearly is not representative of everyone's experience of running. A number of the women shared that they were shocked about how much they enjoyed running, suggesting that our conceptual construction of a runner does not always align with our embodied experience.

Claiming the runner's identity came easier for some than others. For some of the women, if they ran, they were runners; for others, specific milestones, such as achieving a particular race goal or pace, had to be conquered in order to feel like a runner. Janet, a woman in her early 50s, described growing up as a "bookish, indoor kid, quiet and sedentary." Janet shared that even though she had been running for several years, it was not until she was walking in the park before her first marathon that she finally felt like a runner. Leaving aside, for now, the discursive construction of the runner's body, the women described a runner as someone who measures and tracks distances or follows a plan, runs a certain speed, consistently trains, is health conscious, strong, and fit, a member of a running group, and is willing to run in all weather. The general sentiment was that you do not want to be a "fair-weather runner, " understood as a runner who will only run in pleasant weather or certain times of year (i.e. summer but not winter).

Louise, a woman who did not start running until after she retired, said she thought runners were crazy, especially in the wintertime. She said whenever she saw a runner out in nasty weather, she often thought, "what's wrong with them?" This judgment shifted when she joined a running group (on a whim). Louise reflected, "It never dawned on me that I could feel so good and so relaxed and enjoy it so much." This sense of surprise was a common sentiment among other participants. Many noted that the feel-good experience and enjoyment were not because running felt effortless. Instead, they experienced the satisfaction of achieving something that felt hard and exceeded their perceived bodily limits.

4.1.1 Moving From "I run" to "I am a Runner"

I am presenting a longer quote from Wanda. I am choosing this section of her narrative as I believe it encapsulates a number of the preconceived notions articulated on what it means to be "a runner" and how the embodied experience of engaging in the movement shifts us from the discursive construction of a runner to an enfleshed knowing. I also chose this passage because I smile as I reread her story. I still feel the joy and energy radiating from her during her interview. As a researcher, I remain open to being moved by these stories and continue practicing turning inward to notice how my body has insight patiently waiting to be revealed.

I asked Wanda if she identified as a runner, and she replied yes. She began running in 2013 and said she joined a running club in 2014/2015 (she was uncertain of which year). At that early stage in her running, she was unsure if she could claim the runner's identity because she never kept track of pace and distance. She felt this way until a fellow runner said, "if you're out and you're moving, you're a runner," to which Wanda shrugged her shoulder and said, "okay, I guess I'm a runner." I then asked her what she thought it meant to be a runner before she felt she could claim to be a runner. Wanda stated:

> I just thought they were crazy people out there going. Any person who did any form of exercise, I'm just like, yeah, if it's green, it's mean. I didn't eat healthy, I didn't live a healthy lifestyle. And then I got to a point, it was just like more power to them if they can because I can't. Maybe that's where that came from at the time.

Holly: You were saying with the healthy you know meant, if it it's green it's mean, the lifestyle, if runners were you know-

Wanda: I just picture them as healthy, active, fit people and I just thought, you know, like how are they deprived and ourselves kind of like because you just I did at the time [I:Yeah] I guess I was naive to it all and just thought that, you know, they don't get to enjoy life because they're so obsessed with healthy eating and living a healthy lifestyle or, you know, like I don't know what my what my head thought until I started making the changes. Like, it really just changed the whole outlook and everything I had.

Holly: Okay and at what point did you go like oh this is not like was it once you were in the group and saw that your beliefs about running weren't really holding true?

Wanda: I mean, I think it started when I first started running on the treadmill and I had lost weight. And I'm just like, okay, I'm still eating the things I want. I'm being healthier. I'm being active. I love the way running made me feel and it was almost like a light bulb moment. I got to walk up this [she is referring to walking up a hill]. And I was like, okay. Like, I can do this. I understand what they're going for. I totally got that this is why they're running. This is why they're doing it. Like just the endorphins, runner's high. How I felt after a run versus not running.

In many of the women's stories, a common thread was "I never thought I could be one of those crazy runners" until their bodies engaged in the movement of running, which materialized their ability to claim the runner's identity. The materialized runner's identity is illustrated in Wanda's reflection when she says,

> I guess I was naive to it all and just thought that, you know, they don't get to enjoy life because they're so obsessed with healthy eating and living a healthy lifestyle or, you

> know, *like I don't know what my what my head thought until I started making the changes.* Like, it really just changed the whole outlook and everything I had.

In this section of her narrative, she articulates certain preconceived notions of runners, namely "obsessed" with living a healthy lifestyle; hence, they do not get to enjoy life. This points to the connection that a healthy lifestyle comprises eating and physical activity, positioned from a place of deprivation and restriction.

In popular media, constructions of the fit, feminine body are intertwined with notions of health. In turn, a lack of engagement in such health-promoting behaviour is conceptualized as risky behaviour. It has also been suggested that the meaning of "exercise" as articulated through scientific and medical discourses is a disciplinary tool for weight loss, and regardless of body size, women "can and *should* use to take control of, and fix, their flawed selves" (McGannon et al., 2011, p. 106). If we do not engage in these behaviours as women, guilt and shame can arise for not taking responsibility for ourselves. It is argued that feelings of guilt can be read as an internalization of neoliberal medicalized discourses; for example, you should take control of your health (Harmen, 2016).

Wanda indicates that before engaging in running, she was not eating healthy or living a healthy lifestyle. She provides some clues about her perception of healthy eating: "if it's green, it's mean," likely referring to her knowledge that she 'should' be eating vegetables but also that she was not engaging in that health practice. What is interesting about Wanda's reflection is her clear articulation of what she thought in her "head" it meant to be a runner versus what the embodied experience was once she engaged in the activity. We see how this moves her sense that runners cannot be enjoying life to "running has just given me back my life."

The other piece of Wanda's reflection is the clear dichotomous line she draws between those who can run and those who cannot run in her statement, "it was just like more power to them if they can because I can't." The idea that some people possess certain traits or abilities whereas others do not is enmeshed with the discursive construction of the runner's body. This will be the focus of the next chapter, but it is critical at this point to describe the women's reflection on the runner's body as it creates and can perpetuate a narrow subject position of who "can" be a runner.

4.1.2 Looking Like a Runner: Strong, Lean, Wearing Tiny Little Shorts

Genna, a woman in her mid-30s, began running in 2010, took a break for a few years, and resumed in 2018. She self-identified as a "bigger person" and had recently lost 50 pounds, stating, "I am still a bigger person and like to show that I am healthy and can still do stuff." I will return to this later as an example of resistance. When I asked her what she thought a runner was, she said, "strong, lean with little, tiny shorts. Like a tall, slender man in tiny shorts." This description illustrates the thin ideal and the gendered nature of sports and running. Abbas (2004) suggests that the rising cultural popularity of running has also created a gendered and ageist hierarchy of bodies that emerges from a middle-class notion of health. Abbas analyzed a popular running magazine and found that women's bodies are often constructed as a liability for running. This "body liability" is attributed to women naturally having higher body fat than men, with body fat described as "dead weight" (p. 162). Genna notes, "I felt like an imposter when I started running." Here is her reflection on how she shifts from feeling like an imposter to saying, "I run so I'm a runner"

> When we first started to do the little like five k's and you know the kinda organized runs you know the organized races you know that I found that kind of nervous cause like I

> kind of felt like an imposter a little bit like maybe I'm not a runner because I'm not like these guys like they're gonna finish this 10 times fast as I maybe I don't belong here. But then once we got into it and especially the Tely I find amazing because like there's so many people cheering no matter how behind you are or how fast you're running. Like people are always cheering for you. And I find with the runs there's people always cheering for you. And it's like it's okay yeah like I think that's when I was doing the five k races or whatever and people weren't lookin at you like was she doing this for she don't belong here. Like I never got that. So I think that's kind of when I felt like yeah okay I'm a runner. I run ---so I'm a runner.

What is also evident is that the construction of the runner's identity is a relational process constantly negotiated at a particular moment based on our understanding of ourselves and others (Kannen, 2013). Nicky, a fitness enthusiast, was still unsure if she could call herself a runner because she believes you need to be a certain caliber to claim "I'm a runner." Nicky gauges who she is with to decide whether she will say she is a runner. Stephanie was the only participant who did not claim the runner's identity. She chooses running as a convenient exercise because she describes a runner as someone who measures distance and follows a training plan. Stephanie also shared that she felt too much pressure and expectation to look a certain way if she stated she is a runner. Whereas for others, being part of a running group affirmed their identity among the collective. The power of collective identity as also be found in other research on running (Cohen & Hanold, 2016; Griffin, 2012; Griffin & Phoenix, 2014, 2016; McGannon et al., 2017; Ohlendorf & Anders, 2022; Quicke, 2017; Wiltshire et. al, 2018; Xie et al., 2020). Wanda embraced the runner's identity by a fellow runner insisting that "if you run, you are a runner."

In this study, embracing the running identity was grounded in the shift from the conceptual concept of who can be a runner to the actual movement of running that materializes the runner's identity. Recent research on women who identify as fat or do not have the "typical" athletic build also found that through running persistently in pace-inclusive running community they were able to relinquish their previous stories that they were not athletic and constructed a new identity of being a runner in a fat body (Ohlendorf & Anders, 2022). Likewise, in this study, the act of running supported the shift from preconceived ideas that a "real" runner looks a certain way (i.e. thin), to embracing a more expansive and diverse description of who a runner is based on their own embodiment and witnessing other bodies in motion in the running community. Simply put, a person who runs, is a runner.

4.2 The Meaning of Running in Women's Lives

The question of the "why" often underpins most research questions. The "why" women started to run and what keeps them running are central questions to this research. We are also shifting from a legacy of ambivalence and outright objection towards women's full participation in physical activity and sports, particularly high-intensity activity. As Vertinsky (1998) highlights in her historical overview of the perception and dominant discourses surrounding the role of exercise in women's health, even in the 19th century, vigorous exercise was deemed dangerous and could result in "physical reproductive harm and nervous strain" (p. 83). Although this line of thinking currently may seem outlandish, a legacy remains of a hesitancy to promote the empowering potential of physical activity and sports (Brabazon, 2006; Calogero et al., 2019; Cooke-Cotton, 2020; Faulkner, 2019; Greenleaf & Hauff, 2019; Leedy, 2009, Scott-Dixon, 2010).

This hesitancy emphasizes the necessity to continue exploring barriers to physical activity participation and garner insight into the meaning and motivation of those with a regular physical activity routine. Moving beyond understanding general motivations for participation in physical activity, with the well-established popularity of an endless variety of active leisure activities leads us to why and how individuals choose what activity they select. Bridel (2013) explored the motivations and experiences of recreational Ironman[3]athletes and emphasized the importance of researching why people choose what they do and what their preconceived outcomes are. The following section will explore these very questions. The two predominant reasons why women run is the sense of purpose and accomplishment and ironically that the act of running is only a part of why they run, but the wider social and other physical and mental health benefits.

4.2.1 Purpose and Accomplishment: "Self-propelling yourself across a distance"

A significant reason why the participants in this study stated that they continue to run is the sense of purpose and accomplishment they experience from achieving running-related goals. Running also brought a sense of intentionality and meaning to the women's lives during times of transition. Such transitions included reaching a certain age, retirement, or a change in the demands of motherhood as their children aged.

Tammy shared that running became a hobby to fill a void and make new friends as she approached retirement. Louise (age 78) started running in her 60s. Louise also provided a history of the lack of opportunity for girls to participate in sports when she was growing up. Although she was always active playing outside and played sports informally. Louise shared that after retirement, she was "bored out of my mind" and that "something's got to give." She serendipitously saw a learn-to-run clinic at a local running store and impulsively joined the group. She laughed as she shared that when she went for the first run and looked around the room and thought to herself, “gee, they’re young….very very young.” However, Louise diligently followed the program, including all the nutrition and training guidance, and never experienced any significant injury. When I asked her what keeps her running, she said, “the excitement of it, the ability that at my age that I can still do it and enjoy it [and] meeting new friends.” When I asked Louise if she considers herself a runner, she beamed and said, “I’m a runner fully pledged deep into it and hopefully always will be.”

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[3] The Ironman is a triathlon which consist of a 2.4 mile swim, 112 bike, and 26 mile run.

The confidence that developed from their body’s ability to accomplish their goals also spilled over into other areas of their lives. The women often used words such as “strong,” “purposeful,” “accomplished,” “powerful,” “capable,” “satisfied,” and “energized.” It is worth noting that these words were used to describe how they felt after they finished a run. A common sentiment is that it does not matter how hard the run felt but that “we got er’ done.” Nancy remarked, “No matter what my day is, no matter how I feel about myself, after I run I just feel like a sense of relief and accomplishment, I guess because it’s just like a big stress relief.” Similarly, Kim notes that “some runs are good, some runs are bad, but I always feel better after then before I went. So that’s my goal, it’s just to feel good at the end, finish standing and smiling.”

Lauren, a woman in her 20s, loves the sense of accomplishment from “self-propelling yourself across a distance” and picking a goal and working towards it. She shared her experience of how she felt after running a marathon:

> It [the marathon] changed the way I look at what I can physically accomplish. Prior to that, I always was kind of like, oh well, that’s something I wouldn’t be able to do. An

> there were aspects of my life where I'm strong in that field but I think having gone from really like self-identifying as a non-runner, it's now identifying generally as a runner has changed what I feel I could accomplish.

Many participants shared that they became more confident to try other physical goals, but it also impacted their personal and professional lives. One participant shared that running has filtered into other areas of her life, such as taking on more challenging work tasks. She elaborates saying "I go into it [work goal] knowing I can do this and I know I have the ability to be lost for a little while and it's going to be fine. But we're in it for the long haul. Just like with a run, you're in it for the long haul." Other research has also shown that women articulate benefits of physical activity that extends into their personal and professional lives, for example in outdoor adventure activities (Wharton et. al, 2018; Yarnal, 2006), martial arts (Velija et al., 2013), and running (Bondy & Batey, 2005; Leedy, 2009; Boudreau & Giorgi, 2010; Reischer, 2001; Ronkainen et al., 2018; Wiltshire et el., 2018).

4.2.2 It's So Much More than a Bit of Exercise

Lynn (age 55) had been running for ten years at the time of the interview. She started to run because she wanted to do something physical. She participated in the Regatta (a local rowing event) but wanted to try a more individual activity. Toward the end of our walking interview, she thoughtfully shared that:

> "I'm surprised at how important it's become. It is not something I saw coming. I thought it could be aerobics, or the gym or will I try running? And it was no more then that. And I've been surprised at how it's now much more central part of who I am and as well as how you feel and how it impacts everything. *It's so much more than a bit of exercise.*"

Accordingly, Majcen (2007) explored the psychosocial impact of midlife women training for a marathon and aptly summarized the women's accounts as "It's More Than the Running." The women in her study also noted a profound sense of accomplishment, self-confidence, and experience of community and belonging. Likewise, Bond & Batey's (2005) qualitative research exploring the relationship between self-cognition and running behaviour, found that increased physical competency and mastery led to increased self-esteem. It is important to note that the increased self-esteem may be a consequence of increased physical capacity and the change in body size that some women experienced. Leedy (2009) also found in her case-method analysis of five long-distance runners that they gained a sense of self-confidence from their accomplishments and a sense of well-being from social connections.

Interestingly, only two participants described running as a form of exercise. These two participants were also hesitant to claim the runner's identity. Running was one of the activities they chose for convenience, efficiency, and to get outdoors. Running was articulated more functionally as a path to health and fitness goals rather than a means in and of itself. Most participants conceptualized running as either training (towards a goal race), giving them a sense of purpose, or contributing to their social, physical and mental well-being.

Other research has explored the narratives of running in various online magazine sources to understand the dominant discourses of what being an active female means as it relates to motivation, identity, and practice and how women may actively resist the discourse (Faulkner et al., 2016 as cited in Faulkner, 2019). Faulkner (2019), drawing from established research, suggests that women often run to navigate the difficulties of life because running is a "space independent from obligations and expectations; running represents embodied physical and mental strength training for women runners" (Faulkner, p. 91).

As argued previously, it is essential to garner insights into the diversity of reasons why people decide to move their bodies outside of the assumed act of oppressive body work (Gimlen, 2002). As will become more evident, it is not that the women never discussed body modification or body size maintenance, in fact, this was the entry point for many. Whether it was post-baby weight, menopause, aging, or family risk factors for chronic disease, the women often articulated that body modification was initially one of the motivators. However, over time, there was a shift from focusing on what their body looks like to what their body could do.

4.3 Closing Thoughts

The primary reasons that women articulated that they are still running are physical health benefits, mental health and coping skills, a sense of purpose and fulfillment, and finally, developing a social network and being part of a supportive community. I began this chapter by demonstrating women's conception of what it means to "be" a runner and "look" like a runner shift once they experience their own body and witness other bodies in motion. In order to identify as a runner, they had to *move* into the identity. Their preconceived conceptual notion of what it means to be a runner was challenged through the embodied of their own body running. I then expanded upon the meaning that running brings to women's lives, including a sense of accomplishment, purpose, and community.

I will expand upon these reasons by applying an embodied poststructural lens, to see how the women positioned these reasons within their understanding of body ideals and notions of health and self-care.

Chapter 5

Discussion: Women's Discursive Constructions of the Runner's Body

"God Gave Me These Thighs for a Reason"

One of the primary goals of this research is to understand how women runners align and resist gendered notions of the runner's body and gendered body ideals in general. I asked a series of questions to help me understand how women described the ideal runner's body, the ideal woman's body, and how identifying as a runner shaped how they experienced their own body. Many narratives revealed the nuanced and complex ways women negotiate the dominant discourses on the runner's body and the ideal woman's body.

What also emerged is how the women articulated the difference between a *High-Performance Running Body* and what I am calling the *Serious Recreational Running Body*. I believe it is essential to include the word "serious," which aligns with the work of Stebbins (2001), who articulates what comprises the serious recreational athlete. The "serious" element is the amount of time, financial resources, and often a shift in social commitments, along with other performance-related behaviours, such as nutrition and sleep that support their athletic goals. The "serious" recreation also differentiates between competitive athletes who are either getting paid or are top finishers in races. The women runners in this study devote significant time to training per week and tailor their nutrition to support their running. Frequently, they described the shift in socializing that came with the early rise on the weekend for their long run. This felt like a sacrifice for some, but it was a welcomed excuse to avoid social engagements for others.

Despite the time spent training and the consistency of their training, many of the participants differentiate themselves from other "hardcore" runners who run multiple marathons per year, follow a strict training program, and get up early in the morning. Ironically, many of the women displayed all these characteristics and behaviours. Yet, there was a clear differentiation between how they articulate the *High-Performance Running Body* and the *Serious Recreational Running Body*.

In the final section of this chapter, I describe the *I Can Body* that appears to help women shift their focus from what their body looks like to what their body can do. The *I Can Body* provides an alternative subject position that challenges the culturally endorsed feminine thin body towards body appreciation. The women draw from their physical accomplishments to provide a counter-narrative to gendered body ideals, but their narrative reveals that this is an active and constant negotiation. This is also exemplified in the final section, where I share how the participants demonstrated appreciation for their aging body focusing on what their body can do, and a deemphasis on their body size and appearance. However, the shift in focus on body appearance appears to be grounded in the societal devaluation and de-sexualization of older women.

5.1 The Discursive Construction of the *High-Performance Running Body*

"A Smaller Body Goes with More Successful Competitive Outcomes"

The *High-Performance Running Body* is described with different names and attributes such as competitive, elite, lighter, sprinter's body, track and field athlete, and super lean with long legs. This construction of the body encompasses both physicality (lean and light) and performance outcomes (fast). These descriptions align with the dominant construction of the ideal runner's body described in other studies (Bridel & Rail, Hanold 2010, Chase, 2008) and popular media (Abbas, 2004; Baldwin, 2023; Faulkner, 2019). The "runner-runners" body (i.e., high performance) is "white, thin, straight, fast, feminine, middle-class, and disciplined" and "thin-hipped, athletically thin, toned, no evidence of having birthed, no stretch marks, no curves or jiggly loose flesh" (Faulkner, p. 2019, p. 80, p. 91). Tammy describes the linkage between competitive outcomes and body size in a very matter-of-fact way, saying,

> I always ran with smaller people. I don't know if that got to me or not but…it seemed like [laughing] it seemed like I was always the biggest when I ran. And even now, I'm probably in the faster of the group and they're all fairly small. So it seems like a smaller body goes with a more successful competitive outcome. That is the runner's body. You will never see anyone with the Tely Ten [a local road race] that's got weight on [laughs].

She continues,

> But if you're a competitive runner, you know you certainly know yourself what you have to do…you have to be light…if you are going to run fast you have I think to have to be a light runner.

Tammy's reflections indicate the strength of the discourse of interconnecting light body weight and competitive outcomes as common knowledge. She also takes it for granted that I align with this common sense by saying, "you certainly know yourself." In my field notes, I reflected on my discomfort with my silence being misconstrued as an indication of aligning with her statement rather than my role as a researcher to listen to her perspective. Another runner shared that when she ran her first race, she was "pure muscle" and "itty bitty at the time because I was sick, but I looked like a runner. I thought I looked like an athlete." This sentiment highlights the strength of the discourses linking fitness to thinness (Bridel, 2013; Tiggeman & Zaccardo, 2015) and how the body has the power to be read in specific ways, in this case, athletic, despite the reality that her body size was reflective of a health concern, not an indication of training or fitness. In the case of larger athletes, the inverse is found. Larger-bodied people/athletes are often not read as fit or healthy, as demonstrated by research exploring "overweight" runners (Chase, 2008; Inderstrodt-Stephens & Acharya, 2018; Ohlendorf & Anders, 2022; Sniezek, 2019) and those participating in general physical activity (Meadow & Bomback, 2019).

An experience of weight bias by one of the participants, Maxine, unfortunately, illustrates how these dominant discourses influence the availability of subject positions based on body size. She reflects on how often people are surprised to learn that she runs and the satisfaction she feels challenging the notion that only certain bodies can run.

> **Maxine**: [People ask her] How do you do that [achieving a race distance]? You know and I say well I run, really? You? Well I was in Florida last July, I was looking for new sneakers. So I was in the Adidas store and I was looking for my particular sneaker and the guy said "that's a runner" [the sneaker] and I said "yes, I know that's a runner." He said, "it's like for running." I said, "that's what I want it for, for running." He said, "for who?" And I said, "for me." And my son was with me and he looked at me and said: "I think we should go now." And buddy looked at me and my son looked at me and said, "you're barking up the wrong tree, buddy. She runs and she can outrun you and we're going to leave now."
>
> **Holly**: Wow.
>
> **Maxine**: And he took me and made me leave.
>
> **Holly**: So what was that like to be questioned?
>
> **Maxine**: Well it wasn't even just questioned like he was like he could not believe that I was buying sneakers to run. Like you know you're an older woman who is overweight what are you doing buying runners?
>
> **Holly:** Right. And did that like you know roll off your back or did it kind of impact you?

Maxine: Ah no, it's rolls off my back because my own family when I first started running were like yeah you'll never do it, you can't do that, you can't run but you know.

Holly: Did any of that play into any of your motivations to kind of do what you were doing?

Maxine: No I'm a very headstrong person. When I decide to do something, I'm doing it.

This story demonstrates how "overweight" bodies are not easily located in the subject position of "a runner" which aligns with other research examining runners who identify as fat or large (Inderstrodt-Stephens & Acharya 2018; Ohlendorf & Anders 2022; Sniezak, 2019; Wiltshire et al., 2018). The salesperson's disbelief that she was buying running sneakers (to run in!) also reflects society's weight bias and resulting stigmatizing behaviours. However, Maxine also demonstrates resistance and agency in her response and her son's reaction, suggesting that this is not the first time she has encountered this experience. She also states how she lets this roll off her back as she is used to it from her family. Perhaps this could be seen as a coping mechanism. Still, later in our conversation, she also shares how she navigated her way through childhood with a mother who was constantly critical of her weight and compared her to her two sisters who were "tall skinny models." When I asked her how running impacts how she feels about her body, she said, "because I run, what I see in the mirror doesn't match what is in my mind because I know that not one of my sisters can run 8 kilometers let alone 18 kilometers".

This example illuminates how feeling empowered and capable in one's body may help women critically reflect on body ideals. The empowered moving body or the "I can" body can support women in resisting oppressive body ideals by shifting the sole focus from what their body looks like to what their body can do (Clark, 2019; Faulkner, 2019; Hanold, 2010 Liimakka, 2011; Ohlendorf & Anders 2022; Mayoh et al., 2018; Velija et al., 2013; Yarnal, 2006). I will elaborate on the *I Can Body* later in this chapter.

5.2 The Discursive Construction of the *Serious Recreational Running Body*

"There's All Kinds of Shapes and Sizes and I Just Happen to Be One of Them"

I have too much body…My body's not quite right for running and I always say that I have more of a sprinter's body then a runner's body and I don't know if that's the reason why I don't identify as a runner. I don't want heavy expectations on me either like you're a runner then you should be skinny. (Stephanie, participant)

Stephanie's reflection demonstrates how the discursive construction of the running body impedes some women's ability to take up the runner's identity if they feel their body is not in alignment with the cultural discourses of what a runner is "supposed" to look like. Stephanie articulates this problematic position with her wording of a sense of "heavy expectations" on what her body should embody---namely, skinny. What is also interesting about Stephanie's comments is that she describes her body more like a sprinter's body, which is typically more muscular. Interestingly, most participants placed sprinters or track and field athletes in the category of competitive athletes. They used these descriptions to articulate what the typical runner's body is not. One participant noted, "No recreational runner is going to look like a track athlete."

Specifically, the women described a runner's body as "regular," "not hard-core," "recreational," "average," and, more broadly speaking, that there is no defined definition of a runner's body. The act of running constructs the material running body. This is not by achieving a particular body shape or size, rather through reconciling the preconceived notion of what is a "real" runner's body. From this material construction, multiple subject positions become available that creates alternative discursive constructions of who is "a runner." Gena, who self-identifies as a larger runner, sums this up succinctly when she says, “my body is good enough for running because I’m running.” Lynn offers a critical reflection of the runner’s body that acknowledges the cultural discourses of the lean body while also counteracting this discourse based on the actuality of whom she sees running:

> Well, I guess you don't want to carry if you carry extra weight, it's more work, right? Every time you take a stride, it's more work. So I guess ideally you'd be much more muscle and none of that extra weight carrying around. But in fairness I know a lot of people who run, who who just that's just, they just always seem to carry that extra weight and they run consistently all year round. So it's kind of a hard, hard question because that works for them. And they do they run well and they enjoy the running.

Lynn draws from the sports-medico discourses of body fat as dead weight, decreasing your running efficiency (Abbas, 2004). Tammy also draws such connections when she equates gaining weight with a decrease in her “VO2 max.”[4] Nevertheless, Lynn also articulates that she knows many people who carry extra weight, run all year, and, importantly, enjoy themselves.

When the women started running, most thought runners were lean and skinny until they began running themselves. The ideal running body is destabilized as the women use it to describe what is not a normative running body. The destabilization occurs on two pathways, individually and collectively. The first is that running in and of itself produces the running body. In this way, moving creates material reality. Alternatively, to draw from Foucault’s conceptualization of discourse being “practices that systematically form the objects of which they speak” (1972, p. 49), it could be said then that “movements form the objects of which they speak.”. Håkan Larsson (2014) suggests a shift from conceptualizing the body as “caused by discourses,” instead

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[4] VO_2 is a measurement of aerobic capacity which is the ability of the body to take in, transport and oxygen

"performed through discursive practices," with sport or physical activity being one such form of discursive practice (p. 647). I run; therefore, I am a runner.

Accordingly, the movement in and of itself destabilizes the discursive constructions of the running body (i.e., thin and lean). The moving body materializes resistance to normative notions of the running body. As Kim noted, "you know right now I'd say your average running at the Running Room [local store] or that we see running on the street is not that different from what I look like." Yet, many noted that what they saw in the media or the bodies of specific local high-performance runners was not deemed "realistic," creating space between the *High-Performance Running Body* and the *Serious Recreational Running Body*. Faulkner's (2019) research also found that women critiqued the dominant cultural images of the female runner by drawing from their own embodiment as "normal bodies, not athlete bodies" and the wide variety of bodies they see running at races (p. 94).

Sandy also demonstrates the discursive construction of the runner's body in her "head" and how her perspective has shifted based on her lived experience of her body. She shares:

> I think I used to have the image in my head that, you know, you had to be a certain weight and everything to be a runner, but you don't, and you know those model women who you see that you know I can probably guarantee that I'm fitter than they are, right so my mindset has changed about that. Whereas before it hadn't [her mindset] because you know media and all that stuff, you needed to be a certain shape and size and all of that.
>
> Of course then I have obesity in my family so that is a big part of it too

Sandy is demonstrating a shift in her critical awareness around what a runner "should" look like and draws a sense of agency from her fitness as a way to question gendered body ideals. It is difficult to gauge from her statement if this has helped her to challenge the thin ideal (by her reference to models) or that her confidence in her body's fitness primarily allows her to question the runner's body. Sandy then circles back to her family history of obesity, a theme throughout her story.

The community of running bodies is the second pathway destabilizing the normative running body. The community of runners serves as a place to destabilize the normative running body because the women can see the variety of body shapes and sizes that are training and racing. Borrowing a term from Wiltshire et al. (2017), the community becomes an act of "collective bodywork" (p. 10) which can disrupt the individualized cultural pressures to conform to idealized bodies. One participant noted that you see many more "normal everyday people crossing finish lines." Bridel (2013), in his research with Ironman triathletes, also found that the participants noted that what they saw on the cover of triathlon-related magazines did not necessarily reflect the "reality of bodies" participating in Ironman races (p. 45). This creates a distance between the discursively constructed running body and what I am naming *the Serious Recreational Running Body*. Doreen reflects on when she first started to run; she thought,

> My god everyone is going to be skinny and fit and wear size four jeans but then you get into it and see people around you and realize no that's not the typical runner at all and neither should it be. […] There are all kinds of shapes and sizes and I just happen to be one of them.

The "typical" runner that community members see provides a diversity of embodied possibilities that broaden possibilities of subjectivities which has been noted in other research on running (Ohlendorf & Anders 2022; Wiltshire et al., 2017). Stephanie noted that she notices way more runners that aren't "ideal because when I see people running around here, I see far more curvy runners then I do thinner runners." This also alludes to the surveillance of other bodies.

Niki, who has struggled to claim the runner's identity due to her conceptualization of needing to be a certain caliber and feels pressure to perform shared,

> There's a lot of people running now and a very diverse group of people and people doing well, that encourages me and probably would make me say I'm a runner quicker now than in the past.

These findings align with Hanold's (2010) research on the discursive construction of the ultrarunning body. Her study found that professional female ultrarunners were aware of the normative distance running body (often extremely thin and lean). Still, they chose to focus on the functionality of what their body can do. They recognized that in the ultrarunning world, a diversity of bodies excel at the sport, partly because the focus is on finishing versus speed (e.g., a 100-mile race).

In my study, Lynn stated that she started running her late 40s and that:

> I wasn't tiny. There was extra weight being carried around, there still is but none of that mattered. You just found the person was the same size as you who runs a similar pace and off you went.

Although Lynn appears to be allying with discourses that equate body size with speed with the assumption that similar body sizes automatically run the same speed, I believe she is also pointing to the diversity of bodies that exist within the running community and that it is more about finding people to run with that align with your moving body. Similarly, Wiltshire et al., (2018) who explore the social context of *parkrun* (a 5 km community running event) also found that individuals who previously identified as unfit or not athletic moved from feeling unwelcomed in a sporting context to being including in the parkrun culture. They suggest this is due to the diverse range of running practices (paces, walk-running, non-competitive) and subject positions which become available such as the reconciling of the paradox of being an “un-fit” runner through the act of running. Likewise, a recent study exploring women who identify as fat shared how they were able to “re-story” their previous unfit athletic identity into an identity of a runner in a fat body, through the act of running and finding pace-inclusive running communities (Ohlendorf & Anders, 2022)

Håkan Larsson (2014) suggests drawing from Judith Butler’s notions of performativity and materiality of the body, rather than conceptualizing the body as “caused by discourses,” instead, “performed through discursive practices” with sport or physical activity being one such form of discursive practice (p. 647). My study suggests that the running body materializes through the discursive practices of running (i.e. all the physical practices that go into training, including nutrition and sleep). Additionally, the “community” running body destabilizes the normative running body (often articulated as higher performance) as they can see a variety of sizes demonstrating physical achievements. This creates a disjuncture between what they discursively constructed as a runner versus what they witness in the actual running field and from the community running body, providing multiple subjectivities of embodied possibilities.

In this study, the runners recognize the dominant discourses of the normative running body but demonstrate resistance by drawing from their body moving them from point A to point B. I move to the *I Can Body* in the next section.

5.3 The Discursive Construction of the *I Can Body*: I Put in the Work, I Can Do This

A fundamental premise of this study is grounded in research that physical activity and sports can provide empowering experiences for girls and women which can contribute to positive embodiment (Clark. 2019; Hanold, 2010; Liimakka, 2011; Mayoh, et al., 2018; Menzel & Levine, 2011; Piran, 2017; Scott-Dixon, 2006; Velija, 2013; Wharton, 2018; Yarnal, 2006).

Returning to the work of Piran's Developmental Theory of Embodiment, positive embodiment centers around body connection and comfort, embodied agency and passion, and attuned self-care, which supports girls and women to fully inhabit their bodies from a place of subjectivity (2017). Conversely, negative embodiment is inhabiting one's body from a place of objectification, grounded in disrupted body connection and discomfort, restricted agency and passion, and self-neglect or harm (Piran, 2017).

When I asked Lauren (late 20s) how running shaped her experience of her body, she replied:

> I'd generally say it's more positive, even on like and part of it we talked about, having done a marathon, it feels like a jewel in the crown. Like, I think overall, even when I have a bad day, there's a perspective that I didn't have before. And then you meet runners who are all different types of like body types, ages, like levels of training, how they invest financially in running and it just makes it seem more possible.

Lauren illustrates that even when she is having a bad day, her perspective of her body has shifted towards gratitude when she draws from her marathon experience. She also supports my earlier argument that the diversity of bodies in the running community creates more embodied possibilities.

A couple of the women from this study alluded to histories of disordered eating or weight preoccupation and that physical activity was a method for weight control. For example, Stephanie, who shared vulnerably about her ongoing journey of trying to appreciate her body, reflected on how the joy of movement was gone when she focused primarily on weight loss leading up to her wedding. Even though she still often wonders if being lighter would make running feel easier, she shares:

> I do sometimes think that and I wonder if that's actually true if my runs would feel better if I was like ten pounds lighter but am I willing to go there? I'm not and for the most part I'm finished and I think I feel good, this was worth it inside, and outside it's all good you know.

Upon further reflection, Stephanie said, "I want to practice peace in my body instead of war." This illustrates what many women in this study demonstrate, holding the tension of the "both/and." Women often have negative thoughts about their bodies *and* can experience deep appreciation and care for them. Mayoh and Jones (2015) draw from the philosophical work of Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty to offer an insightful reflection on how sports can provide an experience of well-being and vitality when it focus on interweaving the path of movement (mobility) and peace (dwelling). This aligns with work that identifies even for people who struggle with a positive evaluation of their appearance, body appreciation is protective against goals of body modification by helping individuals value their bodies and engage in self-care behaviours such as intuitive eating (Resch & Tylka, 2019) and physical activity (Cox et. al., 2019).

This tension also highlights the value of the DTE's conceptualization that embodiment exists on a spectrum since women can simultaneously occupy various places on the continuum. Lynn illustrates this by saying that at the age of fifty-five she is carrying extra weight that she wishes was not there, yet she wakes up every morning and feels strong. Later, when I asked her if running has changed her thoughts about her body, she responded, "Yes. I feel stronger. Before I would have said oh gosh look at that fifteen, twenty pounds, whereas now I say, I did those hills last night". She continues to reflect on her thoughts about her body saying,

> Well you’re very much focused on what your body can and can’t do because all it takes is an injury and that changes everything. Yeah, I think it’s more about what I can do. And the clothes fitting better just kinda happens a little bit naturally. But that’s a different focus. If I want my clothes to fit [different] then I got to be focused on what I’m eating. Whereas, when I’m running, I’m focused on what I eat before I run. But I don’t have to focus on all the other times I’m eating, you know what I mean? So I think it’s two different things.

This reflection demonstrates the power of body appreciation grounded in the “I can,” or what Piran (2017) calls “body-anchored experiences” (p.2). Other research exploring the role of physical activity and embodiment also describes the “I can” body grounded in the phenomenological orientation of Merleau-Ponty (Liimaka, 2011). Emerging research on body functionality, which emphasizes focusing on what the body “can do” has been shown to help foster positive embodiment (Alleva & Martijn, 2020).

Liimaka (2011) explored young women’s written accounts of empowering body experiences of physical activity. She suggests that positive experiences in one’s body can create a “counter-experience” to the experiences of body dissatisfaction and objectification (p. 442). Additionally, I argue that Lynn is demonstrating active resistance against the normative thin ideal and cultural expectations for dieting when she explicitly differentiates how she fuels to support her running versus a focus on nutrition from a weight modification standpoint. When nutrition is connected to “fueling” for running, this is a far more empowering orientation than exerting discipline over food choices for weight loss. Her reflection also shows the material reality that weight loss may occur through training; however, as Lynn suggests, it is more of a by-product or secondary outcome to their focus on achieving their run-related goals.

I suggest that running can contribute to empowerment, which involves “the ability to resist pressures to conform to gender-stereotyped notions regarding presentation and behaviour” (Clark, 2019, p.2). Accordingly, research exploring women’s experience of how exercise shapes their embodied self and understandings of the gendered body found that for some women, there is a sense of empowerment when they feel autonomy over their exercise choices, take pride in their physical achievements, and that their body responded to the challenges (Clark, 2019).

The women’s narratives in my study often reflected an early questioning of their ability to achieve physical goals, especially if they never identified as athletic or active growing up. Interestingly, none of the women ever articulated any sense of “female fragility”; instead, their main challenge was whether their bodies reflected the cultural ideal when engaging in sports, in this case, running. To illustrate this point, here is an excerpt where Wanda, who had lost close to 60 pounds through lifestyle changes, describes how she felt after completing her first marathon.

> **Holly:** […] what was the experience like doing the marathon?
>
> **Wanda:** Oh my gosh. Life changing. I never…I always wanted to do it and I kept saying I can do this, but I always was worried I wasn’t going to do it. But again with the support of my running club, it just kept me going. […].

Further into the discussion, she described the feelings of crossing the finish line.

> **Holly:** So that feeling that you crossed the line of oh my god I did it, did that change your experience of yourself and your body?
>
> **Wanda:** Oh, my gosh Yes. Because I never, ever dreamt in a gazillion years that I would ever do that. Like when I first did my first half marathon, I'm like, oh, my God, I did a half marathon. And then I’m like mmmm a marathon, I so want to do it. And then I just thought about the overweight, unhealthy lady who any excuse in gym class, had mom

> write me notes like, any excuse not to be active. And now I was out running a marathon like, I'm not in shape I'd like to be in, but I mean a heck of a lot better shape than I ever was.

Despite reaching these significant physical accomplishments, Wanda shares how it is difficult to feel that she truly embodies the runner's body. Throughout her interview, she often subtly diminished her physical accomplishments by framing them against her body, which is still not quite where she wants it to be. Similar to other literature that describes the "fat identity" that has become entangled in discourses of being "unfit" (Rice, 2007, 2015), it was still challenging for Wanda to integrate what her body could do with cultural messaging around the ideal woman's body. When I asked her to describe the ideal woman's body after she mentioned she was "not in the shape I'd like to be in" she replied,

> **Wanda:** It's just a really hard question because I know I'm not the same person I was, but I still feel 220 plus pounds and I struggle with that daily to see that I'm not that person anymore. I guess somebody with a flat belly more. I mean, not only do I not have a flat belly now where I lost weight, it's a lot of loose skin that will never go. [Holly: yeah] I'm not sure if I'd ever be happy with the way I look and I struggle with that daily, trying to accept what I am because I should be grateful for what I am. But…it's really hard.
>
> **Holly:** And the ideals of the runner's body?
>
> **Wanda:** Again in my head. It's just a skinny, fit person who is muscular and I know that like I said deep down, I know that's not true, but that's what I envision in my head. And so that was one of the barriers before I joined a running club was I didn't want people to see me out in public and say, oh, my God, look at her trying to run. Yeah, I know that's not true I'm the person that's out there always encouraging somebody to do their best. I'm

> always volunteering for the learn to run programs, trying to keep people going because I tell them if I can do it, you definitely can do it, so.

I include these longer sections of transcripts to demonstrate the complexity of how the women (myself included) negotiate the dominant discourses of the ideal woman's or the runner's body. For many, despite reaching a significant fitness accomplishment and being able to reflect on cultural ideals of body size critically, the women's narratives weave in and around body appreciation and gratitude for what their body can do, to drawing from the dominant discourses of the "skinny, fit person, who is muscular." Women can draw from their embodied running experiences to create counter-narratives demonstrating how "women run against idealized images of a 'running body'" (Faulkner, 2019, p. 7).

Attention to these seeming contradictions throughout the narratives provides a more meaningful understanding of how we constantly negotiate diverse subjectivities through interacting with cultural discourses. As Rice (2007) articulates, girls and women in sports often run into the challenge of having to confront the cultural contradictions of the active female body "because female athletes often are evaluated according to skillful execution of sport as much as convincing performance of femininity, they may have to meet and manage conflicting expectations of athleticism and attractiveness to be successful in sport" (p. 167). Therefore, reconciling the fat and fit identity based on prevalent circulating discourses of obesity (Campos, 2004; Gard & Wright, 2005) poses a significant challenge for women in culturally deemed larger body sizes. This challenge has also been shown in power and strength-focused sports in which values of aggressiveness, dominance, competitiveness, and strength are countercultural to norms of femininity and female embodiment (Velija et al., 2013; Young, 2005).

5.4 The Challenge of Running Away from Gendered Body Ideals

"I think Strong is Best, but Strong Still Means Skinny to Me"

The women's stories weave in and around feelings of empowerment and the 'I can' stance and critical consciousness of the cultural pressures of women to contort their bodies to a thin or 'fit' ideal, being a positive role model for women, and valuing body diversity, yet, in the next breath they are still grappling with their own body not meeting the thin-ideal. Liimakka (2011) suggests that we need both an increase in feminist critical consciousness *and* "an experienced sense of bodily subjectivity, obtained by engaging in physical activities" as a pathway to resist the objectification of women (p. 444). In other words, we need critical awareness and bodily experience to weave together. Accordingly, research on women's experience developing physical strength through marital arts training also finds increased physical empowerment and body confidence, yet a lack of problematizing gendered embodiment and femininity (Velija et al., 2013).

Even within one narrative or a section of a narrative, there were often seemingly contradictory ways that women describe body ideals and how this influences how they feel in their bodies. What is relatively stable across the narratives is that for some women, while running or after finishing a run, there was a sense of contentment, connection, and gratitude for what their bodies can do. Poststructuralism provides a way to work with the tensions of discourse. Another example from Kim who is also an active running coach,

> **Holly**: Right and just speak a bit more too because one of my questions is how would you define the ideal woman's body?
>
> **Kim**: You know what it's it's funny because this is where I have a big argument in my own head because while I personally like I look in the mirror and I'm like oh I'm too fat

> I'm to this, I'm blah hate looking at myself in the mirror, hate this thick strip of chub around the chin. My ideal body is thin. [**Holly**: mmm] Don't have to be tall. You don't have to have big boobs, you should just be thin.
>
> **Holly**: OK.
>
> **Kim**: I do think you should have some curve but in my brain I still haven't been able to get away from a size [Holly: Right] Like I still should be thinner I should be thinner. But the practical side of me is you might have a little bit of weight on but look how strong you are and you have muscles and you're still out doing it so it does not matter what your shape or size is if you can do it. But in my brain, personally I'm still struggling with that even though I might seem like I'm confident when I'm with my girls I coach because I have to be because if I'm not confident and I'm smaller than them, they're not going to be confident but yeah no for me it's still like- I think strong is best but strong still means skinny to me.

Interestingly, Kim proceeds to reflect on seeing “larger girls” running faster than her, and other participants also noted that the spectrum of body diversity they see in the running community has widened their perspective of what an “ideal” runner’s body looks like. Kim notes that her idea of the ideal runner’s body has shifted, but “it is more of what my ideal female body should be in my mind.”

Tammy also shares this tension when she reflects on feeling positive about her body during and immediately after a run, yet how quickly this can shift after supper when looking in the mirror. Wanda also demonstrated the complexity of how we experience our bodies internally in motion versus from an externalized objectified stance. She shared that while running, she feels good, which translates into her thinking she looks good. She equates looking good with the gendered body ideals by saying, “when I’m running I imagine myself as a little thin person…I just feel absolutely amazing with the way I am.” The moving running body appears to shift the women into a place of gratitude.

Body appreciation is a primary construct studied to understand factors contributing to body image. It is defined as “accepting, holding favourable attitudes toward, and respecting the body, while also rejecting media-promoted appearance ideals as the only form of beauty” (Tylka & Wood-Barcalow, 2015b, p. 53) and can be evaluated by the Body Appreciation Scale (Avalos et. al, 2005; Tylka & Wood-Barcalow, 2015b). The women’s narratives of feeling appreciative of what their body can do (in this case running) while simultaneously grappling with their physical appearance reflects other research that shows that body appreciation can increase without necessarily changing negative body image or negative appraisal about appearance (Tiggemann & McCourt, 2013). For example after I asked Wanda how does she experience her body while running she shared,

> I’m learning to accept myself as I am, which is challenging. But it doesn’t matter your body size. I mean, it’s all about mentally preparing yourself and going out and attempting something you never thought possible because you never dreamed it. And it doesn’t matter your size, it’s your dedication and the time you’re putting into it. *It doesn’t matter how fast you’re going as long as you’re moving*. And that’s kinda where I am right now. It’s just like accept the way you are and how you are because you can do it.

As Wanda illustrates, body appreciation is an ongoing and unfolding process that for many women is supported through achieving physical goals, with the emphasis on the process (i.e. dedication and time) and not so much on the outcome (not about how fast, but that you’re moving or body size). Wanda also seems to be alluding to how she actively resists the focus on body sizes by “mentally preparing” herself to reach her own personal goals which supports her efforts in accepting her body just as it is.

In contrast, there remains a negative appraisal of their bodies when situating their body against gendered body ideals. Research on women’s embodied experience in everyday life found two versions of embodied experience: “the female body as surface” and “being embodied self through movement” (Del Busso & Reavey, 2013). Relevant to this research is their findings that non-sexualized movement provides a counter-experience to the fragmented experience of their body as a surface informed through the heteronormative male gaze. This aligns with some of the women’s narratives in which they positively relate to their “running body” but are less comfortable with their “female body.” For example, Stephanie attempts to counterbalance her distress over the weight gain, stating,

> “I’m strong and I think I’m 44 and I’m like killing this workout so I have to tell myself to try not to dwell on the parts of my body that are giving me trouble, like the ones that give my mind trouble I should say.”

Stephanie is drawing from the confidence she feels from completing a hard workout to shift her focus away from specific body parts that seemingly do not align with cultural ideals, namely, slim, toned, tight, and youthful (Kennedy & Markula, 2011). Circulating fitness messaging often dis-members women’s bodies into “trouble” spots that require sculpting and shaping, such as washboard abs, or a “beach ready” booty. Furthermore, Stephanie’s comments that part of her body is “giving me trouble” is likely not inferring from a functionality perspective, such as a prior injury, rather aesthetically troublesome. This reflects cultural discourses of the unruly or uninhabitable body that must be disciplined (LeBesco, 2004). Although there has been a notable online trend shifting away from “thinspiration” (focusing more specifically on weight loss) to "fitspiration," the fit body becomes cloaked under the halo of health and living a healthy lifestyle that is represented by the slightly more muscular, yet still toned body (Tiggeman & Zaccardo, 2015).

Interestingly, Stephanie attempts to reframe her negative perception of her body as stemming from her mind, perhaps as an attempt to reconcile her aspiration to "practice peace" with her body. She appears to be inferring that her body is not giving her any actual trouble, but the thoughts of her body are. This speaks to a central element of what I am exploring in this research: can physical activity provide an empowering counter narrative to our thoughts about our body?

For example, Kim shared that despite her struggle with the sense that her body does not align with the ideal female body [i.e., thin and lean], while she is running, she notes that her inner struggle is gone because even during a hard run, it still feels good. She elaborates saying:

> Even with all my battle wounds about my weight it [her body] still got me through a marathon, through a 10 km. So yeah when I'm running and I see people I know I'm always waving, like I don't care what I look like. I'm like "yeah I'm wicked, I'm running."

As depicted in this example, the women's stories did not demonstrate an either/or understanding of their bodies; instead, they consistently drew from multiple discourses weaving together multiple embodied identities. Women's embodiment is not static but fluid and relational. Recognizing the embeddedness our sense of embodiment in the social-material world, reiterates the value of engaging in research methodologies that are body-in-process focused versus a more static body-as-object orientation.

In the above example, Kim demonstrates some resistance to the idea that only certain types of bodies can be considered runners and focuses on being strong or the physical act of running to indicate that one can claim the runner's identity. On the other hand, she is still struggling with gendered norms of the ideal female body as thin, thus, remains in line with contemporary constructions of beauty.

Bridel and Rail (2007) also noted these competing discourses in their study with men who identify as gay and marathon runners. They found that the runners resist some of the constructions of the ideal bodies within the "buff culture" since marathon runners tend to be "thin and sleek," yet simultaneously reproduced another dominant discourse of the aesthetically pleasing body embedded in the messages on obesity and beauty. Their study proposed the discursive construction of the marathon body that drew from competing discourses as a "hybrid" body (p. 139). Drawing from Foucault, they suggest that the marathon body is produced through the disciplinary practices of training and certain dietary practices, creating a functional and culturally aesthetically pleasing body.

Poststructuralism also pays attention to binaries and the inevitable hierarchy that emerges from dualistic thinking, such as good/bad or thin/fat. By looking at ways to disrupt these binaries, feminist writing can open up alternative modes of thought and possible identities (Gannon & Davies, 2007). For example, the fat body is often constructed around discourses of ill health and lack of fitness; hence, it can be challenging for women with larger bodies to see themselves as healthy and fit even when engaging in behaviours that align with health promotion messages. Their body does not 'fit' the image of who can embody the fit identity (Chase, 2008; Inderstrodt-Stephens & Acharya, 2018; Mansfield, 2011; Sniezek, 2021). This was exemplified earlier in Maxine's story of the sales associates' disbelief that she was buying running shoes for herself. Similarly, it has been argued that since the aging body is constructed as a body that is in decline and representing ill-health, in order to claim the healthy subjectivity, one has to maintain a changeless (i.e. anti-aging) body (Cameron et. al., 2018; Carter, 2016; Clarke & Korotchenko, 2011).

5.5 Embracing or Resigning the Aging Body?

"You Don't Worry so Much About Little Lumps Anymore"

For some of the participants, aging was an opportunity to further appreciate what their body can do and to loosen their focus on their body's appearance. Their narratives revealed an intricate negotiation of appreciation. There was a sense of resignation over their body due to the perceived desexualization of their aging body with comments such as "I worry more what girls think of me than guys, I don't care what guys are thinking. I'm 40 odd years old pffft if you don't like it, lump it" or "I'm older. I'm in the phase where I don't care and I always cared at one time." On one hand, this could be interpreted as women shifting from a place of objectification to subjectification and not judging their bodies through the perspective of others. Piran (2017) noted that some of the older women in her study were able to take a strong resistance stance from the construct of the "Body as Deficient Object" and the "Female as an Object of Gaze." In contrast, others remained further entrenched in the societal pressure to maintain a slim and youthful appearance. Piran (2017) suggests that "women's body journeys throughout adulthood, reflect both the continued hold social structures have on women's bodies and new possibilities from oppressive forces" (p. 202) and that based on the DTE Theory, the corsets that were imposed on girls bodies to create "docile feminine bodies" can start to become dismantled later in adulthood.

Doreen reflected that her focus with aging is more about being fit, yet she is also clear that it is “not being obese and so on but you don’t worry so much about little lumps because you have no control over them anyhow so you may as well go with it.” Doreen appears to be articulating that since you cannot control the bodily changes that come with aging, there is no point in focusing on it. It is difficult to conclude whether this is a form of empowerment or resignation. Doreen’s sentiments may also stem from the societal devaluation of aging, particularly women over fifty, where there is a common experience of transitioning from “visibility to invisibility” (Chistler, 2007, p. 6).

Interestingly, research suggests that the societal shift that often desexualizes older women’s bodies may contribute to a decrease in self-surveillance and self-objectification as women no longer feel they need to anticipate another’s gaze to the same degree as when they were younger (Robbins & Reissing, 2018). Conversely, a systematic review found that only 12% of older women are satisfied with their body size due to the pressure women continue to experience to meet narrow ideals of youth-oriented definitions of femininity and beauty (Cameron et al., 2018). This study also suggested that although some women may accept aging as a natural unfolding of life, many women experience age-related body dissatisfaction that may lead to emotional distress and social isolation.

Understanding how women’s conceptualization of aging translates into health and self-care practices is an essential topic for further research—additionally, untangling the knots between embracing the aging body versus a sense of resignation stemming from a sense of cultural invisibility would provide helpful insights in supporting women to negotiate anti-aging discourses. Carter (2016) summarizes succinctly articulates the dilemma that aging women are “still sucked into the body image thing” (p. 200). Due to the focus of this research, I was not able to explore at a deeper level how women negotiated anti-aging discourses however, from their narratives, their running practice was conceptualized as a means to preventing age-related health decline and maintaining a productive (i.e. youthful) body.

5.6 Closing Thoughts

In this chapter, I propose two distinct discursive constructions that emerged of the "running body," namely, the *High-Performance Running Body* and the *Serious Recreational Running Body.* The women's articulation of the ideal running body aligns with cultural norms (thin, toned and slender). Yet, they actively resist the idea that there is one "right" running body by differentiating the high-performance running body from the serious recreational running body. The former runner's body is one that is deemed "unrealistic" and "unrelatable," whereas the latter is considered "normal" or bodies "like mine." They draw from their own embodied experience of their moving body to materialize the running body. They create alternative subjectivities of the recreational running body that is more "realistic" based on the knowledge that their bodies run (hence I am a runner).

Next, I described the *I Can Body*. I suggest that this orientation shifts the participants' focus from what their body looks like to what they can do. For some women, this shift increased body appreciation and disrupts gendered beauty ideals, but for many, they could embrace their running body (out of appreciation for how it functions and helps them to achieve their goals) but still found it difficult to disrupt gendered notions of beauty if their body did not align with the normatively thin body. I propose that the empowered subjectivity of the "I can" stance creates a possibility for women to draw on their physical achievements and functionality to buffer body dissatisfaction, especially as it pertains to the ideal running body. The focus on body functionality increases body appreciation, a component of positive body image that denotes respecting and honouring the body for what it is capable of doing (Linardon et al., 2023). I provided examples of the bodily confidence the women gained as they achieved their running and fitness-related goals. Often, this provided an alternative narrative to draw from when negative thoughts about their body arose, or "body-anchored experiences" of gratitude (Piran, 2017, p. 2).

Finally, I elaborated on the complexity and difficulty of challenging gendered body ideals. From the women's stories and reflections, agency and resistance are most evident towards destabilizing the "running body" but less questioning about gendered embodiment, namely, the young, thin, toned ideal. This remains a struggle and constant negotiation for many of the women, especially in relation to age-related body changes. Although some women find freedom from oppressive body standards as they age, my findings indicate a complex negotiation of acceptance and appreciation of what their body "can still do" set against body acceptance that is articulated from a "who is looking at me anyhow" attitude.

Chapter 6

Discussion: Exploring Women's Meaning Making of Self-care and Health

"Running is the Foundation of My Health"

In this chapter, I present the findings of one of the research objectives: how do female runners negotiate dominant discourses of health and self-care? I approached this objective by asking, "what does being healthy mean to you," "what does self-care mean to you?" and "how does running fit into your health and self-care practices?"

First, I provide an overview of how women defined self-care broadly and the gendered nature of self-care. Second, I present the thematic findings of how women conceptualized physical health and how running contributes to their physical well-being. These benefits are divided into current health benefits and future benefits, articulated through the lens of chronic disease prevention. The following section focuses on mental health. All of the women heavily emphasize the role that running plays in their mental health, both in navigating life stressors and in managing conditions such as depression.

In the last section, I apply a poststructural perspective to understand how the participants discursively construct the "Healthy Body" and how this aligns or resists dominant discourses of health and well-being within a Western neo-liberal context. I include a discussion on how women construct a healthy body in relation to age-related body changes.

6.1 Self-care

Self-care is the umbrella term for how the women in this study conceptualize the strands of practices that they weave together to "feel good" and "be well." It is both conceptual and instructive. From the women's narratives, their conceptualizations of self-care intertwine with what being healthy means to them, as their beliefs about self-care direct the types of practices they engage in and how they believe this contributes to their physical and mental well-being. For example, Kim reflects on self-care, saying:

> Isn't so much as what I thought it was. I always thought it was about being you know, you work out so you're skinny, you're doing this [work out]. But no, self-care for me is more when my mind is at peace.

Although self-care and health are interwoven, I am beginning with the three overarching themes that emerged on how women conceptualize and engage in self-care to situate their reflections on health and the healthy body. The first theme is that self-care is finding a balance of all the components of wellness, with a strong focus on emotional well-being. The second theme is prioritizing care of the self to ensure they can take care of others and be a good role model. This gendered orientation of care for self means caring for others, which aligns with the feminist work of how women are guided by an ethics of care for others (Moore, 2008; Piran, 2017), often perpetuating gendered and racial inequalities (Baldwin, 2023). The third theme is that self-care is about becoming more in-tuned with bodily needs and preferences.

6.1.1 Self-care: Balancing all the Components

The participants discussed self-care as interlinked with their sense of well-being. Although there is no clear definition of well-being in the literature, the concept of wellness and well-being inundates social media, government policy, and research. However, there is a general consensus that it is about balancing physical, emotional, psychological, spiritual, and social dimensions (Barbour, et al., 2019). The language of balance and moderation grounds the participant's conceptualization of self-care in a way that infers that there is a predetermined formula to correctly "do" self-care. The women's reflection demonstrated they are well versed in health promotion messaging, engaging in physical activity, eating a balanced, moderate diet, getting sleep, and managing stress levels.

In the women's reflections, nutrition and healthy eating are identified as a critical component of self-care. Canada's Food Guide was commonly referenced to describe getting the "correct" balance of food. The "correct" balance includes lots of fruits and vegetables and healthy proteins while avoiding fried food; some noted actively trying to limit their meat consumption. A few participants indicated that it is not just about what they eat, but *why*, if they recognized they were eating for emotional reasons and as a coping strategy.

An interesting finding worth exploring in more depth in a further study is how running (or any sport) shapes the relationship with nutrition. Genna reflected that running shifted her food choices, saying after she finishes a run or a workout, "I don't want a Big Mac [burger from fast-food restaurant]; I want something fresh and healthy." The participants often conceptualized shifts in nutritional choices as becoming more intentional with what they put in their bodies. Lauren noted that after a run, she feels "confident and content, and strong and I want to put good things in my body." Still, others also mentioned how running could offset guilt for eating certain foods. Wanda shared that if "I ate something I shouldn't eat, running just helps the guilt to go away." Articulations of positioning food choices as good or bad reflect dominant cultural discourses that often guide food decisions based on morality (McDermott, 2011, McPhail, 2016b; Petherick & Beausoleil, 2016; Strings, 2019; Ward, 2016). These discourses are often taken as truths yet reflect Western-centric ideas without acknowledging other cultural meanings or understanding of food (LaMarre et. al., 2020; McPhail, 2016b; Sarkar, 2020).

The inevitable tension of "striking the right balance" evokes questions: how much is too much? When do we take certain health behaviours too far? In the extreme, this emerges as disordered eating behaviours or Orthorexia, a clinical diagnosis of a preoccupation with healthy eating that is not stemming from a weight preoccupation but an intense focus on health and purity (Dunn & Bratman, 2016). Niki highlights her inner struggle with finding the correct balance. She grapples with trying to follow health promotion recommendations yet experiences an underlying uneasiness of "taking things too far". Niki shares that she jokes around with her friend, saying:

> We both like to get our workouts in but like what's the cut off right? What the you know, you want balance in your life and you feel good, you're not on meds, so like keep it up right. But I mean when I go on holiday, I can survive without my workouts. And that you just had to recognize when it impacts your family life, social life, but it's also the culture. I mean, everybody's telling us to eat healthy, be active, take care of mental health. We are doing that and that is good. So it's finding the appropriate balance right?

Niki highlights many women's struggle of doing "what you are supposed to do" according to health promotion discourses. Nonetheless, these behaviours sometimes contradict other cultural expectations of women prioritizing care of others and family commitments. This tension brings us to the following theme: self-care means caring for others.

6.1.2 Self-Care as Care-For-Others

Many participants share a common understanding of self-care as a path to ensure they are physically and mentally sturdy to care for others. They reflected on periods when they did not prioritize their needs and its detrimental impact on their health. Nevertheless, their health status often circled back to implications on their ability to continue caring for others. The majority of the women had children or aging parents. For those who did not have children, self-care did have more of an internalized focus. For example, Gena, who did not have children, stated that she has no problem taking time for herself. She defined self-care as being physically active, eating well, getting sleep, and staying in a positive headspace. When I asked how running played into her self-care, she responded that it is not just the physical benefits but good for her head [mind] as it puts her in a completely different headspace. Wanda, who has children, felt, "If I don’t make myself healthy and be happy myself, how can I make anybody else happy?” She also noted that “I am a much better person if I take care of me first.” She also indicated that running is her self-care.

Accordingly, Lynn shared a very stressful period when caring for her mother. Running became her outlet, as she recognized that she was not prioritizing herself and focused on everybody else. She stated, “If I don’t take care of myself, I can’t take care of anybody else” and had to “get into the pattern” to create the habit of self-care. Care of others is not only highly gendered but also reflects the fact that less privileged members of society often carry out the physical care of others, thus, the notion of “self-care” may be systematically unattainable for those involved in lower-wage domestic and service labour (Baldwin, 2023; Romero, 2000)

Doreen exemplifies the lack of recognition of societal structures that may impede self-care. She states, “if you’re not healthy and you’re not taking care of yourself, then you can’t help anyone else and that a lot of people who take care of others often let themselves go into a depression and let themselves go because they feel like they don’t have the time but not doing themselves a favour.” Yet, self-care understood in this way may not be accessible to everyone without societal support for care work, such as children and supporting elderly parents. Interestingly, Doreen also linked women to being more proactive with their health then men, stating that “we see ourselves living traditionally longer than men. So if you’re going to live longer you may as well be healthy doing it.” However, for many women in committed relationships, caring for aging partners also becomes part of the feminine ethics of care (Moore, 2008).

Interestingly, the recognition of care for oneself continuously loops back to care for others, indicating that self-care for oneself could be deemed selfish- a culturally undesirable feminine trait. Piran (2017) also found that women in her study shared that they waited until their children were older before they could re-engage with physical activity. Accordingly, many of the women shared that it was challenging to prioritize themselves. Tammy countered the conceptualization of self-care as selfish, reflecting on prioritizing her fitness goals while raising children.

> "It is hardly selfish to invest in yourself as a person, to feel good, because that translates into a good role model. An active parent is a really good role model. Not calling it selfish. I've always put exercise and being healthy as a top priority in my life and I think there's only good that comes out of it."

Running can be conceptualized as a relational practice for women since it is often described as modeling positive and healthy behaviours for their children, friends, and family (Faulkner, 2019).

For many women, balancing sports and family responsibilities is a significant barrier to running, for both the elite (Darroch & Hillsburg, 2017) and recreational runners (Bond & Batey, 2005; Faulkner, 2019; McGannon, et al., 2018; Ronkainen et.al, 2018). As many runners are in committed relationships or a family structure, familial support is often essential for women, especially if they have young children, to participate in an often time-consuming leisure activity (Goodsell & Harris, 2011). Piran (2017) contends that Care of the Body is "centrally related to structural and social inequities that privilege some bodies and disenfranchise others" (p. 213).

Accordingly, research critically examining the proliferation of the social media presence of the "#motherrunner" during Covid-19, persuasively argues that the increased pressure on mothers to be even more productive (and chipper doing it) as maternal resources is founded upon the "logics of neoliberalism" (Baldwin, 2023, p. 2547). Furthermore, the hashtag "#motherrunner" invites us to reflect on "what is hidden or marginalized within this conjuncture of race and class" (Baldwin, 2023, p. 2547) and that the focus on running as a path to self-optimization can mask structural inequalities founded upon neoliberal imperatives to produce more with less.

Therefore, it is essential to keep a critical perspective of the sense of empowerment women may derive from running within the broader cultural imperatives of individual responsibility for health and self-improvement, often within a white middle-class social structure (Abbas, 2004). Accordingly, taking up the running identity can be seen as performative of white, middle-class privilege, and it communicates that "a woman who runs is a modern woman of sufficient means to have the time and resources necessary to run" (Ohlendorf et al., 2019, p. 312).

6.1.3 Self-care as a Practice of Attuning to Bodily Needs and Desires

It is also refreshing and inspiring to hear how many participants were aware of their intention behind self-care and noticed when they acted from a place of guilt versus a sense of attunement to their embodied needs. Lauren described self-care as "making the right decisions for you in a given moment and not being motivated by guilt or obligation." She elaborated, "giving permission to do what you need to do in that given moment, treasuring that above all else, even if that means missing a fun opportunity or disappointing someone." She highlights the tension that women often feel that responding to their own needs and desires (which seemingly require permission!) often comes at the expense of another. Lauren also demonstrates attunement when she states that running is part of her self-care as long as she pays attention to her body to decide whether to run.

For example, Steph defined self-care as “practicing peace on my whole being” and being aware not to push her body in any “weird kind of punishment.” Although she acknowledges the importance of movement and a healthy body, she notes that she has already punished her body enough and, in her words, “I don’t want exercise to ever feel like it’s too you know, it needs to feel like a gift.” Steph also critically reflected on what being disciplined means to her sharing:

> Discipline is too rigid, committed feels like a nice way to treat myself but discipline feels like a crack on the ass or you need more discipline. I don’t know if I need more discipline, in terms of my body, I probably need more softness. I don’t care for that word [discipline] on my body.

I suggest that Steph’s conceptualization of needing more “softness” is reclaiming an often-oppressive gendered body critique of the soft fleshiness of women’s bodies and the cultural imperative towards a taunt, tight, and contained body.

In the framework of the DTE (Developmental Theory of Embodiment), Steph appears to be engaging in the act of “unhooking the corset” of internalizing oppressive body ideals and disconnected care of the self (Piran, 2017, p. 203). Her resistance to the word discipline “on my body” could reflect the cultural discourses of exercise being felt as punishment, contributing to a sense of disconnection. Steph’s orientating herself towards softness aligns with the DTE’s Attuned Care of the Body, described as a “positive connection with the body as a worthy site, support for its desires, and the internalization of a stance of body attunement throughout one’s life journey” (Piran, 2017, p. 20). The idea of ‘body anchored’ experiences also provide a lens to explore one of my research objectives of understanding how running may contribute to positive embodiment. The DTE's focus on attuned self-care and meaningful pursuits is worthy of further research to continue to understand the prospective role of physical activity in fostering embodied agency.

6.2 Conceptualization of Health and the Role of Running: Physical and Mental

6.2.1 Physical Health Benefits: "My Lungs Feel Exercised and I'm Doing My Lungs a Favour"

The benefits of running on physical health have been well documented (Lee et al., 2017; Shipway & Holloway, 2010). Specifically, after adjusting for age and gender, running has been shown to decrease all-cause mortality by 30% to 45%, attributed to improved cardiovascular health, blood glucose regulation, bone density, and body composition (Lee et al. 2017).

In my study, the perceived physical benefits of running fell into two categories. The first is the present health benefits they experience, such as increased energy, heart health, and improved cardiovascular fitness, allowing them to participate in various physical activities. The second category is the prevention of chronic diseases, which is of particular concern for those who state they have strong family histories of particular chronic illnesses.

Although body shape and size was mentioned, it was, perhaps surprisingly, not among their primary focus for running. Some women initially started running for body modification, but once they were into running, their reasons to stay running shifted towards mental health and social connection. Other research on women's meaning making of their running practice as it relates to their health and chronic disease prevention also demonstrate the nuanced ways that their running can shift from weight loss focus to broader health goals over time (Little, 2017).

Perceived Present Physical Benefits

When I asked Tammy how she described her health, she replied, “my health is excellent.” She elaborated:

> I tend to investigate all my health parameters [laughs], I know my sugars and cholesterol are low, every risk factor for heart disease is low. And I have lots of energy. I can still do handsprings [laughs]. I feel that I have excellent health and I think running has played a total role in that.

Here, we can see the language of risk factors and how many women draw upon medicalized language to describe their health. Abbas (2004) suggests that situating running as a health-promoting or preserving practice, reflects running as embodying a middle-class praxis that draws from biomedical and sports science knowledge. From Tammy’s perspective, running is understood within the present benefits of “lots of energy” while also being viewed as a means to mediate risk factors for future ill health, such as heart disease, as indicated by Tammy’s reference to cholesterol levels. For the sake of clarity, I am separating perceived current health benefits from risk prevention; however, they are clearly intertwined.

The pursuit of a healthy subjectivity can also create a sense of the “other,” namely, the “unhealthy subject” understood as those who are not engaging in health-promoting behaviours. Janet stated that being healthy means being physically active and that her body is not preventing her from doing anything. She attributes running to not having any chronic disease and her body “looking the same” [i.e in comparison to other women her age whose bodies with aging]. She also reflected on the health status of our province saying:

> We're in this province that's the unhealthiest in so many ways where you've go this small minority that are really kind of super health conscious and super fit and it's interesting.

This mirrors discourses on "problem populations" (McPhail, 2013, 2016b) and creates an "othering" of certain bodies via health status that is often represented as lean and thin (and white). This does not acknowledge the broader social determinants of health and reinforces Western neoliberal discourses of individual responsibility for health.

Another example from Doreen (mid-60s), who has been running for over 20 years, reflected on her health status by saying:

> well I don't take any pills, you know for a 64-year-old, that's not too bad. Whereas a lot of people I know and work with over the years Jesus I mean they're on blood pressure, they're on God knows whatever else.

It could be inferred that taking medication indicates that one has come to this place by not taking responsibility for oneself. Doreen attributes running to feeling more mentally active and physically fit enough to do things she likes, such as long walks and biking. She asserts that "nothing has stopped me. You know, if I want to do something, I can go do it." Toward the end of the interview, she reflects on how many former classmates or work colleagues are no longer active. She emphasizes that it is essential to find something of interest to do "as long as it's not sitting around watching t.v. all night long." I asked her to describe the ideal woman's body, and she responded that you cannot look at someone's body and criticize them without understanding the complete picture unless "they're lazy and sitting around doing nothing." Similarly, Sandy reflected that being healthy means "living your life, not in pain, and not having to be on the couch all the time."

In recent years, sedentary activity has been deemed a ‘risky behaviour’ with such slogans as “sitting is the new smoking” circulating in medical and mainstream media (Vallance et al., 2018). The increased focus on government policy addressing population health has subsequently targeted physical activity, sport, and play as modifiable behaviours to decrease the risk of sedentary behaviours (Wellard, 2019). Bridel (2013) also highlights how participating in sports can contribute to a mode of differentiation and hierarchy of bodies when notions of healthiness are interwoven with athletic accomplishments. Subsequently, health status becomes linked to “doing” or accomplishments rather than a state of being.

What is interesting about Doreen’s story is that she lives with her embodied memories of being the “fat kid” stating, “once a fat body, always a fat mind.” This illustrates the power and internalization of dominant discourse surrounding ideal bodies. Even if weight loss has occurred, there is always a fear of re-becoming the “fat girl” (Rice, 2007). Interestingly, rather than increasing her empathy for the lived experience of those bodies outside of the socially constructed ideals, or those experiencing health issues, her empathy has decreased. She says:

> So I don't have a lot of pity for people who complain a lot about your health, especially if I think and maybe I'm wrong that they could do something about it. Now, if you're sick and you've got cancer and you got heredity issues, you can't do anything about it. That's fine [I:Yeah] But if there's the ability to change through lifestyle and eating habits, then I don't have a lot of pity for you. Sorry I don't know. And I don't know if it's that's typical of people like me or if that's you know different from somebody who is totally inactive. And I guess if you're an inactive and has health problems, you have more pity for people who are in the same situation [I: Yeah. Yeah.] But no, I don't have a lot of time for pity of people like that.

Doreen draws upon the neoliberalism concept of individual responsibility by distinguishing between people who can improve their health through “lifestyle and eating habits” versus those with heredity issues or cancer, which arguably falls outside someone’s control—the difference between those who “do health” and those who don’t.

Promoting health consciousness is realized in tandem with “danger consciousness,” or the awareness of potential threats or harm that are always omnipresent (Crawford, 2006). Crawford (2006) argues that since disease symptoms may not appear for decades, one always has to understand that “one’s health is in continuous jeopardy” and requires constant vigilance and medically informed knowledge (p. 403). As such, Doreen’s stance is grounded in moralistic underpinnings on what makes for “good” or “bad” hobbies from socially constructed risk discourses.

Deborah Lupton (2013) provides a detailed exploration of the construction of risk building from various theoretical backgrounds. From a poststructural perspective, risk is never truly knowable or an objective fact. The neoliberal focus on individual responsibility and autonomy fosters a milieu of self-surveillance and surveillance of other people engaging in culturally produced understandings of risky behaviour.

Chronic Disease Prevention: Running Away from What “Runs in the Family”

The second theme of the physical benefits is running as a strategy to prevent chronic diseases. This theme was a stronger focus for women whose family members had a chronic illness. Running became a way to offset the genetic risk that “runs in the family.” This genetic risk also included obesity.

For example, when I asked Sandy during our running interview what her activity was like growing up, she replied,

> When I was In grade 10…, I think…[deep breathing]…I think in the back of my mind I was always a little bit health-conscious as I come from my dad's family [who] are very obese. So like I have aunts that are like five and six hundred pounds. So I think that always played in the back of my mind and I didn't want that for me even though I'm probably predisposed to it with my genes and all that. I didn't want that for me. So when I was in grade 10, I started playing Ring It.

For Sandy, part of the decision to play sports and exercise was an attempt to offset her perceived risk of becoming obese. Running was a strategy to help her maintain her weight. Still, she also notes that when weight loss was the original motivation for running, it was not enjoyable. In contrast, her enjoyment increased once her intention shifted to a mental health outlet and a sense of community.

One of the participants, Maxine, shared that her body size and build are more like her father's side. She began Weight Watchers when she was 11 and is still a member. She noted that part of the reason for joining Weight Watchers at a young age was observing her father's family. Maxine noted:

> he has a couple of sisters who are very big. I keep myself sort of in check, I let myself get you know stay within a range. I don't stay probably what would be an ideal weight because for me that lifestyle, it's just not me.

Maxine is a participant whose narrative I discussed in the previous section who demonstrates examples of resisting dominant discourses on the ideals around the healthy body and the runner's body. In this passage, she "keeps herself in check," yet does not attempt to achieve what may be deemed an "ideal" weight. Maxine believes that lifestyle changes that any further weight loss would require would not work for her, likely suggestive of an overly restrictive eating pattern.

When I asked Tammy what she was hoping to achieve when she started running she replied, "you feel about a low heart rate and control over your own health because there is a lot of heart disease in our family and this is something I can affect by living healthy."
Tammy's reflections align with dominant discourses of neoliberal notions of individual responsibility over one's health through living healthy. Lupton (2013) would suggest that this is an example of "government at a distance" (p. 130) in which epidemiological risk factors are positioned as individual risk factors. This shifts the onus of risk mediation upon the individual rather than on population-based interventions (Fullagar, 2009; McDermott, 2011). Tammy voluntarily engages in self-surveillance and takes full responsibility for her health because of her awareness that heart disease runs in her family. This is illustrated by her statement that she "investigates all health parameters. I know all my sugars and cholesterol are low and every risk factor for heart disease is low."

Some scholars argue that the paradigm shift in health from curing disease to disease prevention is gendered. Moore (2008) asserts that the "healthy citizen" as articulated in government policy is grounded in culturally constructed feminine ideals of "help-seeking, self-checking, and body-monitoring" (p. 273), with the added tension that women's bodies were traditionally constructed as out of control and subject to many risks, yet simultaneously, health promotion messaging constructs health as something that we *choose.* Tammy's reflection aligns with the discourses of individual responsibility over health by monitoring her health parameters and aligning her behaviours as a strategy to prevent heart disease. From a Foucauldian perspective of bio-power, running can be seen as a technique or technology that individuals actively engage in drawing from discourses of "truth" that physical activity is unquestionably "good" for maintaining health status (McDermott, 2011; Rabinow & Rose, 2011). Alternatively, in a study by Wiltshire et al. (2017) which explored *parkrun* (5 km running event) that is done as a community event allowed the individuals to engage in personal body projects (e.g. increasing fitness) while simultaneously being “all in this together.” The authors argue that the “collective body work” ameliorated the strength of the discourse of individual responsibility for health and risk reduction. It is essential to continue to explore the nuanced and complex ways that people embody health practices especially within group contexts.

The women’s narratives and construction of the healthy/body is situated within a discursive-material juncture that aligns with a notable quote from Larsson (2014), who says, “there is nothing more material than a socially constructed body” (p. 637). It was important for these women to actively avoid becoming the unhealthy subject.

6.2.2 Mental Health and Well-being

I now turn to one of the most articulated reasons for running: the perceived benefits on mental health. Two distinct yet intertwined categories emerged of the benefits of running for mental health. First, there is a positive impact on stress relief, coping, and dealing with life's challenges. The second benefit is dealing with longer-term conditions such as depression or cancer.

Running for Mental Health and Stress Relief: *“Running is just as valuable as medication”*

Running has been shown to improve mental health and overall well-being. (Malchrowicz-Mośko & Poczta, 2018; Markotić et al., 2020; Oswald, 2020). All of the participants stated that running plays a significant role in their mental health and how they cope with life’s stressors. Tammy, an energetic woman in her 50s, shared that she began to run as a hobby leading up to retirement and said that “running has saved me.” She shared that she loves the physical outcomes of running, such as low heart rate and control over her health. Yet, she also expressed that "running is more psychological, translates into how you feel about yourself" and "didn't think in terms of body, more about well-being emotionally." Tammy also stated that,

> you can't fight the demons in your mind sometimes so you have to have these positive…, some people handle them by drinking. Well this is a really positive way too. Running is just wonderful for that.

Other women also drew from this narrative of running as coping or use it as their "vice." Maxine, a woman in her late 50s, echoes this sentiment saying:

> I have my running buddies and we always run together and it's a great stress reliever, it's a real mental health piece. You know we all live very stressful lives and I'm very busy at work and with other things I'm involved in and it's my outlet. I don't drink, I don't smoke [laughs], I don't go out, I run.

The women also shared stories that running became their way of coping with life stressors such as caring for a dying parent or ill spouse, marital strain, or their professional lives.

Two of the women were diagnosed with cancer, and running played a significant role in coping with the treatment, but more importantly, it maintained their sense of normalcy. Maxine, one of the women diagnosed with cancer, said she ran through her treatments and stated the importance of "maintaining my routine and well once again for mental health issues. If I can run, then I'm not that sick." It was evident that maintaining her routine and drawing strength from what her body could do was a source of healing. Leedy (2009) also found that women state the benefits of maintaining a training plan as a coping strategy and a sense of continuity during stressful periods in life.

The initial motivation for starting to run often shifted over time. Sandy, who took part in a running interview, said that she initially started running to lose the "baby weight," get fit, and get back to her body size from when she was first married. Eventually, the motivation changed to meeting new friends and her mental health outlet. During a very stressful period in her family, she stated running was "my drug," and it created a space where "I get out and I feel free and I don't have to think about all the other stuff." She also noted that running became more enjoyable once her focus shifted to reaching race goals and social connections. Lynn discussed running during a tough family time, saying, "Runs were more important than because they'd get all your frustrations out, pounding on the ground and you get all that out and you'd come back in a better frame of mind." Margie, a woman in her 80s, said she started running as a coping strategy and self-perceived form of therapy when her husband was sick, as she just "needed to get up and go."

Running, conceptualized as a form of therapy, has also been found in other research exploring why people run. Shipway and Holloway's (2010) qualitative research on long-distance runners' social networks also noted a strong theme of the mental health benefits of running. One of their research participants described running as "free therapy," and another claimed she "felt at peace" while running (p. 274). In their study, which included both men and women, running was often described as a way to cope with life's stressors. Faulkner (2019) also found that women described running as a form of therapy and repeatedly claimed that running "saved their lives" because of the mental aspects of running and that it became a place where women could fully feel and process their emotions (p. 68).

Catherine (mid-50s) reflected on her earlier years of running, which she described as a "mental catharsis" as she had a house full of young children and often felt housebound. While running, she said, "my mind just goes totally at ease and all of the conflicts in the world resolve."

Other research has shared insight into the negotiation and navigation women often must grapple with when trying to engage in leisure activities while balancing childcare. Bond and Batey's (2005) research also found that women had to navigate the "ethics of care" inherent in the construction of motherhood. They insisted that "many of these women saw running as an opportunity to temporarily escape their family care responsibilities and regain some time and space for themselves" (p. 77). Indeed, for many participants, running became a time when they could place aside the challenges and pressures of daily life. Similar accounts have been noted in other research on the benefits articulated of running (Bond & Batey, 2005; Boudreau & Giorgi, 2010; Leedy, 2009; Shipway & Holloway, 2016).

Despite running being utilized as a strategy used to uplift and counteract low moods and depression, critiques have been raised that this does not address the underlying structural reasons why life may feel burdensome, painful, and stressful. Running then can be a form of escape and avoidance. Baldwin (2023) queries if emphasizing "feeling good" masks the necessary actions to improve lives and reduce inequalities and her contentions are well-founded and warranted in the neoliberal emphasis on individual responsibility and self-optimization milieu. Just as chronic disease prevention and maintaining physical health is widely accepted and internalized as a reflection of an individual's choice in health-promoting behaviours, the participants also discuss maintaining mental well-being as something that is in their control rather than a broader critical reflection on what societal structures may be impacting their overall well-being.

However, we must remain attentive from placing all of our focus on oppressive structures and discounting the "feeling good" experience that the "joy of embodied movement" can bring. This invites us to reflect critically on how privilege and intersecting axis of identities can impede the "choice" of engaging in leisure activities. This deepens my own reflection into acknowledge the benefits I experience from being able to relate to my well-being from a place of autonomy (e.g. my sense that I "choose" to get myself up out of bed every morning to run) while not forgetting the conditions that allow me to make that choice (e.g. childcare, autonomy over schedule, stable employment).

Running is My Mental Health Therapy

The women state they run for the physical and mental relief it provides. For example, one participant said she believes running helps her manage her low-grade depression and finds it as valuable as medication. The literature has shown the benefits of running in managing anxiety and depression and an overall improvement in mental health (Leedy, 2009; Shipway & Holloway, 2016; Verhoeven et al., 2023). A recent research study found that participating in a 16-week running program (2-3 days a week) was as effective as antidepressants for managing depression and anxiety (Verhoeven et al., 2023).

Joy, who was in her early 60s at the time of our seated interview, began running at the age of 52. She shared how she was having a rough time and was diagnosed with PTSD (post-traumatic stress disorder). She was inspired to start running after watching a local race pass by her house. Although she had tried running in the past, she would stop and start again and become frustrated that she was always out of breath. She noted that she did not realize that this was a regular part of learning how to run, saying, "well, I had to get into running and do all this research and talk to other runners to find out that's normal until your body settles down for a while." Joy was also well-versed in some of the medical literature on PTSD. Here is a part of her reflection on how running became part of her approach to well-being where running seemed to click into place for her:

> Well what I’ve discovered and this is done in my research and after I was diagnosed with PTSD is I was probably doing what naturally for me to deal with what was going on in my life. Because the research now and they’ve done a lot of it with veterans, the research and veterans with PTSD, if they ran for a half hour before the therapy session they responded better and then had less intense response to their therapy. [I: mmmm]. Like they could handle it better [I: okay] so they could handle whatever the CBT was doing and I really think there is somewhere in my brain or body I knew I needed to run. [I: mmmm]. Because my PTSD comes from childhood on [I: okay]. So by the time I was 10, I already had it. I already had a level of it [I: yup]. I know that now so sometimes I so I keep saying that I don’t know why I wanted to run, I just needed to run. [I: mmm]. I needed it. And I’m wondering if that’s my innate knowledge that you need this.

Joy also conveys that part of her knew that running would be helpful, although it took many years before she could feel its benefits. A big part of her story was reflecting on the information and knowledge required to experience some sense of mastery. Pedagogically, she drew from the limited online resources available at that time and highlighted the wisdom shared from other runners' lived experiences. Experienced runners play an essential role in encouraging beginner runners. They are known to share inside knowledge of reading bodily cues such as pain and discomfort by helping beginners learn what is ‘normal’ pain as part of developing mastery in running and what is veering towards injury (Lev, 2019). This can be framed as a form of biopedagogy, namely, teaching how to ‘do’ running through interpreting bodily cues. However, biopedagogy, in this sense, takes on a more embodied and intimate exchange with your own body.

Kim, an energetic and vibrant woman in her mid-40s, shared that after her cancer diagnosis and surgery, she still ran because of her mental health. She shares the following reflection on the time after her surgery when family and friends suggested that she shouldn't be running and to take a break:

> **Kim**: And I'm like well my mental health can't handle the break because the only time I really feel normal and I feel good about myself is when I'm running even if it's the hardest run I've ever done because of what happened. It's still like mentally there's nothing I've found yet. Boxing would be close [I: okay] but [laughs] you know I can't spend my days just hitting things. But yeah it's mentally just being with a group of other women who are all got the same goal, just start and keep moving till you're finished.
>
> **Holly:** Mmm and get back to your car if at all possible [laughs]
>
> **Kim:** Yeah and you know there's a cappuccino or a beer waiting for us at the end whatever your reason or your motivation is to run. It's just you know I know I would not have made it through mentally because I remember the day I woke up in surgery after surgery I went like this I felt where all the surgery and I was like [sigh] So I guess I'm not doing Tely this year. That was my first thought and then I was like I'm going to do Cape to Cabot [local 20 km road race] and I had three friends fly home and we all dressed as Wonder Woman and we walked Cape to Cabot.

This narrative demonstrates the intertwining of mental health, sense of purpose and the support of strong social connections that women often find in running communities.

In my study, nearly all the women stated they knew from experience that they would always feel better after finishing their run. Stephanie, a woman in her 40s, reflected on the meditative experience of running and the sense of peace she feels after a run but does note that the sense of peace is only there when the focus is not on weight loss. When she was running to lose weight before her wedding, it took the joy away from running. Wanda shared that running also gave her a sense of peace regardless of how stressful her day was and beautifully summarized the impact that running has on her life:

> Running has just given me back my life is how I feel. It's just given me so much more energy and hope and I'm such a happier person along with making me healthier and the social network of people I got.

6.3 The Healthy Body: Investing in the Life-long Productive "I Can" Body

In the previous chapter, I argued that the *I Can Body* can provide an empowering embodied experience for women as they experience a sense of achievement and freedom through movement. Perhaps not surprisingly, when I explored what "being" healthy means for them, many of the women spoke of being able to do what they wanted physically for as long as possible. Health status is enmeshed with fitness status, which constructs the healthy body as functional and productive. In this section I engage with discourse analysis to see how women construct the healthy body within a neoliberal notions of health and being a "good" productive citizen.

For example, when I asked Lynn to define health, she said, "feeling strong, feeling capable, having the energy to be able to do things you need to do all day and have the stamina to work hard all day." The healthy body, discursively constructed as the productive body, grants you the "stamina to work hard all day" and aligns with Western neo-liberal ideals of the 'good citizen.' Halse (2009) uses the term "bio-citizen" to describe the categorization of individuals in a society who contribute to the common good of society. Alternatively, understood as an "active citizen" productively contributing to society. There is a literal parallel between being physically active and the capacity to be productively active in society. Halse (2009) also argues that taking care of oneself is constructed as the responsible duty of being a moral citizen. For example, the rhetoric of the "burden" of obesity is grounded in discourses of responsibility for achieving a 'normal' BMI, so as not to be a drain on society. Others have noted the racial implications of regulating discourses on body and health that construct the burden of the racialized "Other" (Meerai, 2020; Robinson, 2020; Strings, 2019).

6.3.1 Investing in the Healthy Body: "So My Body Doesn't Prevent Me From Doing Anything"

In current society, health is articulated as a reflection of one's moral character determined by individual health and lifestyle choices, as Crawford (1980) theorized as "healthism." The women describe their understanding of being healthy and the healthy body as a body that "can keep doing" and allows you to "get up and go." This reflects Crawford's (2006) discussion on the "imperative of health" that compels individuals to engage in health measures as a sign of being a rational and moral citizen. There is a present-day focus on maintaining their body's ability to remain functionally fit for the future. For example, Janet, a woman in her mid-fifties, stated:

> I'm running as insurance for the future, like I still want to be you know twenty years down the road and running and being active and social and having the same sort of running experiences in my life and I look at as you know insurance for being healthy in the decades to come.

Running is being articulated in transactional language, an investment toward future health. Janet assumes that if she invests wisely in her health now, through running, she will have the same running experience and "insurance for being healthy in the decades to come." The assumed control of her health status mirrors individual responsibility for health and denies the reality of the body's material realities, which are often outside our control. Carter (2016) argues that the medicalization of aging has led to the "reframing of youthfulness and anti-aging as tied to good health" (p.201). This suggests the reinforcement that "being" healthy is represented by "looking" healthy; thus, anti-aging practices become veiled as "health" practices.

Shilling (2008) reminds us that despite the cultural myth of the enduring healthy and aesthetically pleasing bodies, we will eventually get sick and experience some form of illness, just by the very nature of our organic bodies. The understanding that being ill is not an exceptional experience and that we are all at potential risk for disease reinforces taking steps towards mitigating one's risk factor through individual lifestyle choices.

However, considering Janet's belief that running is an investment in a future body that will be healthy for decades to come aligns with Shilling's (2008) theorization that the dominance of the health role promotes a sense that maximizing one's fitness grants "the right to a seemingly ever-expanding quantity of health-related products and services" (p. 107) and I would suggest ever-expanding quality of health. Put another way, Wellard (2019) indicates that the dominant discourses of Western capitalism that underpin the health role situate the body as a material investment to be "managed strategically and in [a] similar way to how one should manage personal finances" (p. 33).

Interestingly, all the women stated present-day choices to ensure longevity in their health and ability to continue running. These choices range from intentionally reducing weekly running mileage, shifting race goal focus, running slower, or adding strength training. These modifications counter Bridel's (2013) findings with Ironman athletes, who often ignored physical pain and their overall well-being. He captured these patterns with the term "negotiated health," which refers to a "conscious decision to sacrifice one body part for the sake of another" (p. 49). Bridel's broader contention is the often unquestioned "healthiness" of sports given that "with the emphasis on finishing, there is an idea that one's health is measured not by how one feels but by how one feels but by what one is able to do" (p. 51). In comparison, many of the runners in my study shifted training practices based on protecting future well-being. For example, Janet shared that her body "sometimes creaks and that during her last marathon at the 37 km mark, "this hip said to my left hip, I've done enough for you now and I'm not doing it anymore." She adjusted her training with less mileage and speeds and stated, "so this is how I'll run".

6.4 Closing Thoughts

This chapter's focus presents how women who identify as runners conceptualize health and self-care. I began by discussing how the participants understood self-care and what it meant for them in their own lives. Self-care is the broader term under which all their different health-related practices fell under. There is a general sense that the goal of self-care is to "balance" all the components of physical and emotional well-being. Perhaps not surprisingly, self-care was situated as a means to ensure they could care for others, alluding to the caregiving role that women often play within family and society. I also shared how self-care was a path to becoming more in touch with unique bodily needs and desires, often underlined by women searching for a sense of peace. The physical nature of running assisted the women in becoming more in touch with bodily cues and attending to aches or issues that could be an early warning sign of an injury.

I then discussed the two broader constructs of how women define health, being both physical and mental health. Physical health is understood in terms of running's present-day and future-oriented benefits. Running and physical activity, in general, were heavily articulated as contributing towards current health benefits (e.g. increased energy, cardiovascular fitness). These activities are conclusively stated as a behaviours that can attenuate risk for future chronic diseases. The participants often situated their behaviours in contrast to the health status of family members or social circle. Then, I moved into mental health and emotional well-being, which was the predominant benefit of running described by the women. This is an interesting finding as women strategically use physical activity to manage daily stress and for longer-term conditions, such as depression. The women actively engaged in this behaviour to manage their mental health. This may reflect a strong cultural focus on mental health and well-being. Still, it also runs the risk of overly placing individual responsibility for mental health, as we have seen in physical health and chronic disease prevention.

Next, I presented the "healthy body" as a body that "can do" or a functionally fit and productive body. The healthy body is discursively constructed as a body allowing the women to do what they want. The healthy body is also articulated as an "investment" towards their future healthy self. Running creates functionally fit bodies while attenuating future health risk factors. Running, the foundational practice towards a healthy body, can also create a hierarchy of bodies if health is understood as what certain bodies are able "to do." For many participants, their activity levels are likely beyond minimum standards for general health, creating a higher standard of what a healthy body "should" be able to do. Inadvertently, this can create "other" less active bodies. However, the women demonstrate resistance against dominant discourses that a healthy body is a thin one. Health is not articulated as reflective of weight status, but of your health behaviours, including nutrition and overall activity levels. I then discussed how the women actively negotiate the material realities of an aging body, including changes to their eating and exercise patterns that align with dominant discourses on aging responsibly.

Additionally, what appeared to be a protective factor in the women's investment in their future running/healthy self, was their focus on enjoyment and fun. Many women evaluated a run by how much fun they had or whether they finished a race smiling. The emphasis on joy and fun is predominantly understood in relation to others. As discussed in Chapter 4, the sense of social belonging and connection was a significant factor in why the women continued to run. There was also a gendered notion of the relationality of running in which the motivation for women was social and fun, whereas, for the men, it was more competitive. This is expanded upon in the next chapter on how a supportive community creates body-positive spaces underpinned by joy, fun, and acceptance.

Chapter 7
Discussion: I can do it + You can do it

Integrating Positive Physical Experiences Within a Supportive Community

This chapter integrates the findings from the overall study. It proposes that the “I can” experience is a path towards positive embodiment that requires reinforcement through a supportive, body-positive community's "You can do it” stance. The benefits and value of a supportive community and the social element of running are core themes that emerged from the study. Connection and friendship are critical elements for nearly all the participants. The narrative reflections on the running community reveal words and phrases such as welcoming, comradery, positive, fun, shared experience, accountability, enjoyment, and acceptance. The most common sentiment of their experience of the running community is “no body gets left behind.” Additionally, I propose that social connection and belonging can protect against injury by creating an atmosphere in which listening to your own body will not exclude you from the group experience.

Running plays such a vital role in women’s overall sense of health and well-being that many will sacrifice running performance (i.e. race times or speed) if they sense they are heading towards injury or burn-out. Prioritizing, joy, fun and social connection is arguably an act of resistance against the “no pain, no gain” motto. The women often make daily decisions that reflect their goal of running as a life-long endeavour.

In this final chapter, I outline five pathways to creating body-positive experiences within a physical activity context that emerged from the women’s narratives on how they experienced their bodies in motion alongside others. The five include (1) social connection and belonging, (2) fun and pleasure in physical activity, (3) expanding embodied possibilities through witnessing diverse bodies achieve physical goals, (4) body-inclusive practices of "no-body left behind," and (5) focusing on achieving physical goals, rather than body modification.

7.1 Running as Relational: I Run Because I run with People

I do not doubt that my experience of running would be entirely different if it were a solo endeavor. I align with Lynn (age 55), who said, "I thought running would be more individual but running is very much a group sport. I run because I run with people." She continued saying:

> So it's not always that I love it when running or I'm waking up going who we're doing 16 km. It's more like I'm doing this. I have a purpose, I have a goal. I've got great people I'm doing this with and I'm going to feel great when it's done.

Based on the seventeen interviews, only one participant intentionally chose to run alone and considered running a form of exercise, whereas, as mentioned previously, everyone else referred to running as training. Another participant enjoyed running with people, but due scheduling conflicts, she often ran alone. Geena (early 30's) shared that she is not a very sociable runner and does not like to talk much during runs; however, she occasionally runs with her sisters when they have a goal race. The rest of the participants heavily emphasized the social element of running and the deep friendships formed over many years of moving alongside each other. Janet described the running community as a "low stakes socializing" as the connecting happens during the run and there is minimal expectation of maintaining communication outside of the running. Janet also elaborates on the unique dimensions of these friendships, where you meet people from diverse backgrounds and ages, yet bonds form through shared experiences and memories. Some friendships expanded beyond the shared experience of running as many women felt cared for and supported in all areas of their life, especially during times of transition or grief, such as the death of a parent or an illness.

Due to the time that training takes, it makes sense that these friendships form as you align with people with shared values. Some women felt they were sacrificing their social life due to the time commitment and early morning training. Wanda remarked that some people think she doesn't have a social life because all she does is run, but in her mind, she has more of a social life because of running. Others noted that friends and family outside of their running community were generally supportive, yet they weren't overly interested in hearing about the details of running or racing. In a study on middle-aged women's experience of outdoor adventure activities, the strong social support and group belonging was also identified as one of the most significant benefits of participation (Wharton, 2018).

The social component of running is so vital that if an injury occurred or they had to step back from running, they often felt disconnected and out of the loop. Louise (late 70's) shared that if she had to stop running, "I think I would be lost because I would lose all the friends that I'm running with constantly because I would be out of the loop." Due to a medical issue, Doreen cannot run in extremely cold weather. She navigates missing the social aspect of the group by running indoors at the gym, then joins the group for the post-run coffee. The social network formed in these groups also elucidates the sense of isolation and loss of identity if a runner experiences an injury or other reasons to take a break. This has been found in other research on the loss of identity associated with an injury from distance running (Allen-Collinson, 2003; Allen-Collinson & Hockey, 2007; Shipway & Holloway, 2010; Shipway & Holloway, 2016).

7.2 Pleasure and Fun: Alternative Articulations of Being a Runner

Interestingly, other research exploring individuals who self-identify as "runners" or endurance athletes note a strong sentiment that claiming this identity is linked to obedience to a vigorous training plan. Inevitably, pain and injury are accepted as given outcomes as noted in other research on distance running (Lev, 2021). For example, in Bridel and Rail's (2007) research on how gay male marathon runners discursively construct the marathon body, they found that the runner's identity was articulated as "disciplinary practices of marathoning for the production of a functional, though often injured body" (p. 135). Similarly, in Hanold's (2010) study on the discursive construction of elite female ultrarunning bodies, pushing your body past preconceived limits was one of the predominant ways the ultrarunning body is discursively constructed. However, there were nuances in how pain was both articulated and experienced and required an embodied negotiation of knowing "good pain" (patiently pushing through the inevitable and normalized discomfort of ultrarunning) versus "bad pain" that is more indicative of injury.

Bridel (2013) explored how people participating in Ironman[5] triathlons construct health. He argues that despite the normalized and popular discourse that sport is unquestionably healthy, with the emphasis on "pushing one's limits" health becomes measured by what one can do, rather than how one feels, reinforcing the normalization of pain and injury. Bridel (2013) offers a helpful conceptualization of "negotiated health," in which there is a conscious choice to sacrifice one part of the body for the sake of another. In other words, a conscious choice is made to push through pain in a given moment to achieve a goal, knowing that the future implications may be an injured body.

Interestingly, in my study, there was not a heavy emphasis on pain and discomfort. Many discussed the various practices they engaged in to prevent injuries, including progressive training programs, physiotherapy, massage therapy, and strength training. Indeed, they reflected on pushing through pain, fatigue, and discomfort when trying to cross a finish line. Several women had a surprisingly similar motto: their goal at the end of a race or a run was to “finish standing up and smiling.” This sentiment does not discount the effort that went into training and races. Still, an alternative construction of the runner’s identity beyond pain was articulated: having fun and enjoying the experience. For example, Wanda recounts her approach to completing her first half-marathon (21 km) with three friends saying:

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[5] The Ironman is a triathlon which consist of a 2.4 mile swim, 112 bike, and 26 mile run.

> We decided that it wasn’t gonna be about time, it was gonna be about fun. So we stopped for pictures, chatted with everybody, stopped at every water stop, like posed for pictures. We weren’t serious about it. We ran it, yes, but we wanted to do this as a memorable experience. It was a lot of fun!

The notion of pleasure and fun in athletic pursuits is worthy of continued exploration, exemplified in Ian Wellard’s (2012, 2014) work of “body reflexive pleasures” and fun within the context of sport and physical activity. He contends that overemphasizing health outcomes or body modification restricts the potential benefits for those with a limited history of engaging in physical activity. Specifically, he suggests that pleasure and fun are often overlooked and underemphasized in promoting physical activity, leading to missed opportunities for enjoyable embodied experiences. Welland (2012) proposes that experiences in sports and physical activity must be understood at an individual and societal level. This entails embodied experiences that are remembered in a way that may support continued participation—namely, enjoyment and pleasure.

This aligns with Wanda’s reflection that in their half-marathon race, they consciously created a sense of fun so that it could be a “memorable experience.” The sentiment of fun and “having a laugh” was common among the participants. It could also be argued that Wanda’s articulation of a memorable experience is predicated on fun. In contrast, for others (myself included), memorable experiences can also consist of pushing through discomfort and pain. This highlights the complexity of the embodied experience of pain and pleasure within the physical activity and sporting context.).

7.3 Expanding Empowering Embodied Possibilities

No matter how fast you are, how slow you are, how large you are, how small you are, there's always someone there who says you can do it. Not only will they say you can do it, they will help you do it. Doreen (Participant, age 64)

The *I Can Body* reflects the DTE's domain of Freedom in Physical Activity and Movement where women can experience joyful engagement in movement, which can foster a sense of body connection and agency. I previously expanded upon how running can be a fruitful path for women to experience their body from a place of subjectivity and an orientation of being-in-the-world versus experiencing their body as an "object of gaze" (Piran, 2019, p. 16). What is also evident from this research is that the body is not experienced in isolation but materialized in relationship to people, place, and space.

The participants reflected on how their preconceived ideas of what was possible shifted as they saw diverse bodies "like mine." This indicates the expanded possible subject positions of who can be a runner from a poststructural perspective. As discussed in Chapter 5, taking up a subversive subject position is challenging, but the community of diverse running bodies expands embodied subjectivities. The participants recognized the value of seeing various ages in the running clubs, which deconstructed negative stereotypes of aging bodies. Similarly a study on middle-aged women participating in dance classes (Barbour et al., 2019) and outdoor adventure activities also emphasized the importance of seeing older women engaging in challenging activities which provided an alterative possibility for embodied aging (Wharton, 2018).

Many participants emphasized seeing “normal” and “everyday” runners as a source of inspiration. For example, Kim, reflecting on a talk she heard by a local athlete [a climber]:

> So finding another female who you relate to and that inspires you […]. I think you need lots and lots and lots more normal females because you know I don’t get inspired and this sounds really bad but by seeing [local elite athlete] because she’s an ultra athlete. I get inspired by seeing the mom who didn’t think she could and it took her two and a half hours but boy she ran the length of that. So I try to fill myself and those girls [who she coaches] with the realistic images that we got to see.

Kim emphasizes the value of seeing a diversity of bodies but also a variety of life contexts, such as “the mom” who surpasses her self-perceived limits even if her running performance would not be considered “inspiring” by conventional speed measures. Wanda expressed gratitude for her running community, saying, “without the support of the running club, I wouldn’t be doing these things [marathon].” It also speaks to the importance of having diverse bodies leading and coaching physical activity and sports. Other research exploring women runners who identify as large or fat also emphasize the necessity of seeing diverse bodies running but also diverse bodies in coaching and leadership roles (Ohlendorf & Anders, 2022).

Research has shown that many girls and women have had negative experiences in sports and, unfortunately, in physical education (Skyes & McPhail, 2008).This can have a lasting legacy on the willingness to engage in a new activity later in life. Seal et al. (2022) found that women’s sense of being judged within physical activity spaces is fluid and mediated by social relational dynamics based on the network of people within a space and how bodies are (re)presented. These dynamics can shape whether women feel welcomed, comfortable, and at ease moving their bodies. Approaches to creating body-inclusive spaces are captured in the next section on the powerful experience when women feel supported and welcomed, regardless of their initial fitness level or body size.

7.4 No(body) is Left Behind

A common sentiment on the benefits of the Community Running Body is that “no body is left behind.” This phrase was iterated on their experience as part of a formalized group (signing up for a running program) or informally running with fellow runners. With a diverse group of fitness levels and experience, Sandy noted that someone in the group would be supportive, saying, “Come on, we’re almost there” to help get you through it.” It is worth emphasizing that though running seems like an individual sport, there is a visceral sense of a shared experience as individuals move towards meeting their goal, whether finishing a challenging run or crossing a finish line. As Sandy reflects, when you are racing, you feel part of the same struggle, and everyone is going through a similar experience. Additionally, Sandy recalled running back to get a newer runner because she knew she was struggling. The newer runner cried because she was so grateful that someone would come back to ensure she was ok and accompany her to the end of the run.

Piran’s (2019) research suggests that re-engagement in physical activity in later life is more likely for women who had positive experiences of passionate involvement in activities during childhood and adolescence. Additionally, the older women interviewed in Piran’s (2019) life course approach to understanding embodiment also found that experiencing Physical Freedom through physical activity was greatly facilitated by relational connections and significant social contexts. This is partly attributed to a greater sense of safety, including physical safety and safety from sexual objectification. Interestingly, although some mentioned the physical safety component of running with others, the motivational benefits were more articulated. There was also minimal discussion of feeling unsafe from sexual harassment or unwanted attention. It is important to emphasize that not all runners (those who identify as male or female or in other ways) do not feel safe moving in public spaces due to racial stereotyping (Girgraph, 2023; Williams et al., 2022)

The “no body left behind” creates a culture of inclusion where many members of the running community are invested in supporting others in achieving their goals, and diverse abilities and body sizes are welcomed. Catherine shared that “people are supportive regardless of ability, you’re out here, you’re running, we’re that you are with us.” Wanda mirrors this sentiment of her own experience, saying “I’m a bigger girl and never thought I could keep up, but everyone was encouraging, [saying] keep it up, keep moving.” Gena, one of the few participants who generally prefers to run independently, emphasized that the organized races helped her feel like she could fully claim the runner’s identity

7.5 Focusing on Finishing Instead of Restricting

I suggest that focusing on fun and pleasure is an act of resistance against a culture that often situates sports and physical activity in terms of “no pain, no gain.” For many women, exercise is situated as a form of disciplinary practice with the goal of body modification, which Piran (2019) aptly calls “coercive body alterations and practices.” During the interviews, topics such as nutrition and eating practices often arose as we discussed health, self-care, or body ideals. I asked if they felt that there was a lot of diet talk or focus on body modification as the goal in group running programs or among themselves. The general sentiment is that sometimes women discussed different eating patterns, but it was often contextualized as proper fueling or nutrition choices to help recover from running. Food choices were often dictated by what did not upset their stomachs or cause the dreaded “runners runs” in the middle of a training session.

When reflecting on her body size, Karen made an interesting statement: "If I want my clothes to fit then I got to focus on what I'm eating. Whereas when I'm running, I focus on what I eat before I run." I believe this alludes to healthier connections with food as a fuel source rather then, a dieting mentality that is often rule-based, grounded in deprivation and restriction. Sandy said that sometimes her running friends bring up dieting or weight loss when chatting, but generally, they say, "I just feel stronger when I'm running, I feel tighter when I'm running, that kind of stuff, not that I lost ten pounds." Louise demonstrates critical awareness about the linkage between health and weight, saying, "some women who run [are] always focusing on weight but I say look you know what, as long as you're healthy and there is nothing wrong, weight you know it doesn't have anything really to do with it." I am not suggesting that running does not contribute to weight loss or a change in one's body composition. However, from the narratives in this study, weight loss does not appear to be the sole focus motivation to run.

As described earlier, the women may have started with the focus on losing weight, but this motivation shifted over time. Gena exemplifies this saying:

> When I started to run, noticed both times changes in my body very quickly. Like I feel stronger, I notice my legs have changed shape and in ways that I never thought they would go. I was like I got nice legs now and that's from running because I was doing everything else before but I didn't have legs like that.

She continues:

> I don't need to be super thin or super muscular or wear the tiny little booty shorts. I can run how I am and the fact that I'm like getting more muscular and losing more fat, that's coming along with it and that's great because I'm noticing that I can run better because of that. But even if I didn't lose the weight, like I'm still running. I can still do it.

It is important not to deny the material reality of the moving body and that weight loss or shifts in body composition are not inherently negative. Previously, I discussed the feminist contentions and suspicions around fitness or sports. It is essential to emphasize that, as other research shows, the sole focus on weight loss can be detrimental to women's mental and physical health. However, the emphasis on achieving sport and fitness-related goals in which body modification occurs due to a shift in movement and often nutrition patterns is complex.

I believe it is important not to discount women's lived experience of weight or size modification simply as a sign of complicity with the cultural imperative of achieving the feminine thin, toned body ideal. Many of the women's stories from this research indicate that achieving physically demanding goals is often experienced as empowering and contributes to body appreciation. A possible contributing factor to the decentralization of body modification is that many women began running by joining organized running clinics. Generally speaking, these clinics focus on training individuals to achieve particular distances such as "learn-to-run," 5 km, 10 km, and marathons. There are also women's only options. This focus on physical activity may provide an alternative experience to programs that target weight loss, such as "get your pre-baby body back" or get your "beach body ready."

7.6 Closing Thoughts

In this final discussion chapter, I bring together the overall findings from each chapter to how the individual and communal experience of movement can help contribute to positive embodiment. Specifically, I argue that body appreciation and body image are relationally influenced. I proposed five overarching experiences that emerged from the women's narratives that contributed to empowering embodied experiences. These five elements included the value of (1) social connection and belonging, (2) fun and pleasure in physical activity, (3) expanding embodied possibilities through witnessing diverse bodies achieve physical goals, (4) body-inclusive practices of "no-body left behind," and (5) focusing on finishing, rather than restricting.

In the first section, I discuss how running is a relational and communal experience. Moreso, the relationships developed through running are one of the primary motivators keeping the women running. The strong social community that running provides can have a downside during an injury as they often experience losing their support network. The participants also discussed relational gendered differences (within a binary construction of male and female) of topics of conversations, pacing, and navigating staying in relationship with others once they become faster.

Next, I discussed how the runners actively focused on their running being fun and pleasurable. While other studies have found that distance runners or endurance athletes tend to normalize pain and perhaps experience pleasure from withstanding discomfort, a number of the women in this study shared how they adjust their pace or goals to keep the experience fun and pleasurable. Third, I discussed how women's sense of embodied possibilities expanded through their own *I Can* body experiences and witnessed diverse bodies achieving goals. These empowering possibilities often contradict previously held assumptions about what their body could do or negative experiences from earlier sports or physical education experiences. Fourth, in "No(Body) is Left Behind," I examined how, for the participants in this study, the running community actively welcomed, embraced, and encouraged them. This support helped to foster a sense of belonging and solidify the runner's identity. Finally, in the final section, "Focus on Finishing, Instead of Restricting," I examined how shifting from a focus on weight loss or body modification to reaching a physical goal fostered agency around having a more critical stance towards ideal body sizes or what a healthy body "looks" like. Again, this was not to dismiss that some weight loss or body modification did not occur through running; however, it became more of a by-product of focusing on running versus a goal in and of itself.

I would argue that even if women accomplished their running goals, without the affirmation of the running community, running in and of itself may not sufficiently provide body-affirming experiences. The women experienced a shift in their understanding of their bodies and others by witnessing diverse bodies accomplish physical goals while being supported and fully welcomed by the running community.

Chapter 8

Conclusion: Summarizing the Findings

This research explored how female recreational runners experience their bodies through movement and how these embodied experiences influence their understanding of gendered body ideals, health, and self-care practices. Through a feminist poststructural framework, I utilized a moving methodology to "engage the force of the moving active body" (Markula, 2014, p. 283) to garner insight into how women recreational runners experience their bodies through movement and to understand what embodied experiences become the basis for questioning dominant narratives of body ideals and result in new ways of thinking about healthy or athletic bodies.

All the participants who chose the moving interview (fifteen out of seventeen) enjoyed moving while talking. This approach also brought to life how the moving body informed their responses. This included how geography shaped their responses (sharing training locations) and how engaging in the movement provided an in-the-moment bodily experience. This affirms the potential for moving methodologies that acknowledge the influence on the moment-to-moment interaction with the socio-material world, that include people and shifting geography. Actually moving made it easier to "talk about" moving (which is more complex than you would think). An essential benefit of a moving methodology is that it allows for embodied knowledge and experience to be captured in situ rather than retroactively trying to recall bodily sensations and feelings while seated. In this study, choosing to walk or run together provided an added layer of co-creating knowledge not only through *talking* bodies but through *moving* bodies. Moving interviews incorporate the added dimension of present-moment bodily sensation and our embodied inter-action. Additionally, the moving methodology was well received as it was perceived as an efficient way to get their training or step count in.

From this groundwork (or bodywork), I turned towards answering my research objectives in Chapter 4. The first objective was to explore women's experiences and meaning-making of their running practice. Starting broadly, I was able to let the women guide me through their running stories. When did they start running? Why did they start running? Do you identify as a runner? If so why or why not? What does running mean to you? This created a running narrative, though not always linear, but was an entry point into the runner's identity. Understanding how women defined a runner provided insight into what kind of person (i.e. body) can claim that subject position.

Although being a runner was primarily linked to social belonging, there were other indicators of being able to claim the runner's identity, including engaging in a particular level of training or participating in races. The runner's body inevitably became a focal part of our interview. The women could readily construct the ideal runner's body (i.e., thin, lean, and toned) often promoted in the media but also from watching competitive runners. What was intriguing is how the women resisted the dominant discursive construction of the running body by articulating two distinct running bodies, what I have called the *High-Performance Running Body* and the *Serious-Recreational Running Body.*

This brought me to the second research objective, exploring how women runners negotiate dominant discourses on gendered body ideals, health and self-care practices. A core finding of this research is that identifying as a runner created a pathway to subvert conventional notions of the ideal runner's body, thus, opening up more possible subjectivities. I suggest that the embodied act of running, materialized as a discursive construction of an alternative subject position to claiming the runner's identity. The female runners could claim the runner's identity by drawing from their running practice. This may sound obvious, but it is a common sentiment when you ask someone if they are a runner (likely because you saw them running); they will respond by saying, "Oh no, I just run." Moving from "I run" to *I am a runner* is an empowering experience for the participants. The road to claiming that identity varied, but it created a sense of belonging and a shift in how they viewed their bodies. Often, the change came in the form of gratitude and appreciation of what their body can do and lessened the intense focus on what they look like.

In Chapter 5, I shared women's discursive construction of body ideals and the runner's body. This research found that gendered body ideals of beauty were more resistant to change then the runner's body. Based on the women's descriptions of the runner's body, two subjective positions were articulated, the *High-Performance Running Body* and the *Serious-Recreational Running Body.* Fifteen of the seventeen participants identified as a runner with the fundamental premise, if they run, then they have a runner's body. The *High-Performance Running Body* was described in articulate to what is *not* the running body they identify with or what they see among the majority of the running community. The *Serious-Recreational Running* body materialized through their moving running body and witnessing the diversity of bodies in the running community. Both their reflection on their own bodies capacities and witnessing other bodies in motion provided alternative and more expansive possibilities of the runner's body, which I called the *I Can Body.*

In saying that, the women's reflections on their body alternated between appreciation for what their running body can do, yet for some, they remained aware and sometimes preoccupied that their bodies were not aligning with cultural beauty standards. I assert that empowering physical experiences can foster a sense of body connection and freedom, yet, may not decrease negative thoughts about our body. However, the aging process and “caring less” about other people's thoughts were commonly shared, as found in other research (Piran, 2017; Robbins & Reissing, 2018). I argue that the undertone of these reflections about aging did not necessarily come from embracing their body; instead, a recognition, or perhaps resignation, that they are no longer the primary target of the male gaze. In other words, it seemed to stem from a desexualization of women’s aging bodies. As one participant retorted, “Who’s looking at me now anyways?”

In Chapter 6, I honed in on how women runners describe self-care and what being healthy means for them. Self-care is the overarching framework for their health and wellness practices with a sense that it is about “balancing” all the components of physical and mental well-being. These health-related behaviours looked slightly varied for everyone. Still, common practices included physical activity (running), nutrition (often drawing from Canada’s Food Guide, or balancing food groups), and strategies to manage emotional well-being. Discussions of self-care raised the gendered nature of caring-for-self as a pathway to care for others. There was a recognition that the focus on others was to their detriment, which often catalyzed the intentional focus on the self. However, they would generally revisit the sentiment that they cannot care for others unless they care for themselves first. This indicates women's primary role in the ethics of care (Baldwin, 2023; Moore, 2008). Self-care was also positioned as being a good role model for children and social networks. This is not a critique per se, as it alludes to the relationality of well-being, and participating in extracurricular activities often becomes a negotiated family affair (Goodsell &Harris, 2011). Nevertheless, the hesitancy to claim prioritizing the self in fear of being deemed selfish and the struggle to balance it all is worth noting.

The participants strongly emphasize the role that running plays in their physical and mental health. Women’s views of physical activity were unproblematically connected to physical health and well-being through the perceived present and future prevention benefits. Present-day benefits included increased energy levels, stress release, improved cardiovascular fitness, blood pressure, and cholesterol levels. Running and the subsequent present-day benefits (e.g. cardiovascular fitness and normal blood pressure) are subsequently linked to reducing risks of developing chronic disease. This is posited as investing in their future health to continue to “do what I want to do” and avoid developing chronic diseases that run in their family.

Debating whether physical activity benefits health is not this research's core question. Rather, poststructuralism pays attention to the perceived veracity of the linkage between physical activity and health, signaling the strength of these discourses. Other examples include getting your “10,000 steps a day” as a measure of health and how this measure has also become common knowledge. The focus on self-tracking is worth exploring in more detail as some participants mentioned popular running apps such as Strava (posts a map of your running route and includes pace and distance).

The *Healthy Body* is understood as a productive body that has the ability “to do” and not be an impediment to the variety of activities the women want to continue to be able to engage in for as long as possible. From this perspective, the *Healthy Body* is not necessarily about a subjective sense of well-being, but a functionally fit body, which aligns with other research exploring the meanings of health among athletes (Bridel, 2013). Importantly, from the participants’ perspective, the *Healthy Body* is not constructed as a thin body or linked to any particular weight or size. This may reflect their health status and witnessing that size is not always indicative of health status in others. They actively challenged notions of equating health and weight, but the foundation of the resistance is fundamentally based on fitness and activity level. As such, sedentary behaviour is considered high-risk and indicative of current or future health problems.

In the final chapter *I can do it + You can do it: Integrating Positive Physical Experiences within a Supportive Community* I weave the threads of the findings to suggest strategies to create body-positive spaces in recreation. I will expand on the specific elements in the implications for practice section. In this final chapter, I also focused on the relationality of body image and body appreciation. The women's narratives suggest that a body-affirming community adds a protective factor to body dissatisfaction. Although running in and of itself may foster a sense of body appreciation through experiencing what the body "can do," the mirroring and affirming of the empowering body experience helped the women solidify their identity as a runner. Identifying as a runner expanded their subjectivity of the fit and healthy body, regardless of body size. The act of running problematized the discursive runner's body or returning to Michael Gard (2008), "how we move and how we choose to move are tied up with who we are and who we want to be" (p. 217).

8.1 Implications for Practice, Policy & Research

8.1.1 Practice and Policy

One of the learnings gleaned from engaging in this research is the healing and hopeful space that may created by understanding the body and fluid, dynamic, and relational. Understandings of bodies, health, and self-care are culturally specific and an appreciation of this is essential. Returning to the work of Carla Rice's (2014, 2015) Body-becoming that aims to expand the body's possibilities by reminding us that our body is situated within a variety of shifting physical, psychological, and social contexts. The relationality of our embodied selves encourages us to shift away from body-as-object, to body-in-process. Lucy Aphramour (2018) aptly states, "If we navigate our food cupboard, and our way of being in the world, in a mechanistic way, we close down possibilities for the open-minded curiosity that fosters connection, compassion and criticality" (p. 781). These three attributes are critical in developing a more dynamic and attuned relationship towards care of our bodies. Rice et al., (2023) remind us that because the body is always in process, we can never really be certain about what the body "can/not do." Similarly, can we expand our notions of health and well-being beyond a capitalist driven self-improvement project? Diverse understandings and perspectives of well-being also allude to "feeling well" being an unfolding process with no definitive end point.

Keeping relationality at the forefront demonstrates the power of group belonging and spaces that can foster empowering embodied experiences as demonstrated in the chapter of "I can do it + You can do it". Accordingly, drawing from Piran's (2017) Developmental Theory of Embodiment is a fruitful framework for understanding not only the developmental stages of our embodied selves that are impacted by our biology and our social environment, but also as an entry point into how to support clients (or ourselves!) into strategies that support positive embodiment. As healthcare professionals we often appreciate frameworks and rubrics for assessing health and well-being, while though can be helpful, we also need to deeply listen to the subjective needs of individuals we are supporting.

Relevant to this research is the powerful role that physical activity and movement can play in supporting positive embodiment, if the focus is joyful, non-objectifying activity. I hope that I have demonstrated that it is the intent of the movement that matters. Considerations for practice are discussed in the next section *Bringing Joyful Movement* into Practice and creating body inclusive environments, that may be a policy or at least a guiding framework for organizations in the section *Strategies to Support Body Positive Spaces.* I finish this section with an embodied experience as a reminder that our bodies are never removed from our clinical or academic interactions.

Bringing Joyful Movement into Practice

As a Dietitian who works with clients with eating disorders and disordered eating, I believe in the potential empowerment of sports and physical activity to be part of the healing modality to reconnect with our bodies. There is often a focus on re-teaching how to eat and nourish our bodies, but I have found a hesitancy within the eating disorder therapeutic approaches to intentionally incorporate physical activity, outside of Yoga, as part of the treatment plan. The literature has also explored this resistance to including physical activity as part of eating disorder treatment (Calegro & Pedrotty, 2007; Calegro & Pedrotty, 2010; Neumark-Sztainer, 2014; Neumark-Sztainer, 2019; Neumark-Sztainer et al., 2018).

From a professional practice standpoint, it would be efficacious to explore how physical activity principles grounded in mindful, non-objectifying approaches could be incorporated into treatment programs or client-related goals. Nutrition and physical activity are companions in supporting attuned self-care. My clients often state things such as, “I exercise to earn the right to eat,” thus, as a Dietitian working with disordered eating behaviours, it is challenging to disentangle food-related goals from exercise. Accordingly, Lucy Aprhamor, an inspiring dietitian who has played a significant role in the Health, Not Weight movement, reminds us that “nutrition and PE (physical education) are not miles apart as disciplines and are clearly bridged by feminist concerns around embodiment, gender and health discourse” (Aphramor, 2018, p. 769). For those

Dietitians not working with an interdisciplinary team that may include a physiotherapist or a recreational therapist, receiving additional training in therapeutically appropriate physical activity may allow for a more comprehensive treatment plan.

Strategies to Support Body Diversity Spaces

This research also suggests physical activity can contribute to positive embodiment when the "empowered I" is mirrored by community support and validation. Pickett and Cunningham (2016, 2018) have strongly advocated that the responsibility for creating body-inclusive spaces needs to be at the leadership and managerial level of sport and fitness institutions. The scholars outline practical strategies within a conceptual model of body weight-inclusive physical activity spaces, such as cultural commitment to inclusion, physical spaces, inclusive language, and a sense of community. My findings align with Pickett and Cunningham's (2017) framework for creating body-inclusive spaces or body-positive experiences. Although they focused on organizational strategies, my findings echo their recommendations in how the female runners describe their experience of running and the running community, particularly the emphasis on creating a sense of community and focusing on health, not weight.

In this final chapter, I outline five pathways to creating body-positive experiences within a physical activity context that emerged from the women's narratives on how they experienced their bodies in motion alongside others. The five include (1) social connection and belonging, (2) fun and pleasure in physical activity, (3) expanding embodied possibilities through witnessing diverse bodies achieve physical goals, (4) body-inclusive practices of "no-body left behind", and (5) focusing on achieving physical goals, rather than body modification. These recommendations are based on the findings from white, able-bodied, and predominantly middle-class women and thus, may not address other barriers such as the built environment for accessibility. However, resources such as the "Running Industry Diversity Coalition" (see www.runningdiversity.com) provide education and partner with running brands, retailors and racing events to support diversity and inclusion among running group and events.

These elements can be incorporated into physical activity and sports-focused programming but require education on challenging weight-based oppression (Cameron & Russell, 2016). In fact, these similar elements I applied to creating the G.I.R.L. Run Club program fifteen years ago. Although I may have used different language, I intended to create a safe social space for junior high girls to experience the joy of moving their bodies in a fun and inclusive atmosphere. This was created through diverse and strong females who strived to model body appreciation as an act of disrupting the pervasive and oppressive "body corseting" messages that target female bodies (Piran, 2019). The key is focusing on messaging- we are not moving to modify our bodies but to care for our bodies.

8.1.2 Research

Returning to the impetus for this research, Pirkko Markula (2014), a poststructuralist feminist researcher and fitness instructor, invites new thinking and to "practice movement differently beyond the biopolitics of neo-liberalism" (p.483), thus, opening new ways of exploring the potential of the moving body beyond notions of the disciplined and docile body. Importantly, a focus on positive embodiment has emerged from the eating disorder field, highlighting the necessity to study not only what influences body dissatisfaction, but what actually contributes to positive experiences of inhabiting our bodies (Hefferon, 2015; Menzel & Levine, 2011; Munroe, 2022). Indeed, we need to move past understanding the body just from the perspective of pathology (Hefferon, 2016). To build upon Pirrko Markula's quest to explore alternative frameworks of experiencing movement as empowering, it is imperative to understand what constitutes experiences of positive embodiment and body image. This invites further research in exploring various physical activities and movement-based practices along with a focus on diverse embodied identities. It would also be beneficial to continue fostering intersectional approaches to research with more attention being given to the 'how,' especially during graduate research training.

The diversity of embodied identities also calls for diverse, creative, and dynamic methodological approaches to exploring, analysing, and representing lived experience. Theories and methodologies that move us away from positivism framework of finding out "the truth" creates opportunities to engage in alternative approaches such as arts-based or movement-based that enters into knowledge creation as relational, non-linear, and always "becoming" (Denison & Markula, 2003; Ellingson, 2017; Rice, 2015; Rice et al., 2021; Snowber, 2016; Wellard, 2016, 2019). My focus on keeping the body "in view" as much as possible throughout the research experience from listening to the nudges in my body to take on this project, writing, transcribing, interviewing, and analyzing, has posed both challenges (being vulnerable) and rewards (being vulnerable). However, a core learning that I have aimed to articulate is that our bodies are always part of the research process, despite our traditional academic training.

Embodied scholars such as Laura Ellingson (2017) remind us that the "disembodied researcher" is simply a myth as our bodies are implicated in all elements of research, as much as we try to stay hidden beneath academic discourse and jargon. Furthermore, knowledge production is always "rooted in carnal experience" despite any attempts to hide behind a disembodied voice (Ellingson, 2017, p. 180). As such, burgeoning academics and well-seasoned academics may want to consider experimenting with methodological approaches that tap into the sensuous, creative, and vitality of bodies, including our own.

Fortunately, approaches such as narrative, poetic, autoethnography and arts-based approaches are increasingly becoming more recognized as "real" research (for example, see Ellingson, 2017; Ellis, 2004; Snowber, 2016, Sparkes, 2003; Spry 2011; Wellard, 2016, 2019). Encouragement of these rich approaches to research need to be continued and supported. However, for those of us (myself included) who have trained professionally within a fairly traditional biomedical model of health and the body, expanding pedagogic possibilities of bodily engagement may support students and current researchers to step outside the often narrow confines of academia that is grounded in a more positivist orientation to knowledge production. Courses could be created and offered in our province, through the Faculty of Medicine and Human Kinetics and Recreation to support students in engaging with such methodologies as a moving methodology.

This is not to say that those in sports and recreation fields do not try to capture movement. Measuring and gathering data from tracking devices such as pedometers and accelerometers is common (Lee & Shiroma, 2014). Accelerometers can collect information on acceleration movement patterns but cannot capture nuanced patterns of body posture or if added resistance is being applied to movement. Gathering qualitative data may add to the richness of such measurements to capture the intention behind the movements. As my research and other scholars indicate, when it comes to understanding the role, that physical activity can have in fostering positive embodiment, it is not such much about *what* you are doing but *why.* From my experience, there are many factors to consider in employing a moving methodology, including your own body's capacities. My cardiovascular fitness had to be robust enough to accommodate my ultramarathon training and running an additional 10-20 km with the participants.

Another challenge noted by others (Denison & Markula, 2003, Ellingson, 2017) is capturing in words the experience of the fleshy, messy and often chaotic body. I have found it helpful to speak into a recorder while walking or running to capture my thoughts "on the run." I find speaking my body's impulses easier, but I struggle with putting them into words since proper sentence structure can stymie the grammar of the flesh. Another opportunity within academia is to provide further opportunities to participate in creative writing courses or writing activities within existing courses, allowing students to play with other writing styles, especially in academic programs or departments that lean towards more traditional orientations to research and writing. For example, incorporating learnings from art-based methodologies could add richness and alternative ways to explore research questions (see Leavy, 2020). This may perhaps nurture students' confidence and ability to write with a more prominent "I," resulting in more vibrant and relatable research. At the very least, creative writing opportunities may help students move through the dreaded writer's block by normalizing the messy, chaotic, and non-linear process that is actually involved in arriving at a polished piece.

In conclusion, regarding the possibilities for future research, I return to the work of Niva Piran. Piran (2017) states that the dimensions absent from conceptualizing positive body images involve acting in the world with agency, functionality, and passion, all of which could be influenced by engaging in various forms of physical activity. Mayoh, Jones, and Prince (2018) assert that despite physical activity's potential to facilitate empowering experiences, there remains a lack of academic attention exploring *how* physical activity supports positive embodied experiences. Such lines of inquiry highlight critical new spaces for research, namely, how movement and physical activity can contribute to positive embodiment, and exploring how movement may facilitate agency for resisting cultural norms of the female body. Recognizing that physical activity and sports are not a panacea or direct pathway to positive embodiment is essential. On the other hand, trivializing the possibilities of experiencing more freedom and agency through physicality may also inadvertently limit strategizing and collaborating on creating accessible programming and inclusive public policy within the sports, recreation, education, and health promotion fields.

8.2 Limitations with this Study (Opportunities to Learn)

Blinded by the White: Seeing What I'm Not Seeing

As with all studies, this research is not without its limitations. I have presented the findings guided by a feminist, poststructural framework that does not claim to be presenting objective "truths," rather, presenting ideas grounded in the knowledge that is co-created through the interview interactions. Despite the rich narratives and similar themes articulated, I cannot generalize how running and physical activity can be a pathway toward positive embodiment for all women. Specifically, I cannot apply these findings to competitive athletes, where body size and shape may contribute to performance, resulting in an increased focus on body modification. Through this process I can see how problematic my initial research objectives are with the focus on the "gendered body" which I fell into the dualistic trappings of gendered only being about male vs female without really acknowledging the race-sex-gender intersection of how power operates unevenly through these interactions.

Despite my efforts in trying to keep the questions from Rice (2019), "what do I recognize, and not recognize, because of the position I occupy?" (p.415), my passion and exuberance for the empowering possibilities of movement, especially within a supportive community setting, allowed for my white, privileged, blinders to creep back in insidiously. Returning to Combs (2019), I remind myself that reflecting on white privilege is an "awkward, painful, necessary process” that often evokes guilt (p. 62). Yet, Combs suggests that white privilege does not inherently mean racism, rather, a stance of unquestioning entitlement. In practice, this means that as researchers, we must engage in self-reflection on our own histories and positionalities to shine a light on the blind spots of how perhaps (un)consciously benefited from our places of privilege. In spite of reading and grappling with material on white privilege, it remains a challenge to try to untangle how my positionality continues to limit my understanding of such concepts as empowerment and safe spaces. As a woman, I make choices about, for example, where or when, I may run if I keep safety in mind. My focus is on my physical safety, and I make choices grounded in a general sense of freedom to move as I please, though I take comfort in safety in numbers. As discussed previously, inequalities remain in what bodies are welcomed and have access to different leisure spaces (Baldwin, 2023; Girgrah, 2023; Rose et al., 2018; Williams et al., 2022). A similar sentiment was discussed among the other research participants that there is “safety in numbers.” This perspective is not representative of other racial groups who have been not only been unwelcome in leisure spaces, but also violently targeted (Williams et al., 2022).

Therefore, any sense of empowerment from running remains centered around individual bodily experience and expanded capacity that centers around pre-existing white privilege. As Ahmed (2007) poignantly discusses on the phenomenology of whiteness, that whiteness becomes like a habit that orientates how certain bodies ‘orient’ or take up space in the world. In her words navigating a non-white body in a white world is so that “whiteness becomes worldly through the noticeability of the arrival of some bodies more than others” (p. 149). The women’s narratives are entangled within a white privilege framework, and the fact that this is likely unconscious highlights how insidious it is. The women’s sense of empowerment within this research reflects being able to take up space, which, though may be felt as subjectively challenging based on body size, would likely be experienced differently for women of colour. This is not to diminish this lens on empowering bodily experiences, but it is arguably myopic in its scope and broader applicability.

Within the research process, I try to remember that my findings cannot be generalized across the diverse spectrum of race, gender, and socioeconomic status. The increased visibility of the “average” (white) woman in social media and our local community may skew my perception of running’s empowering possibilities. Critically, I have had to keep asking myself the question posed by Baldwin (2023), “what might this visibility also be shielding from [my] eyes” (p. 2547). Although I do not abide by the notion that running is economically accessible, with the adage of “all you need is a pair of sneakers,” the reality is that even the concept of leisure and recreational time is founded upon the flexibility and autonomy over how one spends their time and access to economically dependent activities. Hence, as Rose et al. (2018) contend, “leisure is permeated with politics” particularly in how power is distributed in the form of time and resources (p. 649).

The sample in my study was also relatively homogenous in terms of race (all Caucasian), sexual orientation, and socioeconomic status. I made the decision to not ask demographic details on sexual orientation or socioeconomic status, that although are important factors, based on the focus of the study, it felt invasive to ask, as I was not specifically looking at barriers or experiences of specific categories outside of “women who run.” I opted to provide space for women to self-disclose based on their comfort level. For example, through their narratives, many would allude to relationship or familiar patterns or if finances are a barrier to participation. Although some women stated that running can be expensive (race entries, travel for races), many are of the mindset that running is not an expensive activity. Only one participant focused on socioeconomic status as a significant factor that she had to manage with her running.

Another obvious limitation is that the participants are currently involved and deeply invested in their running practice, as such, I am likely hearing narratives primarily of positive experiences. It is equally important to understand women's experiences who felt that they did not belong to the running community or how the ideal runner's body may have negatively impacted their thoughts and attitudes towards their own bodies. However, despite this being a limitation, I am building from the call to researchers to focus on pathways to positive embodiment and body image, not just understanding what fosters body dissatisfaction and negative body image (Hefferon, 2015; Menzel & Levine, 2011; Munroe, 2022, Piran, 2019, Tylka & Piran, 2019). More so, despite the potential risk factors that come with competitive sports or physical activity in general, I wanted to contribute to the growing body of knowledge on how physical activity and sports can empowering embodied experience.

8.3 Reflections on the Academic Journey

This is where I see the limitation of representation in this study (and often my consciousness) as the "raison d'être" of engaging in a research project—to make mistakes, to learn, and grow. Likely, anyone reading this dissertation has either completed a research project or is in the midst of one (stay strong!) and hopefully can relate to the struggle of growing with your project. This growth includes challenging unconscious biases and belief structures that undoubtedly influence our thinking and writings. I collected the data in 2019. Through the ensuing years (with a few pauses in between, including a global pandemic), engaging in various scholarly work has shaped and reshaped how I understand the women's narratives, mainly through struggling with writing intersectionally. However, I see the research journey as an opportunity to muddle through my uncertainties and blind spots and push my critical thinking. Ultimately, I hope I have gained more skill and insight as a student to enter future research opportunities with a deepening ability to think intersectionally to create more nuanced research. I take solace and inspiration from Sara Ahmed who states that “to become a feminist is to stay a student” which is a pertinent reminder for all of us to stay open minded and curious (2017, p. 11). This opportunity to engage in research has been both humbling and rewarding. Celeste Snowber’s raw, passionate, and embodied writings have been a companion for me on my path and perhaps they may spark an invitation to you:

> Rediscover your own dear body-guide, foot by foot, hip by hip, heart by heart.
> […] Bodily knowing and understanding is your life guide. It is always with you as you search and research. Now go let your body stand up and stretch. (Snowber, 2016, p. 13)

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Appendices

Appendix A: Participant Demographics

Appendix B: Approved Ethics Letter

Appendix C: Consent Form

Appendix D: Interview Guide

Appendix A: Participant Demographics

	Participate Name (pseudonym)	Age (at time of interview, 2019)	Number of years running (at time of interview 2019)	Date Completed	Interview Moving Choice
1	Tammy	Mid-50s	4 years consistently but running part of routine since she was 17	June 13, 2019	Walking
2	Steph	44	11	June 20, 2019	Walking
3	Kimberly	Mid 40s	12	June 27, 2019	Running
4	Lauren	Mid 20s	4	June 28, 2019	Walking
5	Janet	Mid 50s	15 (since 2004) but ran in the 90s before having children in 1999	June 30, 2019	Running
6	Lynn	55	10	July 3, 2019	Walking
7	Nicky	41	15	July 3 ,2019	Running
8	Wanda	Early 40s	6	July 4, 2019	Running
9	Margie	81	22	July 8, 2019	Walking
10	Maxine	Early 50s	12	July 12, 2019	Walking
11	Louise	78	16	July 17, 2019	Walking
12	Sandy	Late 40s	19	July 18, 2019	Running
13	Catherine	52	16	July 23, 2019	Running
14	Gena	Mid 30s	Began 2010, Break from 2012-2018 Consistent 2018-2019	August 23, 2019	Seated office
15	Liz	Late 60s	~15	August 26, 2019	Walking
16	Doreen	64	20	September 3, 2019	Walking
17	Joy	62	~ 10	December 17, 2019	Seated office

Appendix B: Approved Ethics Letter

NEWFOUNDLAND AND LABRADOR
HREB
HEALTH RESEARCH ETHICS BOARD

Research Ethics Office
Suite 200, Eastern Trust Building
95 Bonaventure Avenue
St.John's, NL, A1B 2X5

May 31, 2019

1 Winslow Street
St. John's NL A1E
6C5

Dear Mrs Foley:

Researcher Portal File # 20200266
Reference # 2019.108

RE: Exploring women's embodied experiences and meaning of body ideals, health, and self-care practices: A moving experience

Your application was reviewed by a subcommittee under the direction of the HREB and the following decision was rendered:

X	Approval
	Approval subject to changes
	Rejection

Ethics approval is granted for one year effective May 31, 2019. This ethics approval will be reported to the board at the next scheduled HREB meeting.

This is to confirm that the HREB reviewed and approved or acknowledged the following documents (as indicated):

- Application, approved
- Research proposal, approved
- Appendix D Consent form, approved
- Appendix G Budget, approved

- Appendix F Reference List, acknowledged
- Appendix E Recruitment Poster, approved
- Appendix C Email Script, approved
- Appendix B Focus Group Guide, approved
- Appendix A Individual Interview Guide, approved

Please note the following:

- This ethics approval will lapse on May 31, 2020. It is your responsibility to ensure that the Ethics Renewal form is submitted prior to the renewal date.
- This is your ethics approval only. Organizational approval may also be required. It is your responsibility to seek the necessary organizational approvals.
- Modifications of the study are not permitted without prior approval from the HREB. Request for modification to the study must be outlined on the relevant Event Form available on the Researcher Portal website.
- Though this research has received HREB approval, you are responsible for the ethical conduct of this research.
- If you have any questions please contact info@hrea.ca or 709 777 6974.

The HREB operates according to the Tri-Council Policy Statement: Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans (TCPS2), ICH Guidance E6: Good Clinical Practice Guidelines (GCP), the Health Research Ethics Authority Act (HREA Act) and applicable laws and regulations. The membership of this Research Ethics Board complies with the membership requirements for Research Ethics Boards defined in Part C Division 5 of the Food and Drug Regulations.

We wish you every success with your study.

Sincerely,

[redacted]

[redacted]
Clinical Trials
Health Research Ethics Board

Appendix C: Consent Form

Consent to Take Part in Research

TITLE: **Exploring women's embodied experiences and meaning of body ideals, health, and self-care practices: A moving experience**

RESEARCHER(S): Holly Foley, PhD (C) Phone Number: 709-728-4699

SUPERVISOR(S): Dr. Natalie Beausoleil & Dr. Erin Cameron

You have been invited to take part in a research study. Taking part in this study is voluntary. You may choose to take part, or you may choose not to take part in this study. You also may change your mind at any time.

This consent form has important information to help you make your choice. It may use words that you do not understand. Please ask the researcher Holly Foley to explain anything that you do not understand.

It is important that you have as much information as you need and that all your questions are answered. Please take as much time as you need to think about your decision to participate or not, and ask questions about anything that is not clear. The researcher, Holly Foley, will tell you about the study timelines for making your decision.

Please read this carefully. Take as much time as you like. If you like, take it home to think about for a while. Mark anything you do not understand, or want explained better. After you have read it, please ask questions about anything that is not clear.

The researchers will:

- discuss the study with you
- answer your questions
- keep confidential any information which could identify you
- be available during the study to deal with problems and answer questions

1. Why am I being asked to join this study?

You are being invited to join this study because I am interested in exploring women's experiences and meaning-making of their running practice. This study is being done to find out more information about how running may create a space for women to experience their bodies and physical activity in positive ways. I am also interested in how running shape's women's understanding of health, body size or shape ideals, and self-care practices.

Participation in physical activity is widely accepted as an important contributor to physical and mental health and is a common target for health promotion. Participation in movement-based practices or sports has also been widely shown to be an avenue for women's empowerment and has been an active target for feminists who have been working toward increasing opportunities and access for women.

On the other hand, there has been some concern that sports or certain types of physical activity can reinforce strict body standards and a dieting culture that may be harmful to women's overall health and well-being. It is important to understand how women are impacted by the messages we receive about health and body size or shape standards. It is also important to understand how participating in physical activity influences women's understanding of these messages.

There is a lack of research exploring *how* physical activity may support women feeling comfortable and positive *in* their bodies and *about* their bodies. This is an important area for research, namely how movement and physical activity may contribute to women feeling positive about themselves and their bodies.

Research objectives:

1. To explore women's experiencing and meaning-making of their running practice;
2. To explore how women who run understand or resist cultural messages on health, gendered body ideals, and self-care practices;
3. To identify elements of movement-based practices that create spaces for questioning dominant messages on health and gendered body ideals and self-care practices;
4. To identify aspects of movement-based practices that may support positive embodiment and alternative understandings of women's experiences of physical activity.

2. How many people will take part in this study?

This study will take place primarily within St. John's but also for interested participants on the northeast Avalon Peninsula (for example Mount Pearl, CBS). I am aiming to interview 10-20 women through individual interviews and/or focus groups.

3. How long will I be in the study?

You will be asked to come to the primary investigator's office (Budden and Associates Law Office, 5 Hallett Crescent, St. John's NL) for an in-person interview that will take 60-90 minutes with the option of taking part in a follow-up interview three months later. There is also an option to complete this interview while going for a run/walk. You may choose a trail in St. John's that is convenient for you. You can also participate in one focus group that will take approximately 1.5 to 2 hours.

4. **What will happen if I take part in this study?**

If you agree to take part in this study, the following procedures will take place:

You will be asked to participate in an individual interview with the option of a follow-up interview three months after your initial interview. You also have the option of participating in a focus group. You may choose to either participate in the individual interview, just the focus group, or you may participate in both.

Individual Interview:

During this interview, you will speak with Holly Foley for 1 to 1.5 hours. The interview will take place either at 5 Hallett Crescent (Holly Foley's office) or if you choose to do a running interview, we will meet on a trail that is convenient for you. During the interview, you will be asked a series of questions about your experiences of running, understanding of body ideals, health and self-care practices. You can choose not to answer any questions you are uncomfortable with or would not like to discuss.

You will be audio recorded during the interview. The audio recording will be transcribed (written down) after the interview and will be analyzed by the researcher. A professional transcription service will do the transcription. Your name or any other identifying information, except for your voice, will not be included during the recording. The audio recording will be destroyed after it has been transcribed, checked for accuracy and the data analyzed.

Focus Group:

You will be asked to participate in one focus group that will last 1.5 to 2 hours. A focus group is a small group of representative people who are asked to speak about their opinions as part of the research. Holly Foley will host the focus group at Budden and Associate Law Office (5 Hallett Crescent, St. John's). During the focus group, Holly Foley will ask questions about your experiences of running, understanding of body ideals, health and, self-care practices. You can choose not to answer questions if you wish.

You will be audio recorded during the focus group. After the focus group, the audio recording will be transcribed (written down) and analyzed by the researcher. A professional transcription service will do the transcription. Your name or any other identifying information will not be included during the recording, except your voice. The audio recording will be destroyed after it has been transcribed, checked for accuracy and the data analyzed.

5. Are there risks to taking part in this study?

During the interview or focus group, you may become uncomfortable or experience some anxiety, emotional and/or psychological distress due to the nature of the questions. You can skip questions, take a break, or stop answering at any time. Should any emotional disturbance occur, all efforts will be made to connect you the appropriate resources.

The following resources are available for you to contact for psychological support:
Association of Psychology NL: http://www.apnl.ca/find-a-psychologist/

Canadian Counselling and Psychotherapy Association: https://www.ccpa-accp.ca/find-a-canadian-certified-counsellor/

For Memorial University Students, the Counselling Centre would be an option.

If you choose to run during the individual interview, potential risks (for example falling) may occur, similar to the risks you could encounter on your personal runs. All efforts will be made to choose a location that is as low risk as possible, such as low traffic and choosing a time of day that has ample daylight.

There is a potential risk of loss of your confidentiality because even though your name will not be part of the audio recording or the transcription, your voice may still be identifiable. If anyone mentions identifiers (e.g., your name), during the recording, this may identify you. Despite protections being in place, there is a risk of unintentional release of information. Researchers will make every attempt to protect your privacy.

Focus Group:

Although the researchers will take every precaution to maintain the confidentiality of the data, the nature of focus groups prevents the researchers from guaranteeing confidentiality. It is possible that some focus group members may repeat things said in the meeting. The researchers will ask participants to respect the privacy of fellow participants and treat all information shared with the group as confidential.

Inconvenience of time:

There is an inconvenience of time. Each individual interview will take about 1 to 1.5 hours for the entire research study. The focus group will take 1.5 to 2 hours. The total time commitment is dependent on which option(s) you choose and how much information is shared.

6. What are the possible benefits of participating in this study?

There may not be a direct benefit to you for taking part in this study. However, you may benefit from talking about your experiences and meaning-making of running. I hope that the information learned from this study can be used in the future to benefit other women who are interested in engaging in physical activity.

7. If I decide to take part in this study, can I stop later?

It is your choice to take part in this study; participation is voluntary. You can change your mind at any time during the research study. You may be asked why you are withdrawing for reporting purposes, but you do not need to give a reason to withdraw from the study if you do not want to. If you decide to leave the study, you can contact the researcher (Holly Foley).

If you decide to withdraw or not participate in certain aspects of the study, participants will be free to do so at any point in time without penalty of any sort. If participants request a withdrawal (verbally or in writing via email), the principal investigator will accept the request immediately up until the point of data analysis.

Due to the group nature of the focus group, if you choose to withdraw from the study, the focus group recording or transcription will not be destroyed. The information from the focus group will continue to be used by the primary researcher. This information will only be used for this study.

8. What are my rights when participating in a research study?

You have the right to receive all information promptly that could help you decide about participating in this study. You also have the right to ask questions about this study at any time and to have them answered to your satisfaction.

Your rights to privacy are legally protected by federal and provincial laws that require safeguards to ensure that your privacy is respected. Signing this form gives us your consent to be in this study. It tells us that you understand the information about the research study. When you sign this form, you do not give up any of your legal rights against the primary researcher, nor does this form relieve the primary investigator their legal and professional responsibilities.

You have the right to be informed of the results of this study once the entire study is complete. I (Holly Foley) will provide a summary of the results and recommendations to you. Any published material will also be made available upon your request.

You will be given a copy of this signed and dated consent form before participating in this study.

9. What about my privacy and confidentiality?

Protecting your privacy is an important part of this study. If you decide to participate in this study, the researchers will collect and use information from your interview. I (Holly Foley) will only collect and use the information I need for this study, including:

- gender
- year of birth
- information from the interview

The personal information collected about you will have your directly identifiable information removed (i.e. name) and replaced with a pseudonym. There will be a master list linking pseudonyms to names.

Study information collected during the study will be kept at the primary investigator's office site and stored in a secure, locked place that only Holly Foley will be able to access. After the study closes, the study information will be kept for five years. This information will be stored at Budden and Associates Law Office, 5 Hallett Crescent, St. John's, NL. Holly Foley, the primary investigator, is the person responsible for keeping it secure.

If you do a moving interview outside, it is possible that during the interview we may meet someone that one of us knows. The interview will be stopped until we are out of hearing range. It will be kept private that you are participating in an interview.

When the results of this study are published or presented at scientific meetings, your name and other personal information will not be used in the publication.

All information that identifies you will be kept confidential, and to the extent permitted by applicable laws, will not be disclosed or made publicly available, except as described in this consent document. Every effort will be made to protect your privacy. Even though the risk of identifying you from the study data is very small, it can never be eliminated. You will be notified if there is a breach of your privacy resulting from your participation in this study. Communication via e-mail is not absolutely secure. We do not recommend that you communicate sensitive personal information via e-mail.

10. Who will see my personal information?

Members of Holly Foley's doctoral committee may review your interview transcription for supervision purposes. The members of the doctoral committee include:

Dr. Natalie Beusoleil, Division of Community Health and Humanities, Faculty of Medicine, Memorial University

Dr. Erin Cameron, Northern Ontario School of Medicine

Dr. Pamela Ward, Division of Community Health and Humanities, Faculty of Medicine, Memorial University

Your access to records
You have the right to see the information about you that has been collected for this study. If you wish to do so, please contact the primary investigator, Holly Foley.

11. Declaration of financial interest, if applicable

There are no conflicts of interest to declare related to this study.

13. What about questions or problems?

If you have any questions about taking part in this study, you can meet with the principal investigator who is in charge of the study. That person is: Holly Foley, 709-728-4699

Or you can speak to my supervisor(s):
Dr. Natalie Beausoleil (709- 864-6578) or Dr. Erin Cameron (807-766-7451)

Or you can talk to someone who is not involved with the study at all but can advise you on your rights as a participant in a research study. This person can be reached through:

Ethics Office at 709-777-6974
Email at info@hrea.ca

Signature Page

TITLE: Exploring women's embodied experiences and meaning of body ideals, health, and self-care practices: A moving experience

RESEARCHER(S): Holly Foley, PhD (C)
SUPERVISOR(S): Dr. Natalie Beausoleil & Dr. Erin Cameron

My signature on this consent form means:

- I have had enough time to think about the information provided and ask for advice if needed.
- All of my questions have been answered and I understand the information within this consent form.
- I understand that my participation in this study is voluntary.
- I understand that I am completely free at any time to refuse to participate or to withdraw from this study at any time, without having to give a reason, and that this will not change the quality of care that I receive.
- I understand that it is my choice to be in the study and there is no guarantee that this study will provide any benefits to me.
- I am aware of the risks of participating in this study.
- I understand that my interview will be audio recorded and transcribed for data analysis purposes.
- I do not give up any of my legal rights by signing this consent form.
- I understand that all of the information collected will be kept confidential and that the results will only be used for the purposes described in this consent form.

Signature of participant	Printed name	Day Month Year
Signature of person conducting the consent discussion	Name printed	Day Month Year

To be signed by the investigator:

I have explained this study to the best of my ability. I invited questions and gave answers. I believe that the participant/substitute decision maker fully understands what is involved in being in the study, any potential risks of the study and that he or she has freely chosen to be in the study.

Signature of Researcher	Name Printed	Day Month Year

Appendix D: Interview Guide

1. How long have you been running for? What were some of your reasons/intentions/motivations to start?
2. What were you hoping to achieve when you started running? Have your reasons for running shifted over the timeframe you have been running?
3. Would you describe yourself as an active person? (Prompt: How would you describe your activity level growing up? Did you play any sports growing up or over the years? Have there been times in your life that you have been more or less active?)
4. Do you run by yourself or with a group? Why? If you run in a group is it female only or mixed gender? Do you experience running any differently based on if you are running with women or men? Why?
5. What was your experience like when you first began to run? How does running feel like now? Has the experience change? If so, how? If your experience of running shifted, what do you think contributed to this?
6. What does being/identifying as a runner mean to you? How has it shaped how you feel about yourself?
7. What does running bring to your life? What keeps you running? Have you had any negative experiences with running? If so, please explain.
8. How does running fit in with the rest of your life? Are your family/partners/children supportive? Can you discuss any barriers you have encountered with incorporating running into your life?
9. Where do you generally run? Why?
10. How would you describe your health? What role does running play in how you feel about your health?
11. How do you conceptualize self-care? What are your self-care practices? Has running changed what type of self-care practices you engage in? If so how?

12. How would you describe the cultural messages of the ideal woman's body? The ideal runner's body? How does that fit with how you experience your own body?

13. When you are running, how do you feel about your body? How do you think running influences how you feel and experience your body? What elements of running do you think contribute to this?

14. If you had to choose three words that describe your body/self while you are running or right after a run what would they be? Would these words be similar or different in other areas of your life?

15. Overall do you feel the running community is a supportive space for women to engage in movement? If it is supportive, what are the elements that you think contribute to this? What changes would you suggest?