Living in the Shadow of an “Obesity Epidemic”: The Discursive Construction of Boys and Their Bodies

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A thesis completed in conformity with the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

Graduate Department of Exercise Sciences, University of Toronto

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Abstract

This dissertation is about boys and fatness. In it I explore the central discourses that shape young men’s (13-15 years) experiences of their bodies, particularly in relation to body size, shape, and fatness. A central objective is to listen, hear, and take seriously the embodied health rationalities of young men as they negotiate the multiple and contesting discourses that confront them in their daily lives. I employ a feminist poststructural lens to account for the nuanced, alternative, and contextually specific ways young men think about and do health. Data collection was divided into three phases (non-participant observation, photo(focus) groups, and interviews) and was implemented at two Toronto area sites, including an exclusive private school and a publicly funded parks and recreation community centre. I demonstrate that there is not one way of experiencing fatness and masculinity, rather the young men’s constructions of fatness and health were fluid, shifting, contradictory and cross cut by other salient identity categories such as gender, race, ethnicity, social class, and age. Using Michel Foucault’s concept of governmentality, I show how obesity discourse provides a set of resources by which young men are able to construct themselves as autonomous, rational, neoliberal subjects, and how these subjectivities are differentially constituted depending on social and cultural positioning. I also reveal how differently raced and classed young men take up and embody normative ideals of the lean muscular male body through culturally
appropriate masculine technologies of the self (i.e. sport and heterosexuality). The multiplicity of health and body discourses available to the young men gave rise to contested and ambivalent experiences and practices, such that dominant discourses were not always articulated in a straightforward and predictable manner, but were imbued with alternative and, in some cases, subversive meanings. To date, the social sciences have neglected to account for the relationship boys and men have with fatness discourses. By centering the analysis on the embodied experiences of diverse racialized and classed youth, this research demonstrates that weight and shape is more than a biomedical problem to be eradicated, but a discursively compelled embodiment that exists at the crossroads of the social, cultural, psychic, and biologic.
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And finally, to LeAnne Petherick, my partner, I would like to say that your intellectualism, warmth, and love have inspired me through the dark times and made the bright ones that much brighter. I love you.

I dedicate this dissertation to my brother Greg, who has dealt with the anguish of living a non-normative embodiment in a body normalizing culture. Greg has shown me, and those close to him, that it is possible to live our bodies differently. Thank you, Greg.
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CHAPTER ONE
(RE)CONSIDERING MALE EMBODIMENT: MEN, MASCULINITY, AND FATNESS

Me and My Fatness

This dissertation is about “fatness”. For me, the subject of fatness is not a distant or abstract research interest, but is an important part of who I am as an embodied subject\(^1\). Ever since I was a child I have thought about the size and shape of my body. Food, dieting, and weight “management” were all important aspects of my family life growing up. Eating was, and is, a focal part of Norman life. The family dinner table was where we shared stories, solved our collective problems, and enjoyed each other’s company. For my family, the cliché “the family that eats together, stays together” was self-evident in its truth. And eat we did. Over time our eating habits eventually resulted in increased body weights, which proved to be a violation of our status as a middle class family (Moon and Sedgewick, 2001) firmly entrenched in values of health, self-responsibility, and delay of gratification (Crawford, 2006). As a result, our rich, sugary eating practices inevitably gave way to the bland, dry, unfulfilling foods of dieting. I vividly, and somewhat painfully, recollect the unbuttered toast, cantaloupe, and low fat cottage cheese breakfasts of the Scarsdale diet. I can remember weekly weigh-in sessions, meticulously recording the number on the scale, noting whether it was “up” or “down” from the week before. I recall the feelings of power and bodily control that were experienced when the number on the scale was “lower”, and the disappointment and despair when it was “higher”. In our family, the rule was when mom or dad were on a

\(^1\) Sykes and McPhail (2008) define “embodied subjectivity” as a poststructural concept that characterizes the “intersections between the body, the social, and the psyche” (p. 70).
diet we all were on a diet, the logic being that we had to support one another in their efforts to control their weight. It was a familial-alimentary support structure, if you will.

I do not want to give the reader the impression that I was a skinny kid forced in to restrictive dieting because of my parent’s weight anxieties. That would be too simple. I was a “big-boned” kid. Although I spent a lot of my childhood feeling fat, the truth is I really was “big-boned”. I was stronger than most of my friends, I had wide shoulders, a deep chest, and powerful legs. But to a pre-pubescent kid the line between “fat” and “muscle” is a decidedly blurry one, and I spent much of my life simply feeling “fat”. Although I hated the food restrictions of dieting, I did like the idea of losing weight. I liked feeling smaller, I liked getting closer to the skinny norm of the boys my own age. As I grew older the sense of body dissatisfaction never entirely left me. For the most part my dietary restrictions have given way to intense bouts of exercise as a means of controlling my body weight. Rarely does a day go by where I don’t think about what I can “afford” to eat and/or how much exercise I need to do to maintain or achieve a desired weight. I am not alone in these concerns, I hear many of my male friends, peers, and colleagues talking of similar anxieties. My best friend and running partner talks endlessly about his body weight fluctuations, my younger brother aggressively lifts weights and works out to maintain a slender masculine body ideal, while another friend incessantly worries about that little roll of fat that stubbornly hangs around the mid-section of his otherwise skinny thirty-some-thing body. It is my own experiences with fatness, as well as those of the boys and men around me, that have led me to take up

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2 At this point, I feel an urge to write a disclaimer, to explain to the reader that my weight concerns are normal, not pathological, to purify my mini-corpooreal confessional of any taint of “disorder”. Tragically, I suspect my body anxieties and body management practices likely are “normal”, but not “normal” as in “healthy” and “right”, rather normative as in all-too-common and pervasive in a fat-loathing culture such as ours.
fatness as a research topic. Given my own experiences with my male body and its size and shape, it is shocking to me that the relationship between fatness and masculinity continues to be an underresearched topic\(^3\) (Bell and McNaughton, 2007; Gilman, 2004).

**Fatness as a Feminized, Deviant Embodiment**

While there has been a great deal of scholarly attention on women’s experiences of fatness (see Bordo, 1993; Hartley, 2001; Chernin, 1981; Orbach, 1978), there has been considerably less attention paid to men and fatness (for notable exceptions see Bell and McNaughton, 2007; Gilman, 2004; Monaghan, 2001, 2007). The connections between men, masculinity, and fatness remain almost completely unexplored in scholarly literature (Bell and McNaughton, 2007). The omission of research into the intersections of men and fatness can be explained by the specific historical moment in which we live where patriarchy teaches women to hate their bodies (Bordo, 1993), particularly its size and shape. Thus, the feminist movement generally, and feminist scholarship more specifically, has embarked on a campaign to both highlight and challenge the day-to-day fat oppression that women experience in their personal relationships (Rice, 2007), at the doctor’s office (Cooper, 1997; Herndon, 2002), and in the shopping mall (Hartley, 2001; Moon and Sedgewick, 2001). An unfortunate consequence of this campaign, however, has been the formation of a deeply-held assumption that boys and men don’t worry about their bodies (Gilman, 2004; Bell and McNaughton, 2007). This sentiment is explicitly articulated in Kim Chernin’s (1981) characterization of the fat male body. She writes,

\(^3\) In making the argument that the intersection of fatness and masculinity is a worthy research topic I do not want to be accused of arguing that boys and men experience weight anxiety to the same degree or worse than girls and women. Rather, I agree with Gilman (2004) who suggests that cross-gender comparisons are futile, and we should instead be concerned with how masculinity has its own set of historical, social, and cultural significations that are worthy of study independent of the female experience of fatness. No matter how many times I repeat this disclaimer, it is nonetheless inevitable that someone will accuse me of reductive cross-gender comparisons.
By now it must be evident that the fat man has been spared this burden of negative symbolic meaning only because the fat woman has taken it on. One of the great advantages to men, in a culture they dominate, is the ability to assign to those they oppress whatever it is they wish to disown or ignore in their own condition. It is because the fat man believes the imagery his own culture has created that he can gorge himself with impunity and strut about the pool with his bulging belly, while the fat women are all wearing blouses in the water. Because his wife has agreed to carry the general shame our entire culture feels about the body, he can proudly walk up to the younger women who are absorbed in one another’s company; and now he insists upon opening conversation with them, his belly neatly held between his proud hands, as if it too were an estimable possession. (Chernin, 1981, p. 124)

Although this text is close to three decades old, it continues to be a centre piece in feminist interpretations of the intersections between fatness and femininity (see Gard and Wright, 2005). According to the picture Chernin paints, fat men are completely comfortable and, in fact, proud of their corpulence. It is assumed that it is inconsistent for boys and men to worry about something as trite as the appearance of their bodies. While it is true that “historically men have not been reducible to their bodies” (Boero, 2006, p. 12), such a blanket statement begs the question: Which men are not reducible to their bodies? Do all men experience their bodies in similar ways? Some feminist scholars have noted that masculine disembodiment is secured through the (re)embodiment of marginalized others (see Gallop, 1988; Harding, 1998; Petersen, 1998), but these same authors recognise that processes of projection are not universally available to all men. Rather, masculine disembodiment is available to a select few—white, middle-class, heterosexual—men who gain their privilege by projecting embodiment onto racialized, working-class, queer, and disabled men and women. Thus, theoretical conceptualizations that explore fatness through the lens of patriarchy exclusively (see Chernin, 1981; Hartley, 2001; Gard and Wright, 2005) tend to reproduce the cultural assumption that the
“fear of fatness is something only women experience” (Bell and McNaughton, 2007, p. 110) and lose sight of the complex and intersecting discourses that construct the experiences of fat men. Put simply, the “focus on fat prejudices as a manifestation of patriarchy has served to disguise more complex dimensions of the ways that fatness has been constructed” (Bell and McNaughton, 2007, p. 111).

**Why Fatness Matters to Boys and Men**

Men are increasingly feeling pressure to achieve a normatively sized and shaped body for both aesthetic and health reasons. In terms of aesthetics, the male body has been inserted into a “new kind of representational practice” (Gill, Henwood, and McLean, 2005, p. 38) within contemporary consumer culture, where it is increasingly positioned as an object to be gazed upon, desired, worked at, and beautified (Alexander, 2003; Bordo, 1999; Dworkin and Wachs, 2009; Nixon, 1997). Such constructions of the male body are only possible in the context of late modernity’s “somatic society” (Turner, 1992), where the body is positioned as the “principal field of political and cultural activity” (p. 12). Within this context, the body is constructed as an object to be manipulated through “cultural work” (Pronger, 1998), through procedures such as genetic engineering (Rose, 2007), plastic surgery (Atkinson, 2007; Davis, 2003; Gilman, 1999), sport science (Pronger, 2002), and nutritional science (Clark, 2008), into a cultural surface embodying normative class, gender, raced, and sexed identities. Technological advances, in other words, have given individuals unprecedented control over bodily surfaces and thus bodily surfaces (including body size and shape) have come to reveal something about the

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4 This is not to argue, however, that all individuals have equal access to bodily control. Financial and cultural resources differ across the population and thus so too does one’s ability to work on and transform the body into a desirable form (Bunton and Burrows, 1996). Some critics argue that the construction of the body as ‘plastic’ disproportionately applies to white, middle-class, males (hooks, 2004).
self. For example, the participants interpreted a well-toned, muscular male body as belonging to someone who “cares” about themselves (FG#3_2, Feb. 8, 2006). The shape and size of the body therefore acts as a representational surface that provides “inside information” (Moon and Sedgewick, 2001) about the real subject—what they eat, how much they exercise, their socio-economic background, and their status as a gendered, raced, and sexed subject, for example.

The emerging representational context that situates the male body as a surface to be gazed upon and desired means that men are increasingly judged by how their bodies look as opposed to what they do (Alexander, 2003; Bordo, 1999). Unlike traditional versions of dominant masculinity (Connell, 2005; Messner, 1992; Whitson, 1990), where men are culturally incited to treat their bodies as instrumental, emergent versions of “branded masculinity” (Alexander, 2003) are produced through cultural practices of consumption. Thus, at this historical moment we are witnessing an “extraordinary fetishization of muscles and muscularity in young men at precisely the moment that fewer traditionally manual jobs exist” (Gill, Henwood, and McLean, 2005, p. 40). The heightened cultural visibility of the male body within the context of consumer-oriented culture of late modernity has led young men to feel increasingly anxious about the appearances of their bodies, particularly its size and shape (Alexander, 2003; Bordo, 1999; Gill, Henwood, and McLean, 2005; Grogen, 2008; Grogen and Richards, 2002). From the preceding review of literature it is possible to see that the body, particularly body size and shape, are important symbolic markers of masculine identity. However, masculine aesthetics are not the only normalizing pressures confronting young men as they are also central targets of health promotion campaigns.
The assumption that boys and men are somehow immune from body weight ideals is all the more curious given the explosion of media attention surrounding the “obesity epidemic”. Experts warn that children and youth are facing an epidemic of obesity brought about by sedentary lifestyles and over consumption of calorie-rich foods (see Healthy Weights, Healthy Lives, 2004; Active Healthy Kids Canada, 2008). Thus, we are currently in a climate where fatness is not only vilified as an undesirable, unaesthetic, and non-normative mode of embodiment but as a medical pathology as well (Boreo, 2006; Murray, 2005). The “obesity epidemic” has particular resonance for boys and young men as obesity experts have identified them as being especially at risk of overweight and obesity (CLFRI, 2007; Flegal, 1999; Fox, 2004). The increased attention placed on boys and young men has led Wright and Burrows (2004) to call for greater research into how young men experience body size and shape given the biomedicalization of their bodies. Interrogations of how young people take up and make sense of their embodied identities through health discourse is all the more relevant given that obesity discourse has secured a prominent position in the health and physical education curriculum of Canadian schools (MacNeill, 2005).

The social sciences, however, have demonstrated a reluctance to commit to empirical research on everyday embodiments (Nettleton and Watson, 1998) generally and even less so the intersections between masculinity, embodiment, and health (Robertson, 2006; Watson, 2000). This dearth of empirical research comes at a time when the sociology of the body occupies a prominent position in the social sciences (Shilling, 2005). While there are a few notable exceptions (see Gill, Henwood, and McLean, 2005, 2000; Monaghan, 2001, 2005; Watson, 1998, 2000), the sociology of health and illness
carries on as though the male body is unaffected by health issues (Rosenfield and Faircloth, 2006). This dissertation goes some way to filling this research lacunae by qualitatively examining the everyday “vibrant physicality” (Monaghan, 2001) of seemingly “healthy” young men. It examines the manner in which health and body discourses provide a set of “cultural resources” (Edley, 2001; MacNeill, 2000) by which young men construct and make sense of their embodied identities. In particular, I am interested in the type of subjectivities made possible by “obesity epidemic” informed health discourse.

The “Obesity Epidemic”

This dissertation approaches the “obesity epidemic” from a discursive constructionist perspective. As such, I do not understand the “obesity epidemic” to be a “real” phenomenon, nor do I dispute its reality as others have (see Campos, 2004; Gard and Wright, 2005; Oliver, 2005), but approach it as a technology, or “an ensemble of knowledges and practices” (Cole, 1994, p. 15) that mobilizes a whole way of thinking, seeing, experiencing, talking about, and working on bodies. It constructs, in other words, a discursive fabric which makes certain things “thinkable and practicable” (Rose, 1999, p. xiii) and these thoughts and practices are constitutive of particular subjectivities. Thus, obesity discourse is not an oppressive force, it does not crush subjectivity, but is productive of particular types of subjects—“slender” and “obese” subjects; “healthy” and “unhealthy” subjects, “responsible” and “irresponsible” subjects. Central to this

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5 I use the term “health and body discourses” to get at the multiple discourses—including biomedical, popular culture, and other identity constituting discourses (i.e. gender and racial)—that converge on the male body in the construction of masculine embodiment. The use of this phrase helps to draw attention to the degree to which our understandings of health and normative embodiment are interpenetrating constructions influenced through power/knowledge relations emerging from numerous, sometimes unidentifiable locations. Sam Murray (2007) characterizes this multiple and interpenetrating relationship of knowledges as a “complex entanglement of medical science and popular perceptions of the body…[that] constantly draw on each other for power, authority, and veracity” (p.365).
dissertation is the assumption that “subjects...represent themselves to themselves in terms of languages available to them” (Rose, 1999, p. xix), including the languages made “available” through health discourse generally, and obesity discourse specifically. More than any other “apparatus or institution” health discourses serve as vehicles for thinking about and experiencing our bodies (Lupton, 1995). Thus, health and body discourses provide a powerful set of cultural resources by which individuals are able to construct themselves—and are constructed—as intelligible subjects.

While there has been an explosion of research and writing on the “obesity epidemic” in the biomedical sciences, scholarly attention in the social sciences is considerably less (Boero, 2006). With a few notable exceptions (see Burrows and Wright, 2004; Gard and Wright, 2001; McDermott, 2007; MacNeill, 2005; Monaghan, 2005, 2007; Murray, 2005, 2007; Rich and Evans, 2005), the abundance of obesity literature is emerging from a positivistic scientific perspective. Even those scholars that are examining the “obesity epidemic” from a social scientific perspective tend to do so theoretically rather than empirically. Thus, both the social sciences and the positivistic sciences tend to ignore how body weight is lived as an everyday reality. In other words, the lived realities, the voices of embodied subjects, are all but silenced in the “war on obesity” (see Monaghan, 2007 for notable exception). What remains to be investigated then is how health, obesity, and body discourses more generally are “actually taken up by children [and youth] in all of their diversity, an area of research that is currently yet to be cultivated” (McDermott, 2007). This dissertation goes some way to answering this call. I employ a variety of methodological techniques in an attempt to give “voice” to those who
remain “voiceless” in the cultural war that has been waged on the bodies of young people. The manner in which young people position themselves and others using the discursive tools made available within the context of the “obesity epidemic” is examined. A central assumption of this dissertation, however, is that “obesity epidemic” is not just a meaningful construct for the “obese”. Rather, all individuals—fat and skinny—take up and situate themselves in and through obesity discourse.

The “Skinny” on “Fatness”

All of the young men that participated in this research self-identified as “normal”, with some self-identifying as “skinny” or “too small”. This might seem like a curious research sample given that the purpose of this research is to interrogate how young men take up discourses related to fatness in the construction of their embodied sense of self. However, I do not see this as a contradiction at all. Indeed, the health and body discourses related to body size and shape are not limited to fat bodies, nor is the war on obesity limited to overweight and obese bodies. Rather, experts warn that “everyone, everywhere” (Gard and Wright, 2005) is at risk of obesity, regardless of body size and shape. Thus, the “obesity epidemic” represents what Boero (2006) refers to as a “postmodern epidemic”, where “medicalized phenomena lacking a clear pathological basis get cast in the language and moral panic of more ‘traditional’ epidemics” (p. 7).

Non-infectious, bodily conditions such as overweight and obesity are re-framed as

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6 Notions of “voice” and “voiceless” are problematic, as is the notion of the researcher providing voice to the silenced-Other (Alcoff, 1991-2; Smith, 1999). Young people are not passive nor silenced. However their voices are largely excluded from the cultural “war on obesity”, both in research settings and in public discourse. This dissertation sets out to re-address this silence even if in a small way.

7 In recognition of the discursive nature of chronological age categories, I use “boys” and “young men” interchangeably in this dissertation.

8 One participant identified as “chubby”, but his identification was fluid as on other occasions he labeled himself as “normal”. See “corporeal biographies” (Appendix G) for an extended discussion on the bodies of the participants.
diseases within the context of postmodern epidemics (MacNeill, 2005). Thus, moral panic \(^9\) erupts over body size and shape as opposed to specific etiology. Overweight and obesity are thus risk discourses that operate not on existent pathology but on the basis of probabilistic calculations of future pathologies. In other words, obesity discourse, as a technology of risk, does not require physical symptoms (i.e. obesity) for it to position bodies at risk, rather certain ways of life or lifestyles are also deemed risky. Expanding notions of risk that include lifestyle are part and parcel of broader strategies of (neo)liberalism where the responsibility for health and wellbeing is increasingly shifted from the state and downloaded onto the individual (Adele et al., 2003; Kelly, 2000, 2001). Thus, it is assumed that the individual makes a conscious choice between health and wellbeing, fatness and skinniness, attractiveness and ugliness, for example. With the neoliberalization of health, health and body discourses become powerful resources for understanding the self, not just for non-normative bodies, but for normative bodies as well. The lean, muscular, and attractive male body is inscribed with certain moral assumptions, as is the fat, loose, and unattractive male body. Individuals come to understand themselves in and through their bodies and their embodied practices, regardless of body size, shape, or appearance. The mostly “normal” or “skinny” kids that participated in the present research took up, understood, and articulated their embodied

\(^9\) In this dissertation “moral panic” is conceptualized using a poststructural sensibility as opposed to the more conventional Marxist framing of the term. With a Marxist articulation, the power bloc consciously produces representations of youth as out of control “folk devils” as a mechanism of gaining social control. In contrast, with poststructuralism there is no concerted effort by those in power. Rather, the discourse of moral panic around obesity emerges from multiple and diffuse sites and interest groups (i.e. media, consumer market, science, health promotion, parents, sports organizations) in a piecemeal fashion that ultimately congeals to form a “truth” about the bodies of young people, their lifestyles, and their health. With the discourse of moral panic around the size and shape of young people’s bodies, as well as their embodied practices (which, at other places in the dissertation, I refer to this as “obesism”), there are no clear battle lines (i.e. media vs. obese youth). Rather, young people themselves are constituted as subjects of a moral panic and, as a result, come to see and experience themselves in and through this lens.
identities in and through health, body, and obesity discourses. Obesity discourse was not irrelevant for the skinny boys, rather it was a constitutive component in their embodied sense of self as they pointed to their skinny bodies as markers of their “clean” and “healthy” living and thus moral superiority over the fat-Other. Thus, I explore fatness through the embodied perspectives of mostly “normal”, “skinny” boys.

**Purpose and Setting**

The purpose of this dissertation is fourfold:

- To explore the role the discourse of fatness plays in the constitution of young men’s (13-15 years) embodied sense of self;
- To explore how the young men take up health and body discourses in the process of forming culturally meaningful subjectivities;
- To examine how individuals located in diverse social and cultural locations take up and position themselves within health and body discourses;
- To produce knowledge that will help health experts—such as teachers, policy writers, researchers, and health care professionals—understand how their knowledges forcibly materialize certain subjectivities and with what effects.

The research was carried out at two locations. The first was a Toronto area community recreation centre which I have given the pseudonym “Pinevale”. Pinevale is located in a mixed income neighbourhood and most of its patrons were variously referred to by Community Centre staff as “poor”, “low income”, while the neighbourhood itself was generally referred to as “high needs”. Most of the patrons of Pinevale were visible minorities and of those who participated in the present research, all but one self-identified as first generation Canadian. The second research location was an exclusive private
school located in downtown Toronto, which I have called “Lawson”. In contrast to Pinevale, Lawson is an exclusive private school widely known for its academic excellence. With an annual tuition of $10 000 dollars and a challenging entrance exam, Lawson’s student body did indeed represent an exclusive population. While Lawson did offer scholarships for exceptional students who did not have the means to pay the pricey tuition, this information was restricted for the purposes of confidentiality, thus there was no way of telling the exact proportion of students who had received scholarships. Lawson’s excellent reputation drew students from around the city, thus it was difficult if not impossible to connect Lawson’s students with a particular community or neighbourhood. These two sites were selected because they represented two very different social and cultural locations, and I anticipated that this would allow for an analysis of how the uptake of health and body discourses was embedded in the social positioning of the participants.

In order to accomplish the objectives outlined above, the research was divided into three phases, including non-participant observation, photo(focus) groups, and one-on-one interviews. In total, 31 participants took part in the research project. There were 20 focus groups, 4 one-on-one interviews, and between the two sites, participant observations spanned from October 2005 to June 2006. I recruited participants aged 13-15 years, with the majority of participants being 15 years old. The dissertation is divided into ten chapters including this introduction. In the following section I briefly overview each of these chapters.

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10 See Appendix H for an extended discussion on the two research settings.
11 See Chapter #3 Methodology for an extended discussion on each of the phases of the research.
Overview

By way of introduction, I have briefly named my personal experiences with fatness and shared that these experiences do not line up with the common assumption that boys and men do not worry about fatness. Given the relative dearth of scholarly writing in the social sciences on the intersection of masculinity and fatness, it would appear as though the social sciences likewise assume that fatness is not a problem for masculinity. Using relevant literature, I argue that fatness is indeed important to men, both in terms of its embodied aesthetics as well as in relation to “healthfulness” and health identities. Thus, I build a case for studying the relationship between boys and fatness as a legitimate research field in its own right.

In the second chapter, I overview and piece together the key theoretical writings that inform this dissertation. In particular, I provide the reader with a sense of the Foucaultian theory that I use to examine how the embodied subjectivities of young men are forcibly materialized through health and body discourses. In addition, I articulate some of the key research terms and categories that are employed as analytical tools in subsequent chapters. This includes subjectivity\textsuperscript{12}, youth, masculinity, and fatness, to name a few.

The third chapter is the methodology chapter. Here, I unravel a lengthy description of the epistemological assumptions that informed all stages of the dissertation, including data collection, data analysis, and write up. I spend some time articulating my poststructural sensibility and justify it as an effective model for achieving the objectives of the research. In this chapter, I also spend some time reflexively

\textsuperscript{12}While I recognize there are differences in the epistemological assumptions underlining the terms “identity” and “subjectivity”, in this dissertation I use them inter-changeably.
considering how the politics of embodied social justice animate this research project. The final sections of this chapter elaborate on the more technical aspects of the dissertation’s research methods.

Chapter four is entitled “The Discourse of Fatness”. In this chapter, I demonstrate how the categories of body size (i.e. “fatness”, “obesity”, “overweight” etc.) are fluid, shifting, and diversely expressed across different research locations and amongst differently situated subjects. Thus, categories of body size exist at the crossroads of social and cultural location. Furthermore, categories of body size are not just constitutive of the bodies they name, but are at the same time constitutive of the subjects who are doing the naming. In other words, to identify and label the “obese” body is at the same time to position oneself in relation to the so-named Other. Moreover, obesity discourse does not operate exclusively at the level of intersubjective relations. I argue that obesity discourse is constructive of national borders and national identities. Finally, I demonstrate how communities from non-white, working class backgrounds construct shifting and performative notions of fatness.

In the fifth chapter, “Men, Masculinity, and Fatness”, I use the narratives of the participants to counter the commonly held notion that fatness is not a salient identity category for boys and men. Furthermore, this chapter fills an identified research gap in the social sciences by examining how young men take up and are constituted in and through health, body, and obesity discourses. I argue that much of the existent research on fatness and subjectivity—and fatness and masculinity more specifically—tends to
posit a universal humanist subject, and does not consider how experiences\textsuperscript{13} of fatness are always mediated through the prism of socio-cultural positioning (i.e. gender, race, sexuality, and age, for example). Unlike the intersections of femininity and fatness (Bordo, 1993; Hartley, 2001), I found that fatness is not necessarily inconsistent with socially dominant performances of masculinity. For example, the young men at Pinevale talked about the fat male body as both degenerate (i.e. lazy, unathletic, and unhealthy) \textit{and} as a positive embodiment of phallic masculinity (i.e. taking up space in sporting contexts, able to win fights etc.). Constructions of the fat male body, however, were contingent upon social location, with many of the young men from Lawson simply seeing the fat body as “unhealthy”.

Chapter six, “Obesity Discourse, Healthism, and the (Neo) Liberal Governmental Subject” offers an example of how health discourse is constructive of particular subjectivities. In this chapter, I take up McDermott’s (2007) call for greater research into how governmental power relayed through obesity discourse is taken up by young people. I argue that obesity discourse provides the young men in the present research with powerful resources by which to construct a controlled, rational, self-governing (neo)liberal subjectivity. In addition, I identified that youth were constructed as “incomplete” governmental subjects because it was assumed that parents were at least partially responsible for their size, shape, and health of their children. Thus, to a large extent a parent’s subjectivity was dependent on the size and shape of their children’s bodies. However, the participants talked about parental responsibility along gender lines,

\textsuperscript{13}“Experience” is not used here to reflect the psychic core of the individuated self, rather experience is conceptualized as constructed through “fields of knowledges, types of normativity, and forms of subjectivity in a particular culture” (Foucault, 1985, p. 4).
suggesting the responsibility for children’s bodies was disproportionately assumed to be a mother’s duty.

In the penultimate analysis chapter, “Masculinity and Health and Body Discourses”, I shift slightly from the focus on fatness and explore the relationship between “appearance” and masculinity. I demonstrate how the participants talked about embodied appearance (i.e. musculature, leanness, height etc.) as an important resource in the performance of normative masculinity. However, the young men were reluctant to explicitly state that the appearance of their bodies mattered to them and was worth “working on” because working on and worrying about the body was culturally coded as feminine (Bordo, 1999; Davis, 2003). I borrow Susan Bordo’s notion of the “double bind” to demonstrate how the young men discretely worked on and worried about their bodies by disguising such “feminine” practices within normatively masculine practices such as sport, health performances, and heterosexual relations all the while articulating a chilly aloofness to their embodiments.

In the final analysis chapter, “Competing Discourses”, I demonstrate how the young men narratively constructed a subject position for themselves and their embodied practices by splicing together and counter-posing the various discourses available to them. In other words, health discourse conflicts and contradicts with other social discourses, and the participants creatively and meaningfully capitalized on these contradictions to shore up a meaningful sense of self. For instance, rather than passively consuming the notion of video technology as a health “bad”, as public health discourse tends to do (see Active Healthy Kids Canada, 2008), some of the participants articulated how video games actually increased their sporting knowledge and strategy thus making
them better athletes and therefore more active, healthy subjects. In addition to competing discourses confronting the consumption of technology, the participants also spoke of other salient contradictions, including the binary opposition between “lifestyle” and “genetics”, and age-related contradictions.

The concluding chapter is designed to accomplish three tasks. First, it overviews the major findings of the analysis chapters. Secondly, it situates the dissertation within the context of existent research, specifically addressing the major contributions of the dissertation and how these develop and extend the field of knowledge related to the intersections of health, masculinity, and male embodiment. The third task of the conclusion is to provide a list of recommendations for further research.
CHAPTER TWO
THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

In this chapter I will overview some of the key theoretical concepts that will be employed throughout this dissertation. Given that the central objective of this research was to determine how obesity discourse was taken up by young men in the processes of forming meaningful embodied identities, Michel Foucault’s writings on the intersections of knowledge, power, and subjectivity are the focus of much of this chapter. Additionally, I overview relevant literature on the intersections of men, health, and embodiment thereby constructioning a theoretical lens through which to explore men’s embodied relationships, particularly in relation to body size and shape.

Foucaultian Theory

Michel Foucault’s “analytics of power” has had a significant impact on social theory. However, power has not been the objective of his life’s work; rather, his objective has been to “create a history of the different modes by which, in our culture, human beings are made subjects” (Foucault, 1982, p. 208) and, in so doing, he has exposed the complex intersections between power, knowledge, discourse, and subjectivity.

Power

Foucault argued that “the question of power remains a total enigma” (Foucault cited in Smart, 2002, p. 73). By this he was suggesting that political-philosophical conceptualizations of power are premised on the power of the Sovereign or what he also referred to as the juridico-Christian model of power. Here, power is understood as a possession of an individual or group that is exercised over the powerless and whose only force is the negative operation to deny, withhold, remove, exclude, or incarcerate in
accordance with the code of law or word of the Sovereign. In keeping with the metaphor of war, which is central to his writings, Foucault suggests that “we need to cut off the king’s head” (Foucault, 1980a, p. 121) and re-work power in terms other than Sovereignty, law, or prohibition.

This is not to deny the negative or prohibitive force of power, for that dimension of power is undeniable in its palpability, but to push us towards seeing the “positive mechanisms” of power “insofar as they produce knowledge, multiply discourse, induce pleasure” (Foucault, 1977, p. 73) and in so doing “subject our bodies, govern our gestures, dictate our behaviours” (Foucault, 1980e, p. 97). This new or modern power is productive and in this regard does not repress individuals and their behaviours, but is constitutive of them. Furthermore, this form of power does not reside in a centralized state apparatus, but circulates throughout the entire social body. It is a constant, regular, uninterrupted, localized power that takes hold of bodies at the level of their movements, practices, and experiences. In this sense, Foucault’s analytics of power is directed at the micro-politics of everyday life (McHoul and Grace, 1993). Foucault referred to this modern power as biopower. He characterized biopower as a life-administering power whose primary operation was not to “take life or let live”, as was the case with sovereign power, but was quite the opposite and sought to “‘make’ live and ‘let’ die” (Foucault, 2003, p. 241). Paul Rabinow and Nikolas Rose (2006) suggest that biopower is comprised of four elements, including: one or more “truth” discourses about the “vital” character of human beings; a group of widely recognized experts who speak this “truth”; a range of intervention strategies upon “collective existence in the name of life and health” (p. 195); and finally, modes of subjectification by which individuals intervene in
their own lives in the name of life and health. The “obesity epidemic”—with its biomedical truths about the relationship between body weight and health, host of professional experts, including obesity experts, health promoters, medical practitioners, and health educators, population health promotion campaigns in the form of school curricula and media broadcasts, along with its strategies of lifestyle management, including healthy eating and daily physical activity regimes—meets the four criteria of biopower that Rabinow and Rose (2006) outline. Thus, the “obesity epidemic” is a technology of biopower.

Biopower, or power over life, has two modalities, with mechanisms to both manage populations and discipline individuals. Together in biopower, disciplinary and regulatory power operate at the “level of detail and at the mass level” (p. 249) at the same time. Thus, biopower is simultaneously intensive, yet diffuse, omnipotent, and invisible, coercive, but subtle. To a large measure the efficacy of biopower is attributable to the degree to which it operates from disciplinary and regulatory poles concurrently.

By the beginning of the nineteenth century a new form of power had emerged which Foucault referred to as disciplinary power. Disciplinary power refers to a series of procedures that coerce, train, or discipline bodies. Central to the operation of disciplinary power is visibility, for if the subject is visible it is thus knowable, controllable, and therefore modifiable. The gaze and internalization are central components to the operation of visibility as a technique of power. Within a system of surveillance there is no need for arms, physical violence, material constraints. Just a gaze. An inspecting gaze, a gaze which each individual under its weight will end by interiorizing to the point that he is his own overseer, each individual thus exercising this surveillance over, and against, himself. (Foucault, 1980c, p. 155)
Individuals are inserted into an economy of visibility where each observes the other, monitoring gestures, behaviours, actions, and bodies in general, with the outcome being a more docile yet productive body. It must be noted, however, that technologies of visibility are not organized from a central authority figure nor is it a property or possession; rather, it operates as a machine that produces power by situating individuals into a social hierarchy of observation that is stabilized through the continued and mutual surveillance of self and other.

By the second half of the eighteenth century a new technology of power emerged “which problematized disease as an economic and political problem for societies” (Lupton, 2003, p. 34). Following the initial “seizure of power over the individual body in an individualizing mode, we have a second seizure of power that is not individualizing but, if you like, massifying, that is directed not at man-as-body but at man-as-species” (Foucault, 2003, p. 243). The population as a whole was the targeted for surveillance and thus disease became constituted in the social body rather than just the individual body, and deviant types were identified as needful of control for the sake of the health of the whole population. As a result, by the end of the early twentieth century everyone became a potential victim requiring careful monitoring. (Lupton, 2003, p. 34)

This new technology of power—or regulatory power—does not erase disciplinary power, but complements, integrates, and infiltrates it to the extent that it can be administered to accomplish its own objectives (Foucault, 2003). Unlike disciplinary power, which tries to control the population at the level of individual bodies that can be surveilled, trained, used, and punished, regulatory power focuses on the population as a “global mass” that is affected by the more general processes of life—such as birth, death, production, illness,
and so on. The concern of regulatory power, however, was not death per se, but those continuing factors that “sapped the population’s strength, wasted energy, and cost money, both because they led to a fall in production and because treating them was expensive” (p. 244). Within this technology, death ceases to be something that is conceived of as a sudden and final exit from life, but is more broadly situated as those factors that deaden the full productive actualization of the life of the population. For instance, obesity experts and commentators refer to the “costs” overweight and obesity pose to society in terms of workdays lost and increased health care costs due to health complications associated with excess body fat (see Miller, 2006; Hall, 2007). The regulatory effect of obesity discourse is to incite certain disciplinary practices (i.e. healthy eating and daily physical activity) within the lifestyle of the individual with the objective being to increase life expectancy and decrease morbidity through the production of a healthier, more efficient, less costly, docile population. Regulatory power operates through the collection of knowledge on the population in the form of general measures, statistics, and expert forecasts. This knowledge is than administered to the life of the species through implementing health, environmental, economic policies, and so on, designed to secure and stabilize the health, well-being and, ultimately, docility and productivity of the population.

Knowledge

Central to the operation of modern or biopower is the mutual elaboration between power and knowledge. Foucault writes that, power produces knowledge…power and knowledge directly imply one another…[and] there is no power relation without a correlative field of knowledge, nor any knowledge that does not presuppose and constitute at the same time power relations. (Foucault, 1977, p. 27)
Foucault displaces the privileged position of objective knowledge about the world by arguing that knowledge is the outcome of the struggles and contestations—in short, the power relations—that invest it. What we consider to be “truth,” therefore, should be more accurately understood as a product of the struggle between competing discourses (Weedon, 1997). But to say that “truth” is corrupted by power relations is only half the equation. The production of “truth” is in fact necessary to the operation of power.

The positivity of the power/knowledge circularity is best demonstrated in Foucault’s elaboration of “games of truth”. Here, he argued that “games of truth” are not about the discovery of real or true things, but the rules that govern the emergence of what comes to be understood as “true” or “real” (Foucault, 1980e). The production of “truth” governs how we see the world and ourselves in it and, therefore, shapes our very existence down to our most intimate everyday gestures. Foucault refers to the power/knowledge relationship as discourse. Discourse is a “group of statements which provide a language for talking about—a way of representing a knowledge about—a particular topic at a particular historical moment…Discourse is about the production of knowledge through language” (Hall, 1997, p. 44). For example, the knowledge claims made by obesity experts that correlate a high percentage of body fat with increased risk of heart disease, diabetes, and some forms of cancer has the “truth-effect” of producing health conscious citizens who chronically police their diets and exercise levels. This power/knowledge influences how people eat, move their bodies, conceive of themselves and see others. Moreover, it incites people to talk about their bodies—to transform their bodies into language—in specific ways that line up with prevailing obesity discourses. Thus, discourse constrains some statements and ways of being while enabling and
inciting others. To claim, for instance, that one is fat and happy, or perhaps even worse, fat and healthy, is to say the unsayable (Herndon, 2002). Such claims appear irrational within a discursive context where fatness has been pathologized in both bio-medical and popular cultural discourses. The knowledge/power relationship is productive of certain subjects, as I will explore in the following section.

**Subjectivity**

The power/knowledge nexus is central to understanding the degree to which the power of the subject or, more specifically, the power to produce oneself as a particular kind of subject, necessitates that an individual subject themselves to knowledge. The power of the subject is in this sense paradoxical in that it always requires a subjection to power/knowledge. Judith Butler (1995) suggests that the “very ‘conditions of existence,’ the possibility of continuing as a recognizable social being, requires the formation and maintenance of the subject in subordination” (cited in Davies, 2006b, p. 163). In other words, it is not that the individual pre-exists power, but that in order to be an intelligible subject at all, the individual must, in the first place, subject and re-subject themselves to power/knowledge relations as the constitutive conditions of their intelligibility. Subjectivity is thus the effect of power/knowledge relations, or what Foucault referred to as “technologies”.

Technologies refer to the ensemble of knowledges—the truths—humans develop about themselves and their worlds. Technologies of the body shape, condition, discipline, and inscribe the body (Cole, 1994) by transforming bodies into quantifiable objects of knowledge that can be measured, calculated, known, and therefore worked on and controlled. The human body becomes a technical problem that, through the acquisition
and application of knowledge, can be manipulated and administered into a body that is at the same time economically useful and politically docile (Foucault, 1995). Foucault refers to the processes by which an individual takes up, negotiates, and/or resists particular technologies in the constitution of a stable sense of self as technologies of the self.

Technologies of the Self

Many Foucaultian commentators argue that there are three Foucaults (Lupton, 1997; Smart, 2002), or at least three distinct stages in his writings. Foucault himself acknowledged that his early writings tended to focus more on “techniques of domination,” but he increasingly found himself interested in the “technologies of individual domination, in the mode of action that an individual exercises upon himself [sic] by means of the technologies of the self” (Foucault, 1997, p. 225). Stuart Hall (1996), commenting on the later work of Michel Foucault, recognizes that it is not enough for disciplinary power to “summon, discipline, produce and regulate, but there must also by a corresponding production of a response…from the side of the subject” (p. 12). It is to the “practices of subjective self-constitution” (Hall, 1996, p. 13), or technologies of the self, that I now turn.

Technologies of the self refer to those voluntary practices that the individual engages in the process of making the best possible self (Lupton and Tulloch, 1998). Foucault characterized technologies of the self as a series of techniques which permit individuals to effect by their own means, or with the help of others, a certain number of operations on their own bodies and souls, thoughts, conduct, and way of being, so as to transform themselves in order to attain a certain state of happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection, or immortality. (p. 25)
With technologies of the self, Foucault moves away from a conceptualization of disciplinary power as a “fully monolithic force which saturates all social relations” (McNay cited in Hall, 1996, p. 12). Instead, he theorizes the self as formed through a relationship of “games of truth…of the self with the self” (Foucault, 1985, p. 6). In other words, the individual learns to relate to her/himself through employing a number of techniques of “self-decipherment or self-problematization” (Martino, 2003, p. 162) designed to elicit the truth of her or his existence. This self-discovery, which is often facilitated by expert interpretation, ultimately produces “categories of the person” (Martino, 2003, p. 164) such as the sexual pervert, the hysterical woman, and the masturbating child, as Foucault (1978) discusses, or more contemporary categories of healthy/unhealthy and slender/obese. The subject is formed in relation to the prevailing technologies available within a particular discursive regime for working on and fashioning an embodied sense of self. However, not all individuals take up regimes of truth/discourse in the same way. People are not passive automatons, rather individuals have their own biographies and set of circumstances that impact how they receive, make sense of, and take up these “truths” (Wright, O’Flynn, and MacDonald, 2006). A theory of “technologies of the self” helps to account for the different and complex ways in which people relate to “truth” discourses in the process of constituting the self.

For instance, the deployment of specific bio-medical discourses about body size is a normalizing set of practices where the individual is incited to relate to self as a particular kind of self (Bordo, 1993; Gard and Wright, 2001; Murray, 2005; Wright, et al., 2006). With the medicalization of everyday life the “patient” or the embodied subject is incited to reveal their bodies both through the medical examination and through
recounting of their body’s history (Lupton, 2003). In this regard, body fat and its
discursivization through popular media, interpersonal relationships, and biomedicine
offers a set of culturally specific frameworks, or a grid of cultural intelligibility for
deciphering who we are as particular kinds of subjects. Within this grid, the self fits along
a continuum of body sizes, with the normatively slender body being privileged.
Disciplinary technologies are by no means homogeneous, but inconsistent and
contradictory which, consequently, opens room for the self, through “practices of the
self”, to exercise a sort of agency in constituting a preferred self (Shogan, 1999). Because
technologies of the self takes into consideration both the biography and life
circumstances of the individual, as well as the multiple and contradictory “truth”
discourses that are in circulation, it proves to be a helpful theory in articulating why an
individual would take up some discourses, while resisting others (Lupton, 1995; Wright
et al., 2006).

Subject Positions

Discourse necessarily produces subject positions. Harding (1998) writes that
“discourses are comprised of statements which must be spoken from somewhere and by
someone, and this speaking entails assignment of a subject position” (p. 20). Central to
the poststructural analysis of subjectivities is the notion of “positioning”. Davies (2000)
defines positioning as the “discursive process whereby selves are located in the
conversations as observably and subjectively coherent participants in jointly produced
storylines” (p. 91). In order to produce storylines about oneself and others, people must
learn the ways of being and seeing made possible by the various discursive practices of
the social group of which they are members (Davies, 2000). It involves a process of not
just learning the language of the group, but also the ability to fully and correctly engage in reading, interpreting, and responding to the social world more broadly through the skillful use of available discursive practices.

The positioning of oneself, however, should not be thought of as a completely intentional act. As Davies (2000) points out, “one lives one’s life in terms of one’s ongoingly produced self, whoever might be responsible for its production” (p. 91). Not all individuals have equal access to the resources that enable them to position themselves (Davies, 2000; Wright, 2004), similarly, not all subject positions are equally valued in all social contexts (Wright, 2004). Some bodies are more constrained or overdetermined by race, sexuality, body size, social class and so, such that they are already positioned in prevailing discursive practices and, consequently, have less room or resources for self-positioning.

Discourse constructs both the speaking subject and that of which the subject speaks. For example, the obesity expert who writes a journal article on obesity simultaneously constructs and stabilizes his or her subject position as an expert as well as subjecting the object of his or her research, the obese person, to the “truth-effects” of their knowledge. From this example we can see that the “knowledge a discourse produces constitutes a kind of power exercised over those who are “known’” (Hall, 1996, p. 205). Moreover, it is possible to discern how this knowledge constructs both the expert or the subject of the knowledge—the knower—and the object of the knowledge—the known—and that this is an unequal power relationship. Therefore, we should ask questions about what discourses are enacted in a particular statement, what subjectivities these discourses bring into play, and who is privileged and who is subjugated by such discourses?
Governmentality and Risk

Governmentality is the term Michel Foucault uses to describe a power relation over free subjects who have multiple options available to them (Smart, 2002). Governmentality is an “art of government” (Davies and Bansel, 2007, p. 248) that simultaneously individualizes and totalizes power relations by merging technologies of discipline and technologies of the self (Lupton, 1997; McDermott, 2007). Significantly, governmentality does not achieve its ends through domination or authoritarian rule, rather it operationalizes a field of knowledge that effectively “structure[s] the possible field of action” of free and autonomous subjects (Foucault, 1982, p. 221). Governmental power is thus “exercised only over free subjects, and only insofar as they are free” (Foucault, 1982, p. 221). Freedom is essential to the operation of governmental power because it sets out to normalize and construct a subject who is autonomous, self-directed, and self-regulated. The self-directed, self-regulated subject is thus responsible for their own self-realization, thereby relieving the state of its direct responsibility for its citizens. In this sense, governmental power is not be confused with traditional structures of legislative “government” or the power of the state, rather the “state only appears as one element…in multiple circuits of power, connecting a diversity of authorities and forces within a whole variety of complex assemblages” (Rose, 1999, p. xxi). Nevertheless, the emergence and intensification of neoliberal forms of state governance at the close of the twentieth century and in the first decade of the twenty first century have influenced the modality of governmental power.

The neo-liberal state is characterized by an intensification of free markets as regulators of economic development; increased skepticism over the capacity of
centralized governments to govern; and the replacement of the collectivism of the “welfare state” by an autonomous, rational, self-governing citizenry (Davies and Bansel, 2007; Petersen, 1997). Within this context, a form of “(neo)liberal governmentality” has emerged where citizens are re-conceptualized not as wards of the state, but as “‘free’, entrepreneurial’, competitive and (economically) rational individuals” (Kelly, 2001, p. 29). The ethical subject within the context of (neo)liberal governmentality is one who freely and rationally conducts his or her existence, while accepting responsibility for outcomes of his or her choices. However, the “freedom” of (neo)liberal governmentality is always a constrained freedom or a “regulated autonomy” (Petersen, 1997, p. 193), for there are preferred ways of being and conducting oneself. (Neo)liberal governmentality, then, entails the dual movement of “autonomization and responsibilization” (Rose, 1999, xxiii) where individuals simultaneously have more freedom to choose their “lifestyle” within the context of new forms of social control. Central to these new forms of control—and thus (neo)liberal governmentality—is the accumulation and dissemination of expert knowledge.

Experts and expertise are integral to governmentality (Lupton, 1995). Governmentality relies on knowledge—or the “truth”—about the populations it seeks to govern as a constitutive component of its operation. Nikolas Rose (1999) observes that, to make calculations about a population necessitates the highlighting of certain features of that population as the raw material of calculation, and requires information about them. Knowledges here takes a very physical form, it requires the transcription of such phenomena as a birth, a death, a marriage, an illness, the number of persons living in this or that house, their types of work…into material upon which political calculation can work. Calculation, that is to say, depends upon processes of ‘inscription’, which translates the world into material traces: written reports, drawings, maps, charts and, pre-eminently, numbers. (p. 6)
Such calculations or inscriptions produce new regimes of truth that enable a new technique of government, whereby the individual is confronted by the “truth” of his or her existence (i.e. unhealthy, corrupt, unproductive ways) and is presented with a series of possibilities for change (i.e. producing oneself as healthy and productive). Thus, governmental effects are not only accomplished through the threat of the law, violence, or coercion in extreme circumstances, but are more commonly achieved by way of “persuasion inherent in truths, the anxieties stimulated by its norms, and the attraction exercised by the images of life and self it offers to us” (Rose, 1999, p. 10). Thus, governmental power operates on the conduct of others through encouraging, inciting, persuading, and seducing some modes of conduct, while simultaneously discouraging, pathologizing, and constraining others. Over the course of the last century, risk discourse has emerged as a particularly effective technology of governmentality (Petersen, 1997).

Risk has become a central cultural construct in everyday life of western societies (Lupton, 1995). Risk discourses are “a strategy, a rationale, and a technique deployed to govern a population” (McDermott, 2007, p. 317). Risk is effective as a technology of governmentality to the degree that it shifts the focus from deviant populations or, in the case of health promotion, diseased and ill bodies, to abstract, measurable risk factors. Petersen (1997) writes that “by focusing not on individuals but on factors of risk, statistical correlations of heterogeneous elements, the experts have multiplied the possibilities for preventive intervention” (p. 193). Preventive intervention, keep in mind, is not necessarily to be found in the state sanctioned institutions (i.e. hospitals, courts, prisons, schools etc) as it once was but, within a neoliberal state, prevention circulates through the entire social body, where teachers, social workers, public and private
bureaucrats, parents, and community action groups are all working towards constructing the self-governing subject (Lupton, 1995). Here, the goal is “constructing and normalizing a certain kind of subject; a subject who is autonomous, directed at self-improvement, self-regulated, desirous of self-knowledge” (Lupton, 1995, p. 11). Risk discourse then, works to produce a subject who is both active, free-thinking, and independent from the welfare state at the same time as they are responsible for their own health, prosperity, and wellbeing.

Risk discourse is especially prominent in the discipline of health promotion (Lupton, 1995), and is often targeted at youth (Kelly, 2000; 2001). Within the context of health promotion, risk discourse is aimed less at treating illness and disease and more at preventing its occurrence in the first place. In shifting the focus from “curing” to “preventing” disease and illness, risk discourse operates on the foundational assumption that “individuals control their own health destinies” (Wheatley, 2005, p. 199). It is assumed that once expert knowledge identifies potential health risks the individual will act responsibly in the construction of an “at risk self” (Leahy and Harrison, 2004) that strives to minimize risk. Thus, risk discourse encourages and incites particular health behaviours (i.e. healthy eating and exercise) as part of the duties and responsibilities of being a good citizen in a neoliberal context. Risk discourse thus outlines “good” and “bad”, or “healthy” and “unhealthy” health behaviours, and therefore can be referred to as a “moral technology” (Wheatley, 2005).

However, not all subjects are equally positioned to take control of their “health destinies” (Lupton, 1995; Rose, 1999). Social structural factors such as material resources, race, gender, and (dis)ability powerfully structure an individual’s ability to
conform to normalized risk behaviours. Regardless of structural inequities, all individuals are culturally compelled by risk discourse to make something of themselves. Nikolas Rose (1999) writes that,

the self is not merely enabled to choose, but obliged to construe a life in terms of its choices, its powers, and its values. Individuals are expected to construe the course of their life as the outcome of such choices, and to account for their lives in terms of the reasons for those choices. Each of the attributes of the person is to be realized through decisions, justified in terms of motives, needs and aspirations, made intelligible to the self and others in terms of the unique but universal search to find meaning and satisfaction through the construction of a life for oneself. (p. 231)

Thus, the individual is held responsible for the outcomes of their decisions, no matter how constrained and inequitable those decisions may have been; choices are understood as emerging from a core psychological self, while material circumstance and social positioning are obscured from the equation. In short, through “care of the self”, the individual is understood to be the architect of their own destiny and all factors that fall outside individual control are considered irrelevant.

Within the context of the “obesity epidemic”, physical inactivity and obesity are positioned as health risks (Gard and Wright, 2005; Rich and Evans, 2005) and thus are technologies of risk that compel certain ways of being and subjectivities. Kelly (2000) argues that crisis discourse of youth at risk enables and constrains particular ways of thinking about and acting upon youth. For instance, Gard and Wright (2005) argue that increasingly it is difficult, if not impossible, to think of childhood and adolescence outside of the trope of the “couch potato”. Lisa McDermott (2007) suggests that the “strategic representation of childhood inactivity and obesity as epidemics thus involves a discourse of risk and creates a sociopolitical climate that legitimizes mobilizations, interventions, and modes of regulation” (p. 313) by health experts. Thus, childhood
obesity discourse can be seen as more than just a health concern over the well-being of children and youth, but also a “strategy, rationale, and technique deployed to govern” (p. 317) both the individual bodies of young people as well as the larger body politic. What is needed, argues McDermott, is an analysis of how “governmental efforts are actually taken up by children in all of their diversity” (p. 318). In other words, more empirical research is needed to examine how young people take up and position themselves in and through health and obesity discourse.

**Healthism**

Crawford (1980) characterizes “healthism” as an ideology or belief system that understands health to be the personal responsibility and moral obligation of the individual. Such an ideology is only possible in a social context where it is believed that individuals have control over their bodies and, consequently, over the health of their bodies. Whereas at one time the body was thought to be more or less fixed in nature, increasingly it is conceptualized as a plastic form that is to be worked on and manipulated into a desirable end product (Featherstone, 1991; Shilling, 2005). Our contemporary consumer culture and healthist approaches to the body and its health maintain that if the body is the material manifestation of individual will-power, than it is only reasonable to assume that its external appearance provides some sort of intimate information about the person (Bordo, 1993; Shilling, 2005). A good person, the logic goes, would have a tight, beautiful, healthy body, whereas pathology would be visibly marked onto the surface of the body, perhaps in the form of fat, baldness, or disability (Gilman, 1985). So powerful

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14 For the purposes of consistency, I will refer to “healthism” as a discourse, meaning that “healthism” is a body of knowledge or group of statements that constrains the ways of acting, thinking, and experiencing “health”. Healthism discursively positions individuals within its grid of intelligibility and thus healthism is productive of particular subjectivities (i.e., the healthy/unhealthy, normal/abnormal, able-bodied/disabled, or slender/fat).
is this logic that all social determinants beyond the control of the individual are obscured and responsibility for one’s body and its health is placed squarely on the shoulders of the individual (White, Young, and Gillet, 1995). Increasingly neither nature nor governments are held accountable for the well-being of the individual, nor is consideration given to social factors—such as poverty, level of education, racism, gender discrimination, or size discrimination—when attributing blame for health, body shape, and appearance, rather the onus falls exclusively on the individual. Increasingly we feel resentment and hostility towards those who are different because they have failed to take control of their bodies and lives and, in the end, burden our health care systems and the rest of us “normal” people. Once again, such discriminatory reactions to difference only make sense within a milieu where it is believed that individuals can control their health and their bodies. The body is read for the amount of labor that goes into its production, where a tight, flat, stomach or toned, muscular arms, for example, are representative of the amount of work that goes into the production of a particular “cultural body” (Pronger, 1998), or a culturally meaningful body, that meets normative gender, racial, and social class ideals. This process of submitting oneself to social, cultural, and medical standards of normativity is what Foucault refers to as subjectification, a concept I overview in the following section.

**Subjectification**

Michel Foucault characterizes his life’s work as “a history of the modes by which...human beings are made subjects” (Foucault, 1982, p. 208). To accomplish such a task it was necessary for Foucault to “reject a priori theories of the subject in order to analyze the relationships that may exist between the constitution of the subject or
different forms of the subject and games of truth, practices of power, and so on” (Foucault, 1997, p. 290). In this move, Foucault disputes the subject as an essential self, rather situating the subject as the effect of power/knowledge relations. This shift from the subject as “truth” towards the subject as discursively constituted has had a profound effect on social theory. That said, Foucault’s theories of the subject tend to focus on those broad discursive shifts across time which have structured the historical conditions of possibility, but he has given relatively little consideration to the everyday discursive relations that form the subject (Davies, 2006a). Judith Butler’s (1990; 1993; 1996; 2004) work, on the other hand, takes up Foucault’s conceptualization of the subject and examines how subjectification “works on and in the psychic life of the subject” (Davies, 2006a, p. 426). In this section I want to examine the work of Judith Butler which, as I have mentioned, is heavily influenced by Foucaultian theories of the subject.

Davies (2001) defines “subjectification” as the “processes through which we are subjected, and actively take up as our own the terms of subjection” (cited in Davies, Rocco, Taguchi, McCann, 2001, p. 167). Thus, the agentic subject is formed, and re-formed, inside the various regimes of truth that are prevalent at a particular historical moment. Power, in this conceptualization of the subject, is not externally imposed on the subject, rather it the very constitutive matrix of the subject. Judith Butler describes this relationship between power and the subject in the following way.

We are used to thinking of power as what presses on the subject from outside...But if, following Foucault, we understand power as forming the subject as well as providing the very conditions of its existence and the trajectory of its desire, than power is not simply what we oppose but also, in a strong sense, what we depend on for our existence and what we harbor and preserve in the beings that we are. (Butler, cited in Davies, 2006b, p. 426)
Power relations, in this sense, do not simply oppress us—although power certainly privileges some bodies while oppressing others—but set the very conditions of possibility for the subject. Therefore, in order to exist as a speaking, autonomous subject, one must submit to the constitutive cultural relations of power. Thus, there is no subject standing outside power, rather power acts as the very conditions that enable the existence of the subject, albeit in a particularly constrained manner.

This double movement of being acted upon as the conditions of acting is central to understanding subjectification (Davies, 2006b). Butler talks about this duality in terms of the simultaneity of mastery and submission. She suggests that we need to challenge the assumptions underlying the humanist subject as a rational, autonomous, masterful self, and expose the manner in which self-mastery is dependent on a concurrent submission to power. Of this relationship Butler writes,

The more a practice is mastered, the more fully subjection is achieved. Submission and mastery take place simultaneously, and it is this paradoxical simultaneity that constitutes the ambivalence of subjection. Where one might expect submission to consist in a yielding to an externally imposed dominant order, and to be marked by a loss of control and mastery, it is paradoxically marked by mastery itself…; the lived simultaneity of submission as mastery, and mastery as submission, is the condition of possibility for the subject itself. (Butler, 1995, p. 116)

Mastery and submission, in Butler’s account, are not mutually exclusive activities, as we so often assume, but rather are mutually constitutive movements in the formation of the subject. Therefore, to achieve autonomy and self-mastery, attributes that are deemed essential to the rational, humanist subject, it is necessary to successfully submit oneself to the constitutive matrix of power relations that form the subject. Thus, ambivalence is at the core of subjectification, simultaneously enabling and constraining our choices, behaviours, desires, and ways of speaking. However, in order to achieve the façade of the
self-masterful subject—the freely choosing humanist self that is so privileged in modern western cultures (Grosz, 1994; Davies and Bensel, 2007; Smith, 1999)—the subject must renounce those constitutive power relations.

The power relations that are constitutive of the subject remain concealed thus giving the subject the appearance of agency\textsuperscript{15}. Any trace or suggestion that the subject is not completely self-constitutive is scandalous and potentially de-subjectifying. Hence, the “agentic subject disavows this dependency, not out of a flawed capacity for reflexivity, but because the achievement of autonomy, however illusory it might be, is necessary for the accomplishment of oneself as a recognisable and viable subject” (Davies, 2006b, p. 427). By disavowing the conditions of possibility that precede the formation of the subject, choices, behaviours, and all manner of being are assumed to flow from and serve to authenticate the illusion of a self-contained “identity”. In opposition to this perspective, the post-structuralist position understands the subject to emerge from a set of discursive practices that bring into existence the agentic self (Davies, 2000). Therefore, to achieve the appearance of “autonomy” and “identity” is to successfully master and submit to the constitutive matrix, while at the same moment denying and concealing all traces of dependence on any forces outside of the “self”.

The repudiation of power relations outside of the self can be seen in everyday statements that seemingly connote “personal choice”. For example, the statement, “Personally, I would like to be slimmer” reads as a matter of “personal preference,” as a

\textsuperscript{15}Browyn Davies (2000) points out that her use of terms such as “agency”, “choice”, and “positioning” have drawn criticism from theorists suggesting that such terms infer a prediscursive humanist subject, a construct that is inconsistent with her poststructural writings. In response to such criticisms, Davies writes that her use of these terms, and the acts they imply, do not “spring from an essential prediscursive self but rather are constituted in humanist discourses through which subjects (mis)take themselves to be ‘choosing,’ ‘positioning’” (p. 133) humanist subjects. In other words, we experience ourselves as agentic, humanist subjects and, according to Foucault, this is one of the primary dissimulations of power.
thought that expresses some internal and individuated core self, rather than a regulated discursive speech act that draws upon broader gender ideals (i.e., to be feminine is to be slim) and, in so doing, is productive of a particular embodied subjectivity. Bronwyn Davies (2000) eloquently articulates how “personal choice” is never simply an expression of the agentic subject:

Choices are understood as more akin to “forced choices,” since the subject’s positioning within particular discourses make the “chosen” line of action the only possible action, not because there are no other lines of action but because one has been subjectively constituted through one’s placement within that discourse to want that line of action. (p. 60)

The constraints of discursive practices are not experienced as oppressive, but rather expressive of an illusory core self. Therefore, the desire to be “slimmer” is thought to be expressive of “who I really am,” rather than a culturally compelled reiteration of normative gender ideals. In this example it is not just that the speaking subject is submitting to these culturally constrained conditions of gendered possibility, but that their very agency as a speaking subject is dependent on the more or less successful submission to such gender norms. Taking ownership of the discursive practices that insert us into binarized hierarchies of oppression and privilege (i.e., gender, sex, and race) as if they were a “natural” manifestation of a core, ontological self is essential to achieving the status of a humanist subject.

The poststructuralist theory of Foucault, Butler, and their disciples refuse to assume a core, essentialized self. Rather, they understand the stable self to be an illusory outcome of a set of elaborate “process[es] of essentialization” (Nayak and Kehily, 2006). For Judith Butler (1999), the subject is produced through various discursively regulated practices. Hence, she argues that the “subject has no ontological status apart from the
various acts which constitute its reality” (p. 173). Butler’s subject, therefore, is a “type of
doing that is only made manifest at the point of action” (Nayak and Kehily, 2006, p. 259).
To this end, Butler shifts from the relatively anemic language of “constructionism”
(Rose, 1999) to the more tangible language of “materialization”.

**Materialization**

For Judith Butler it is not simply that the practices of the subject are constrained
by discourse, but that those constrained practices actually give rise to the materiality of
the embodied subject. In other words, Butler (1993) re-thinks the materiality of the body
as an outcome of power, a “sedimented effect of a reiterative or ritual practice” (p. 10).
Thus, for example, Butler does not understand “sex” to be a “simple fact or static
condition of the body, but a process whereby regulatory norms materialize “sex”” (p. 2).
To re-think the material contours of the body itself as the sedimented effects of power is a
truly radical discursive constructionist approach that warrants further explanation. Butler
suggests that *both* sex and gender are culturally compelled categories. She writes,

> The category “sex” is, from the start, normative; it is what Foucault has called a
> “regulatory ideal”. In this sense, then, “sex” not only functions as a norm, but is
> part of a regulatory practice that produces the bodies it governs, that is, whose
> regulatory force is made clear as a kind of productive power, the power to
> produce—demarcate, circulate, differentiate—the bodies it controls. Thus, “sex”
> is an ideal construct which is forcibly materialized through time. (1993, p. 1)

In Butler’s formulation of materiality it becomes impossible to think of gender as a social
construction imposed on an inert material body. Rather, the sexed body itself is an effect
of power or, to use Butler’s language, a materialization\(^{16}\) of a regulatory norm.

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\(^{16}\) In conceptualizing embodiment, I have opted to use feminist poststructural theorists such as Judith
Butler, Browyn Davies, and Deborah Lupton. Butler argues that the materiality of the body needs to be
rethought of as the materialization of a set of regulatory norms. Thus, the material body is constituted in
and through the “forcible reiteration of these norms” (1993, p. 2) such that the body’s sex, gender, size,
There are two key points that need to be highlighted when discussing Butler’s theory of materialization. The first is that there is no “agent” that preexists or stands at the centre of the materializing process. The second point is that the materialization of a regulatory ideal is not a singular process, but rather a reiterative set of practices; in short, it is an ongoing process. These points are clearly articulated in Butler’s theorizations on the materialization of gendered bodies.

For Butler, the gendered body is discursively constituted. This conceptualization of gender dismisses the notion of gender—or human subjectivity, for that matter—as emanating from a psychological core self, and rather situates it in what Judith Butler (1990; 1993) refers to as gender performativity. Performativity is quite simply defined as the “power of discourse to produce effects through reiteration” (Butler, 1993, p. 20). In terms of gender performativity, the reiterative effects that are produced are the seemingly “natural” contours of the material, gendered body itself. Thus, a dominant gender discourse that maintains that a proper masculinity is a “forceful, space-occupying” (Whitson, 1990) embodiment compels a particular set of performatives that are consistent with the production of such an embodiment, including, perhaps, the energetic participation in male contact sports, weight-bearing exercises to build bulk, and healthy appetite to gain size. The end result is a large masculine frame that occupies physical and cultural space in a particularly aggressive and dominating manner (Pronger, 1999). To many, this seems to be the natural outcome of biological and psychological maleness. For Butler, however, this body is in fact the effect of a reiterated set of practices compelled through gender discourse. She argues against the notion of an internal biological and

shape, race, age, and so on, are not static conditions of the body, but rather are the outcomes of “reiterative and citational practice[s] by which discourse produces the effects it names” (p. 2).
psychological self, instead suggesting that a gender consciousness, and the direct material purchase it gains over the body, is the effect of culturally compelled surface performances, not the other way around.

For Elizabeth Grosz (1994), these gender performatives involve writing the material body into a situated existence. She uses the analogy of the body as text and socio-cultural power relations as pen which, for the purposes of Butler’s argument, hold value if we consider Grosz’s pen as a set of reiterative and compelled gender performances that mark the body into a particular gendered material being. Of this relationship, Grosz writes,

This analogy between the body and a text remains a close one: The tools of body engraving—social, surgical, epistemic, disciplinary—all mark, indeed, constitute, bodies in culturally specific ways; the writing instruments—pen, stylus, spur, laser beam, clothing, diet, exercise—function to incise the body’s blank page. These writing tools use various inks with different degrees of permanence, and they create textual traces that are capable of being written over, retraced, redefined, written in contradictory ways, creating out of the body text a palimpsest, a historical chronicle of prior and later traces, some of which have been effaced, others of which have been emphasized, producing the body as a text which is as complicated and indeterminate as any literary manuscript. The messages or texts produced by this body writing construct bodies as networks of meaning and social significance, producing them as meaningful and functional “subjects” within social ensembles. (p. 117)

What is particularly useful about Grosz’s description is the emphasis she places on the material production of a particular body—its size, shape, and strength, for example—as not being a product of nature, but rather as the effects of historical and cultural corporeal writings. In the writings of both Grosz and Butler the body is displaced from its ontological status and is inserted into the realm of the socio-cultural. Thus, claims of female physical and emotional inferiority, or male forcefulness and intellectual rationality, for example, are pried away from their ontological foundations and are
exposed as particular discursive constructions that insert bodies into binarized hierarchies of privilege and oppression.

Bronwyn Davies (2000) notes that not all subjects have the same material and cultural resources at their disposal and, thus, nor do they have the same capacity to “resist, subvert, and change” those power relations that shape their ontological being. Put simply, not all bodies are created equally. Indeed, the materialization of difference is crucial to the subjectification process. Some bodies are marked as gendered, raced, sized, and classed, while other bodies appear as “the norm”, or unmarked and simply “human”. Thus, the white, middle class, heterosexual male is represented as the quintessential “agent,” while women, children, the queer, the poor, and the racialized have to struggle to gain a recognizable human subjectivity. The norm plays a pivotal function in the materialization of bodies.

**Materializing the Norm**

The “norm” is fundamental to poststructural notions of subjectivity. Debra Shogan (1999) reminds the reader that the concept “normal” is a relatively recent historical construction that enters the English language around the middle of the eighteenth century with the emergence of the science of statistical probability. Increasingly, the science of statistics has replaced the rule of the sword in production of the docile body. In other words, the “norm” is essential to disciplining and regulating the population as it replaces the need for violent, coercive, deductive demonstrations of sovereign power with the productive power of power/knowledge (Foucault, 1978). In the latter form, power is embedded in a “society of normalization” where “there is a constant pressure to conform to the same model, so that they might all be…like one another”
The norm operates by establishing a field of intelligibility by allowing for “certain kinds of practices and actions to become recognizable as such, imposing a grid of legibility on the social and defining the parameters of what will and will not appear within the domain of the social” (Butler, 2004, p. 42). Shogan (1999) is more specific in her articulation of the productive power of normalization:

Far from being a neutral, objective enterprise, statistics is a discourse that has produced meaning about ‘normalcy’ and ‘abnormalcy,’ ‘ability’ and ‘disability,’ influenced the creation of categories such as ‘intelligent,’ ‘deviant’…and supported the differentiation of ‘normal’ behaviours by gender, sexuality, race, class, and ability in many different social contexts from classrooms to playgrounds, from boardrooms to factory floors. Notions such as ‘success,’ ‘competence,’ ‘excellence,’ ‘merit’ and ability acquire meaning only in the contexts in which some skills, attributes, or characteristics are valued more than others. (p. 50)

Thus, the operation of normalizing power centres around the identification of “normal” and “abnormal” bodies. According to Shogan, once the “normal” has been established, experts are than able to intervene and normalize the abnormal by subjecting him or her to a battery of tests, procedures, and regimes, all of which are designed to control and submit deviance to the rule of sameness. Individuals are not passively subjected to the normalizing designs of the so-called “experts”. Indeed, the desire to be “normal” wields considerable disciplinary force and most of us actively strive to occupy the position of the “normal,” with varying degrees of success.

Although Shogan (1999)—and, to some extent, Foucault (1977)—tend to emphasize the role of the “expert” or authority figure in norming the non-normal, the power relations of normalization are not nearly so centralized. Rather, the power of normalization is enacted by all of us in such diffuse and seemingly mundane gestures as a
casual everyday comment, a surveilling gaze, or manner of dress and mode of conduct. Each instance is simultaneously constituted by a particular regime of normalization and, in turn, constitutive of a regime of normalization. Therefore, the norm is “never more than the expression of a relationship” mobilized through the “principle of comparison” (Edwald cited in Butler, 2004, p. 51). In other words, the individual is inserted into a discursive order which necessitates constant comparison between both the self and the other, as well as comparison between self and the abstract norm, as a primary means of securing one’s identity. Thus, the society of normalization is not passively inscribed on the body of the individual, rather it is actively produced through everyday reiterative practices.

Empirical Investigations of Subjectification

In the previous section I overviewed poststructural theories of subjectification, with a particular focus on Judith Butler’s work. I argued that Butler’s work is useful because it takes the broad historical analyses of Michel Foucault and embeds them in the day to day constitution of the subject. I would suggest, however, that there are limitations to Judith Butler’s theory of subjectification as well. While her analysis is insightful and helpful it operates at an abstract almost metaphysical level, and she rarely, if ever, includes the voices of “living” subjects. This is not to discount her work, but to argue for an examination of those researchers who have explored the processes of subjectification in the everyday lives of living research participants. Nayak and Kheily (2008), for instance, talk about the possibilities theories of subjectification offer for ethnographic work on the everyday lives of youth. They argue that the ethnography lies in its focus upon “doing” and action which enables the researcher “to look in closer detail at the
performative dimension of youth practices through an array of gender presentations, displays and exhibitions” (p. 30). In this section, I want to overview the work of those scholars who have taken up the work of Michel Foucault and Judith Butler in their empirical research into the everyday processes of subjectification (see Davies, 2000, 2001, 2006a, 2006b; Lei, 2003; Mac An Ghaill, 1994; Martino, 2000, 2003; Nayak and Kehily, 2008, 2006; Rasmussen and Harwood, 2006).

Bronwyn Davies (2006a) employs theories of subjectification to explore how “children take up their gendered identities, and in doing so constitute and maintain the binary and hierarchical gender order” (p. 72). It is not only that the children were positioned within gender categories, but that from their gendered positions they worked hard to defend, police, and maintain the broader gender order. She suggests that they did so by deploying two overlapping strategies. The first involves what Davies labelled “border work,” where the children aggressively work to separate the self from the Other. She draws on Julia Kristeva’s theory of the abject to describe how the children used border-work to violently cast out the Other in the formation of the self-contained “I”. For instance, in order for the boys to occupy the position of the masculine subject “the feminine…must be continually expelled from that “I” if one is to accomplish and go on accomplishing, dominant masculinity” (2006a, p. 73). Thus, Davies discovered that the masculine self is founded upon an ongoing process of abjection of difference or Otherness. The second process involves “category-maintenance work”. The primary function of category-maintenance work is to uphold the integrity of those categories which give rise to the subject. In particular, category-maintenance work is directed at individuals that deviate from the normative practices associated with a particular
category, thereby “maintaining the category as a meaningful category in the face of individual deviation that is threatening it” (Davies, 2006a, p. 72). Broadly speaking, border-work can be conceptualized as processes that separate individuals into various binarized categories, such as male/female, white/non-white, wealthy/poor or, more generally, self/Other, while category-maintenance work involves techniques deployed to police those who are already categorized. Together, border-work and category-maintenance work serve to insert and re-insert individuals into a meaning system of binary and heirarchical subjectifying categories.

Rasmussen and Harwood (2003) use Judith Butler’s theory of performativity to understand how the seemingly innate category “intelligence” is in fact a culturally compelled set of practices. Their analysis revealed that Jemma’s (a participant in their research) “slowness” was the result of a reiterated set of intersecting derogatory language practices that were institutionally supported, which “gradually had a constitutive effect” (p. 30). In other words, Jemma came to experience herself as “slow” after years of being labeled as such. Interestingly, the author’s argue that Jemma’s “slowness” was embedded in a broader cultural context of racism, sexism, and fat-phobia which served to multiply constitute her body as “Other” giving rise to her experience of alienation and worthlessness.

Mac An Ghaill (1994), Martino (2000; 2003), and Nayak and Kehily (2006) each explore how gendered identities are produced, policed, and essentialized in educational settings. All three examine how gender ideals come to occupy the position of the “real,” and what role institutionalized educational structures play in the essentialization of gender categories. Mairtin Mac An Ghaill’s (1994) focus is on how schools help shape
“male students’ cultural investment in different versions of heterosexual masculinity” (p. 5). He understands schools to be ambivalent culturally contested sites that both produce and naturalize hegemonic gender ideals, at the same time that they enable a space for young people to engage in practices that shape “non-traditional gender identities” (p. 9). Schools, Martino argues, play a central role in administering and managing the ambivalence that lies at the heart of heterosexual masculinity through the regulation and reification of sex/gender categories. Martino (2000) focuses more specifically on the practices, or “techniques of the self,” that young men deploy in producing a culturally meaningful masculine self. He argues that young men engage in a series of regulatory performances that identify and censure “sex-inappropriate practices” in both themselves and the other boys. These sort of regulatory practices are not just constitutive of the deviant-Other, as we so often assume, but at the same time serve to demarcate and stabilize the largely porous boundaries of normative heterosexual masculinity. In other words, the regulatory function of homophobic strategies are directed at the deviant-Other, to be sure, but they also serve as “technologies of the self” where the individual can engage in practices of self-decipherment, thereby normalizing their own practices through pathologizing the practices of the Other. All three author’s found that teasing and bullying were prominent regulatory techniques that were deployed to mark the constitutive boundary between the “normal” self and the “abnormal” Other. Nayak and Kehily (2006) discovered that that sexual jibes, stories and name-calling were an intimate part of student cultures arguing that this discursive production of sexuality came to form an organizing principle in peer-group relations in school. These tropes of sexual imagining defined the ‘appropriate’ from the ‘inappropriate’, the ‘normal’ from the ‘deviant’, the ‘moral’ from the ‘immoral’. In so doing, they produced complex and dynamic heterosexual hierarchies in which the lives of subordinate males,
girls and young women were most open to sexual scrutiny especially from more dominant male students. (p. 461)

The institutional and discursive practices of hegemonic masculinity, including practices of homophobia, heterosexism, and heteronormativity (Fusco, 1998) combine to stabilize binarized sex-gender hierarchies. However, it is important to point out the constitutive force of these practices lies in their reiteration. Identities, regardless of whether they are “normal” or “deviant,” are not materialized once and for all through single gestures, but rather come into being through the recitation of normative gender and sexed ideals over time. Moreover, these normative ideals are far from universal. They vary from one culture to the next, shift across time, and they gain nuanced meanings depending on institutional context. At an individual level, these ideals are contested, negotiated, taken-up and re-deployed in a myriad of unpredictable ways. Thus, there is no direct causational trajectory from normative ideal to subjective embodiment. Rather, processes of subjectification are rife with misrecognitions, failures, and partial constitutions, which give rise to all sorts of anxieties on the part of the subject. At the same time, however, these inconsistencies allow for a sort of agency that is founded not in an escape from power relations, but in their deflection, manipulation, and inventive deployment (deCerteau, 1984; Shogan, 1999). While the authors overviewed in this section tended to focus on how identities were materialized in and through the institutional practices of educational settings, the authors reviewed in the following section explore the constitutive role of sport and physical activity.

**Sport and the Discursive Construction of “Race”**

Debra Shogan (1999) does not treat gender, sexuality, and race as “naturally” occurring categories, but rather as “disciplines with their own set of performances and
performance standards” (p. 46). Similar to how elite athletes are produced as such through disciplinary technologies that organize “time, space, and movement” (p. 45), human beings are likewise produced through normalized gender, sex, and race performances. In this sense, the gendered, sexed, and raced body does not precede the normalized performances that it engages in, but rather these identity categories are constituted through disciplined performances. Indeed, it is not just that “disciplinary discourse manages and makes use of [individuals] but that it also actively constitutes them” (Butler, 2004, p. 50, emphasis in original). While much of this chapter has focused on the discursive construction of gender and sexuality, this section examines how “race” is produced through the performances of sport.

According to Shogan (1999), sport plays a central role in producing and naturalizing the socially constructed category of “race”. She calls upon critical sport sociologists to consider the sporting “processes that create identity” instead of focusing solely on the “experiences of those already categorized” (p. 46). This is important because “experience” itself is not innate, but is produced through the constraining effects of discourse (Foucault, 1985; Scott, 1992). Therefore, to unproblematically accept the category “race” as a biological given is to erase the power relations that go into the production of the raced body and racial experiences. Such an omission reifies “race” as a “real” and homogeneous category, thereby further entrenching existing racial hierarchies, even if inadvertently.

When talking about “race”, Omi and Winant (1994) write, that there is a “continuous temptation to think of race as an essence, as something fixed, concrete, and objective” (p. 54). Instead of thinking of race as a biological category that describes a
racial essence, Omi and Winant encourage us to conceptualize race as a set of complex and perpetual “sociohistorical processes by which racial categories are created, inhabited, transformed, and destroyed” (p. 55). This is not to suggest that material differences between raced bodies (i.e. skin colour) do not exist, but rather racial categories are the outcome of sociohistorical processes whereby particular bodily features are selected, elevated, and invested with specific racialized significations thus rendering race a culturally meaningful technique for categorizing bodies and embodied experiences. In other words, it is through the complex and at times conflicting work of culture that raced bodies are constituted. However, to argue that race is socially, historically, and culturally constructed is not to argue that we can simply dispense with race as a salient social category (Carrington, 2000; Omi and Winant, 1994). Rather, it is important to recognize the degree to which race, as a concept, “continues to play a fundamental role in structuring and representing the social world” (p. 55). Indeed, to recognize the social nature of race makes it all the more important to trace after the manner in which it is sociohistorically produced, deployed, and re-worked.

Movement, Deborah Shogan (1999) argues, is central to the cultural constitution of race. She argues that “what counts as the boundaries or limits of a ‘raced’ body is constructed within expectations of what these bodies do or should do” (pp. 63-4). Cultural expectations of raced bodies are embedded in a racialized history and “social structure [that] shapes racial experiences and conditions meaning” (Omi and Winant, 1994, p. 60). Thus, racial stereotypes are deeply ingrained, albeit contested, cultural resources by which individual subjects experience their bodies, the bodies of others, as well as their positioning in larger social (i.e. gender and sexual categories) and material
(i.e. school, workplace etc.) institutions. If, as Shogan (1999) and others (see Carrington, 2000; James, 2005) argue, the practices of sport are productive of racialized bodies, the question remains how and what sort of bodies are materialized in and through the practices of health? In other words, how do health and body discourses align with other socio-cultural performances such as sport and physical activity in the production of not just “health identities”, but racialized, gendered, and classed identities as well. In the subsequent section, I overview critical perspectives on “age”, and argue that age-based categories such “childhood” and “youth” or “teenager” are themselves discursively materialized regulatory ideals.

The Discursive Construction of Childhood/Adolescence

There are three general critiques that can be leveled against empirical investigations into the everyday cultures of young people. First, most research treats the category “youth” as though it were a “real,” naturally occurring stage in the life cycle, rather than a culturally and historically specific construction that constrains and regulates the bodies that it designates (Lesko, 2001; Valentine, Skelton, and Chambers, 1998). Second, the identity label “youth” is often treated as a homogeneous category defined by chronological age (Valentine, Skelton, and Chambers, 1998; Wilson, 2001). Other social identities such as race, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, and body size are subsumed under the category of “youth” without considering how they interlock with age in forming unique meanings and experiences for those so categorized. Third, and finally, those perspectives that do consider the multiple and shifting dynamics of age, race, and gender, for example, often do so by exploring their “intersectionality,” as if each category were radically distinct. The more difficult task would be to consider how these categories are actually
historically, socially, and culturally embedded in one another. In other words, how “one
becomes the condition of the other, or how one becomes the unmarked background for
the action of the other” (Butler, 1999, p. 168). Significantly, the constructionist
perspective overlooks the mutually constitutive relationship between age, gender, and
race, for example, failing to consider how the historical evolution of one term “becomes
the condition of articulation of the other” (p. 168). In short, “constructivist accounts do
not consider modern adolescence in relation to broad cultural transformations of time,
race, gender, and citizenship” (Lesko, 2001, p. 7-8). With these three shortcomings in
mind, this section sets out to overview the sociological literature on “youth,” including
“children,” “teenagers,” and “adolescence” with an eye to accomplish three main tasks: to
examine the socio-historical conditions that gave rise to the emergence of “youth” as a
meaningful social category; to unpack the material effects the category “youth,” or
perhaps more specifically “adolescence” or “teenager,” has on the bodies that it names;
and finally, explore the alternative ways of thinking about and representing young people.

A central component of scholarly work in the social sciences over the past two
decades has been the exposure of essentialist assumptions about identity. Increasingly,
the identity categories that were assumed to be “real” have been deconstructed and
revealed as social constructions. Similar to the many identity categories that have been
stripped of their “real” status in the social sciences, such as gender (Butler, 1990, 1993),
race (Shogan, 1999; Razack, 1999), sexuality (Butler, 1990), “childhood” has also been
exposed as a historically and socially situated category rather than a biologically
determined marker of chronological age (Barker and Weller, 2003; Holloway and
Valentine, 2000). In fact, the contemporary western conception of children as “less
developed, less able and less competent” (Holloway and Valentine, 2000, p. 2) than adults is a historically specific construction. It was not until the fifteenth century that the notion of children as beings with a distinct nature and different needs than adults began to emerge (Valentine, Skelton, and Chambers, 1998).

These historical constructions of “childhood” have carried over into present-day representations, where children oscillate between the Dionysian and Apollonian poles (Burrows and Wright, 2004; Valentine, Skelton, and Chambers, 1998). At certain points, for example, children are represented as the ideal of innocence, purity, and naivety, while at other moments they are constructed as violent, at-risk, and a danger to themselves (Burrows and Wright, 2004; Jackson and Scott, 1999). In the current “risk society” (Beck, 1992), childhood is enmeshed in broader discourses of “moral panic”. Within such a climate, “childhood is increasingly being constructed as a precarious realm under siege from those who would rob children of their childhoods, and as being subverted from within by children who refuse to remain childlike” (Jackson and Scott, 1999, p. 86).

Thus, children are represented as at-risk of being exploited and corrupted by adult-villains, sexual predators, and violent offenders, but, at the same time, are also conceived as a risk to themselves, engaging in precociously activities, such as drugs, alcohol, sexual activity, over-eating and sedentary living. These dual representations of children as sweet, innocent, and vulnerable, on the one hand, and deceitful, destructive, and precocious, on the other, construct a version of childhood that needs to be simultaneously protected and conserved, as well as surveilled, disciplined, and controlled. Thus, the moral panic discourse constructs “children” as a target of patronizing, surveilling, and disciplining technologies of power. In this regard, “childhood” could be conceived of as a
“technology” in itself. The discourses and material effects of the “technology of childhood” can best be witnessed in the “obesity epidemic”.

Burrows and Wright (2004) suggest that “childhood is currently being constructed and reconstructed in relation to the corporeal discourses that define the healthy child” (p. 83). Whereas crime, deviance, and delinquency used to be the central “risks” that threatened “childhood,” increasingly there has been a shift to the “new health risks” which focus on biological health risks, such as “obesity”. With “obesity epidemic,” the formerly “safe” space of the private home is transformed into the new “evil” of health risk discourses, with the television set, computer, and refrigerator epitomizing the most salient threats to children’s health and well-being. However, the dual representation of children is still present within the new health risk discourse, where “children are simultaneously positioned as innocent victims (for example, of the fatty food industry, technology, neglectful parents) and as contributors to escalating national health bills (through increasing rates of obesity-related illness)” (p. 86). Thus, risk discourse legitimates intervention, surveillance, and regulation of young people on two fronts—the “humanistic” front, which essentially revolves around the notion that the adult-expert needs to intervene for the safety, health, and wellbeing of the child, and on the “economic” front, where intervention is legitimated by citing the amount of money inaction will cost the state (Withers and Batten cited in Kelly, 2000). It is in this way that the new health risk discourses, of which the “obesity epidemic” is very much a part, shapes and re-shapes the practices, experiences and, therefore, bodies of children. How we see, experience, relate to, as well as what we expect from children changes in relation to these new health risk discourses.
With changing conceptions of “childhood” that are being brought about by the emergence of new health risks discourses there are concomitant shifts in institutional, professional, and parental power relations. For instance, because childhood has been identified as the source of the “obesity epidemic” teachers and schools have become the primary site of intervention into the lives of children in an attempt to regulate and discipline young bodies against fatness. In addition to their regular teaching responsibilities, educational professionals are now charged with the “production of non-obese” children. This requires that the bodies of children be closely monitored and analysed by educators for potential risks, as well as being submitted to a battery of practices, such as proper diet and exercise, designed to ward off “obesity”. Therefore, the legitimacy of educators, particularly health and physical education teachers, lies in their ability to produce certain types of responsible young citizens who embody particular “healthy” body weights, sizes and shapes. But schools and teachers are not the only sites of intervention into the “war on obesity” as both home-life and parents are recruited into the struggle to produce “healthy” children.

The family unit has become increasingly responsible for monitoring and regulating every aspect of the child’s life as a source of possible danger. Within the new health risks context, the identity of parents, as the primary care-givers, are intimately linked with the health of their children, or, more specifically, the size and shape of their children’s bodies. Thus, a fat child is increasingly read as a sign of irresponsibility and ineptitude on the part of the parents’ (Burrows and Wright, 2004). A parent’s identity as a “good” and “responsible” parent depends on the size, shape, and overall “health” of their child. Therefore, it is imperative for a parent to take up and administer the “expert” health
knowledges and take control over their child’s body through an unrelenting surveillance, judgement, correction, and regulation.

However, parents are not equally implicated in the “health” of their children, and therefore, nor do they share equally in the stigma of raising an “unhealthy” child. As Burrows and Wright (2004) make clear, there are gendered and classed aspects to child-rearing. Implicit in the moral imperative to raise “healthy” children into adulthood is the mother’s role as the assumed “primary” care giver (see also Bell and Valentine, 1997). Within a patriarchal culture, mothers are primarily responsible for feeding, nurturing, and developing children into “healthy” adults and, as such, they bear the lion’s share of the burden if the child falls ill or embodies anything less than the “healthy” ideal. But there is not equality amongst mothers, as some mothers have greater access to secondary support, education, child care, medical attention, and so on. Sadly, “it is often those parents who are already “Othered” in the normalizing discourses of parenting (i.e., single parents, parents on low income) who are further marginalised by these moral imperatives” (p. 90). Thus far I have overviewed literature on the discursive construction of youth. In the following section I switch to an overview of the critical literature on youth and adolescence.

**From Childhood to Adolescence**

The dividing line between “childhood,” “adolescence,” and “adulthood” is decidedly blurry. For the most part, the boundaries of age are “boundaries of exclusion which define what young people are not, cannot do or cannot be” (Valentine, Skelton, and Chambers, 1998). In this sense, “adolescence” is performative, where young people are constantly incited to “act their age”. Young people are endlessly being scolded for
“acting too young” or admonished for engaging in and experimenting with “adult-activities”, such as drinking, drugs, and sexual relations. Thus, sandwiched between “childhood” and “adulthood,” adolescence has no identity of its own, rather it is relationally defined by what it is not (Burrows and Wright, 2004; Holloway and Valentine, 2000). Young people are commonly understood as adults in-becoming and, therefore, adolescence is, in its very inception, a patronizing identity category (Valentine, Skelton, and Chambers, 1998). More specifically, “adolescence” is temporally defined over and against the adult world. In this sense, the term “adolescence” is constantly being negotiated and re-negotiated in relation to other people—such as teachers, parents, and other teenagers—as well as in relation to institutional and cultural discourses (Burrows and Wright, 2004). Thus, in some situations youth are granted temporary access to the adult world, whereas at other moments they are denied admittance by virtue of being “too young”. “Adolescents” are, in this way, constituted according to the places, conversations, spectacles, and institutions they are excluded from, on the one hand, and included in, on the other (Holloway and Valentine, 2000; Valentine, Skelton, and Chambers, 1998). For instance, Holloway and Valentine (2000) argue that space is constitutive of age, where everyday spaces are inscribed with discourses that construct the bodies that “belong” there, the bodies that pass through and use them.

Space and Adolescence

For geographers, “adolescence” is a spatial performance. They see youth as spatially constituted, where young people literally “act their age” in a given spatial context. Given that all boundaries are enmeshed with and reproductive of power relations, the boundaries that exclude young people from “adult-space” are no different.
These divisions are constitutive of age. The exclusion of young people from particular spaces, such as restricted movies and drinking establishments, serves to mark off these bodies as less-than-adult. The reverse would equally be true, where certain spaces culturally coded as “kids space”, such as the play room at McDonald’s or the jungle gym in the local park, are constitutive of age-based identities. Kids belong in these spaces, adults do not (unless, of course, they are watching over children). For geographers, space is central to the constitution and lived experience of age-based identity.

Discursively constructed categories of age intersect with other salient identity categories such as “race” and gender, for example, in structuring notions of space and belonging. Wilson, White and Fisher (2001b) noted that in the sporting spaces of a Canadian community recreation centre, spaces which are “usually considered supportive, preventative, integrated social settings for at-risk youth” (p. 319), young women experienced marginalization. Based on their findings, they concluded that positioning in the centre is complex and contradictory, but that the “relative absence of female teens is further evidence of a culture at the centre that catered to male youth” (p. 319). Similarly, young people’s spatial experiences are influenced along racial categories. Wilson and White (2001a) found that at the community recreation centre where they conducted their research “the conflicts that often occur between different ages, different style/interest groups, and different races in other settings are less evident here because of the intimacy/integration of the cultures in this small space” (p. 97), thus demonstrating that “race” is differentially experienced across space and place. In contrast, however, the present research found that “race” was salient to how the young men experienced the Pinevale Community Centre. Tibetan youth were constructed as not belonging at
Pinevale and rountinely experienced harassment, discrimination, and in some extreme cases physical violence. In the end, the Tibetan youth resorted to playing basketball on the less-structured outdoor sporting spaces located throughout the community. Space plays a central role in the construction of age categories, and is always further mediated through gender, sexuality, and racial categories. In the following section I examine how the fat body is culturally coded as a leaky and thus femine body.

**The “Leaky” Abject Body and Fat Embodiment**

Elizabeth Grosz (1994) argues that the female body is culturally constructed as a “leaky body”. Borrowing from Mary Douglas’ cultural anthropology, Grosz suggests that body fluids represent dirt, or matter out of place. According to Douglas, it is not that dirt is inherently dirty, rather dirt is disruptive to a symbolic system where “order is imposed at the cost of the elements being thus ordered” (Grosz, 194, p. 192). Therefore, dirt is “essentially disorder” and has less to do with “craven fear, still less dread or holy terror”. Instead, the troubling aspect of dirt is that “dirt offends against order” (Douglas, 1980, p. 2). It is, quite literally, matter out of place. As such, dirt represents a threat to both social and individual systems that are founded on this order. Similarly, fluids present a problem to order because they “are without any form or shape of their own…[t]hey are engulfing, difficult to be rid of…separation from them is not a matter of certainty as it may be in the case of solids” (Grosz, 1994, p. 194). Fluids, like dirt, refuse to be reduced and fixed in the systems that try and contain them.

From a psychoanalytical perspective, Julia Kristeva (1982) refers to matter out of place as the “abject”. Abjection designates those processes that go into the constitution of

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17 For an extended discussion on the complex and contradictory racial experiences at Pinevale and Lawson see Appendix H.
the clean and proper body, the sloughing of all matter that is inconsistent with an orderly self. It involves discretely separating oneself from those material functions that are simultaneously necessary to survival, but disruptive of a clean sense of self—the shitting, vomiting, urinating, menstruating, and decaying. While each is necessary to the survival of the self, the self cannot afford to recognize them as such. For Kristeva, abjection is a violent separation from the otherness that is simultaneously essential and problematic to the constitution of a clean and proper body. She writes, “‘I’ expel myself, ‘I’ spit myself out, ‘I’ abject myself within the same motion through which ‘I’ claim to establish myself” (p. 3). In short, abjection is about creating and maintaining a boundary between the self, as represented through the pure, transcendental mind, and the abject, with its contaminating and disorderly leaks and flows. Kristeva provocatively queries, “How can I be without border?” (Kristeva, 1982, p. 4). Here, she indicates that the separation between self and other, between mind and body, between the finite and oblivion is essential to self-constitution.

Grosz uses the work of Douglas and Kristeva to articulate how cultural investments in bodies serve to selectively mark and privilege certain bodies, body functions, and body parts, while leaving others unrepresented. In other words, Grosz questions the “conditions under which the clean and proper body, the obedient, law-abiding, social body, emerges, the cost of its emergence…and the functions that demarcating a clean and proper body for the social subject have in the transmission and production of specific body types” (p. 192). Such questioning allows Grosz to inquire into how the cultural intervenes in the ontological constitution of the sexed body. She suggests that the differential cultural coding of male and female body fluids is
instrumental in the production of the sexed body. She does not see the female body as simply a “lack”, as is often suggested by feminist psychoanalytic accounts, but goes even further suggesting that the female body is represented as a formless void. It may be, she writes, that the “female body has been constructed not only as a lack or absence but with more complexity, as a leaking, uncontrollable, seeping liquid; as formless; as viscosity, entrapping, secreting; as lacking not so much simply the phallus but self-containment” (p. 203). Such representations situate the female body as a threat, a “formlessness that engulfs all form, a disorder that threatens all order” (p. 203). In polar opposition to this construction, the male body is represented as a “sealed up, impenetrable” (p. 201) vessel, that is chronically at risk of being consumed by the formlessness of the feminine. Of course this is not to say that the feminine actually is a leaky existence, anymore than it is to say that the masculine does not leak at all. Rather, what is at stake is the cultural construction of a privileged mode of embodiment—the masculine—through the subordination and containment of another mode of embodiment—the feminine.

In order for maleness to occupy its position as the proper, it must symbolically and materially cast off all traces of unruly embodiment. This most commonly amounts to projecting the uncontained, defiling, anxiety-inducing attributes of embodiment onto the feminine other. Here, “men’s fear becomes women’s fate” (Modeleski cited in Thomas, 1996, p. 13). The disembodiment of masculinity is accomplished by reducing the male “fluid to a solid, the establishment of a boundary that congeals, phallicizes, male flows” (p. 199). In short, the male flow is phallicized by reducing it to its function, to what it produces. Some scholars have suggested that the fat body is the leaky abject body.
L’ea Kent (2001), for example, argues that fat women are represented as leaky and abject in our “fat abhorring world” (Sedgewick cited in Kent, p. 130). The fat female body, she suggests, is both revolting and necessary to the constitution of the tight, contained normatively slender body. This paradoxical relationship is generative of the slender body, where the “fat body [is] repeatedly evoked at the margins, drawn in and then expelled in order to continue taking the weight of corporeality off thin bodies” (p. 136). Here, the fat body “forms the margins of the good body, the thin body that bears the mark of the self’s discipline” (p. 136). Put somewhat more simply, if the fat body did not occupy a prominent and horrifying position in collective consciousness, the slender body would have nothing to mark its privileged status against. The self-discipline that the slender body implies would be unrecognizable and it would simply be one body among others. Thus, the fat female body is culturally constructed as the leaky, abject body, but what of the fat male body?

Feminist scholars have argued that the fat male body can still accrue his “patriarchal dividend” (Kimmel, 2001) through the aggressive occupation of space on the sports field (Norman, 2004), in the spectacle of excessive consumption in black hip hop culture (Gross, 2005), or on the large hairy bodies of gay men in the “bear subculture” (Monaghan, 2005), but male fatness is not always consistent with dominant masculinity. Longhurst (2005), for example, has explored the experiences of men with breasts and has found that fatness on male bodies can also be feminizing and abjecting. The present research aims to get a more nuanced understanding of how health and body discourses compel particular body shapes and sizes and how young men from diverse
social and cultural locations experience their bodies through biomedical, aesthetic, and cultural categories of body shape and size.

**Fatness and Masculinity**

The intersections between men, masculinity, and fatness remain almost completely unexplored in scholarly literature (Bell and McNaughton, 2007). The few studies that do explore male fatness tend to simplistically transplant feminist rhetoric about patriarchal oppression of the fat female body onto the fat male body (Gilman, 2004). Either characterization—fat man as disembodied patriarch or powerless victim—“forces the [fat male body] to lose much of its’ subtlety and complexity” (Gilman, 2004, p. 6). Gilman cautions, however, that his insistence for a more sophisticated exploration of men and fatness not be confused with a simplistic argument that posits men have it as bad or worse than women do. He suggests that to leverage gender comparisons as a means of garnering attention for the “fat boy” is not a productive route to follow. He points out that masculinity and femininity are not equal constructions, but each have their own complex history and set of meanings attached to them. Nor, for that matter, does the fat man experience fatness in the same way that the fat women does. While Gilman astutely draws our attention to how the experience of fatness is gendered, his analysis falls short of examining how fatness is also impacted by other identity categories such as social class, race, sexuality, and age. In other words, Gilman fails to examine how the experience of fatness is not only gendered but is interpellated by diverse and multiple identity categories, thereby giving it far more complex meanings than can ever be ascertained through a gender lens alone. Furthermore, Gilman’s exploration is primarily
an historical one and the contemporary experience of the male body in consumer culture is radically divergent from the experiences of men just a couple of decades ago.

**The Male Body Project**

Scholars of the body suggest that our contemporary consumer-oriented culture places increasing emphasis on the male body as an object to be desired, worked at and beautified (Alexander, 2003; Bordo, 1999; Gill, Henwood, and McLean, 2005; Mort, 1988; Nixon, 1997; Pope, Phillips, and Olivardia, 2000). The male body, they argue, has been inserted into a “new kind of representational practice in mainstream popular culture, depicting male bodies in idealized and eroticized fashions, coded in ways that give permission for them to be looked at and desired” (Gill, Henwood, and McLean, 2005, p. 38). As Brian Pronger (1999) points out, the “omnipresence of…popular representations of the fit body undoubtedly contextualize the ways in which people read bodies, whether they themselves follow exercise and dietary regimes or not” (p. 144).

Increasing images of the male body beautiful have incited men to look differently at their bodies and to be “more aware of the ways that their bodies looked, and of the ways that they dressed” (Grogan, 2008, p. 105). Such representational practices, in other words, have created a new economy of masculinities where men are incited to approach their bodies as “body projects” (Shilling, 2005) to be transformed through diet, exercise, and consumption in the construction of particular ways of being male.

Thus, boys and men are facing different expectations and disciplinary and regulatory practices from boys and men of previous generations. Whereas as recently as twenty years ago dominant masculinity was determined by what a man produced, today dominant masculinity is increasingly “constructed as a product available for
consumption” (Alexander, 2003, p. 535). Susan Alexander refers to this commodified masculinity as “branded masculinity” where “profit can be produced by generating insecurity about one’s body” and then offering consumers solutions to their anxieties through the consumption of various products, ideas, and knowledge. The centre-piece of branded masculinity is the “stylish hard body”, which simultaneously involves building muscle mass while minimizing body fat (Alexander, 2003). What Alexander fails to recognize is that stylish masculinity is more often than not an idealized version of masculinity that reflects a white, middle-class model of beauty and privilege. In their content analysis of health and fitness magazines, Dworkin and Wachs (2009) found that there was “almost [a] total exclusion of nonwhite individuals” in cover shots and that the few models of colour tended to be “‘lighter’ skinned models with straightened hair and European facial features regardless of gender” (p. 52). On the basis of their analysis, Dworkin and Wachs concluded that normative representations of beauty and health are embedded at the nexus of class, gender, racial, and sexual power relations. Moreover, representations of the “ideal male body” do not necessarily reflect the material and cultural realities of their readership as access to consumer culture is disproportionately available to men. Not all men have equal access to the material, cultural, and social resources necessary to transform their bodies into a culturally desirable form.

Nevertheless, representations of ideal male bodies have accelerated (Dworkin and Wachs, 2009; Nixon, 1997) and with this acceleration, so too have men become increasingly concerned about their bodies.

As “beauty (re)discovers the male body” (Bordo, 1999), boys and men increasingly feel anxiety over their bodies, particularly its shape and size. The heightened
cultural visibility of the male body and the associated anxiety it generates has led a growing number of researchers to explore the relationship boys and men have with their bodies (see Alexander, 2003; Atkinson, 2008; Bordo, 1999; Grogen, 2008; Grogen and Richards, 2002; Monaghan, 2005a; 2005b; Nixon, 1997; Pope, Phillips, and Olivardia, 2000). Using a social psychological approach, Pope et al. (2000) have coined the term “the Adonis complex” to characterize the “usually secret, but surprisingly common, body image concerns of boys and men” (p. 6). However, their analysis is limited to those men where body anxiety has reached the state of “disorder”. Pope et al. fall in to the trap of focusing too heavily on the “pathological” thereby leaving the “normal” unexplored. What is needed is an analysis that goes beyond “pathological” body obsessions towards one that explores the everyday lived anxieties that men are increasingly confronted with as part of their normative social and cultural lifeworlds (Dworkin and Wachs, 2009; Featherstone, 1991; Shilling, 2005).

These everyday male body concerns, unlike those of girls and women which centre around attaining a slender, fat-free body (Bordo, 1993), are, for boys and men, usually aimed at achieving a bigger, more muscular body (Bordo, 1999; Grogan, 2008; Pope et al., 2000). Boys and men may desire larger, more muscular frames, but they do not want that muscle buried beneath layers of body fat and, in this regard, aspire to a lean, fat-free, “ripped” look (Alexander, 2003; Dworkin and Wachs, 2009; Gill, et al., 2000). While it is quite common for body theorists to recognize that cultural ideals of masculinity and femininity drive men and women in opposite directions in terms of body size, seldom do those same theorists acknowledge the way in which gender constraints on fatness push men and women in similar directions, namely towards body fat reduction.
Although some scholars have acknowledged that men and women are likely to engage in different practices in the pursuit of a tight, fat-free body—men are more likely to participate in sport and exercise, while women are more likely to engage in dieting—there is nonetheless a shared goal of body fat reduction. This is an important point for the current research because it highlights the degree to which body fat is a salient gender marker for boys and men in the construction of a properly masculine body. This point has been overshadowed by the research exploring the intersections of fatness, femininity, and the female body.

Recent research suggests that a double-bind characterizes the relationships young men have with their bodies. With such a double-bind, men are simultaneously compelled to meet a certain embodied ideal—large, muscular, lean body that is ruggedly individual and in command of both the self and others—at the same time that they are culturally dissuaded from publicly concerning themselves with something as seemingly trivial as the appearance of their bodies (Grogan, 2008). Gill, et al., (2005) found that far from being unimportant to the young men in their research, achieving a desired look must be accomplished in such a way so as to not violate the cultural interdiction against male vanity. Thus, many boys and men pursue their body transformation projects as an “open secret” (Sedgewick, 1990), as they engage in practices of self-formation while at the same time maintaining an appropriate distance or aloofness towards the centrality their bodies play in their self constructions. This imperative for secrecy may stem from the relatively narrow discursive resources that boys and men have available to them for making sense of their body transformation projects (Gill, Henwood and McLean, 2005). In short, it may be that boys and men do not talk openly about their bodily anxieties and
practices of self-transformation, not because these anxieties do not exist—as some researchers seem to indicate (Davis, 2003; Wright, O’Flynn, and MacDonald, 2006)—but because there is a deeply held cultural injunction against boys and men openly worrying about the appearance of their bodies.

In his nuanced analysis of men and cosmetic surgery, Michael Atkinson (2008) concluded that the professional middle class white men in his study engaged in cosmetic surgery—often in the form of fat reducing surgeries—as a response to a perceived “crisis of masculinity”. Cosmetic surgery, argues Atkinson, was deployed by the participants in his research “as a tool for ‘re-establishing’ a sense of empowered masculinity in figurational settings that they perceive[d] to be saturated by gender doubt, anxiety and contest” (p. 73). In other words, the men sought out cosmetic surgery as a technique of self production for “meeting and keeping up with the cultural standards and expectations of masculinity” (Bordo, 1999, p. 42-3). What Atkinson reveals is that the gender inequality of cosmetic surgery is not solely invested in whether women or men feel more anxious about their bodies—a question Kathy Davis (2003) grapples with—but what gendered ideals cosmetic surgery fulfills as well as what cultural meanings and privileges are attached to those individuals who are having their bodies surgically altered to attain culturally meaningful identities. Put differently, Atkinson is drawing attention to the fact that it is not only cultural work on the male body—surgery, exercise, dieting, consumerism—that is invested with gender meanings, but meaning is also rooted in the end result of such body projects, where the production of a more masculine (i.e. lean and muscular) body is consistent with dominant manhood and thus masculine power and privilege. What Atkinson fails to consider in his analysis, however, is the manner in
which surgery practices are not only gendered, but raced, sexed, and classed as well. As I
examine in the following section, a consumer culturally constructed ideal is not the only
force driving boys and men towards body projects of fat reduction.

**Biomedical Perspectives on the Male Body**

Popular representations of “hard” male bodies may act as the “pull” inciting new
desires and embodied practices aimed at achieving the tight, fat-free male body ideal, but
biomedical claims of an “obesity epidemic” act as the “push” towards weight
management and body fat reduction. Sam Murray (2005) eloquently captures how obesity
discourse lines up with other popular cultural assumptions about bodies to negatively
shape the way we see our own bodies and the bodies of others. She writes,

> The pervasiveness and dominance of medical narratives in generating a moral panic about the ‘obesity epidemic’ have further pathologized fatness in the public consciousness effectively legitimating and sanctioning prejudice and discrimination against fat bodies. Of course, the desire for dominant aesthetic appeal is carefully hidden beneath a well-constructed rhetoric of ‘health.’ (p. 111)

Under the auspices of “health”, obesity discourse has gained considerable leverage on the
public health agenda which, somewhat problematically, has fused synergistically with
popular constructions of beauty, such that both “health” and “beauty” ideals end up
peddling the same objectives of weight management and body fat reduction. Thus,

obesity discourse is never solely medical, but is always embedded in a broader context
where fatness is understood as not only unhealthy, but unattractive within a symbolic
economy that represents the fat body as lazy, selfish, and morally specious (Gard and
Wright, 2001; 2005; Muarry, 2005; Evans, 2002; Evans, Rich, and Davies, 2004).

The “obesity epidemic” has generated new found interest in the extent to which
boys and men are brought under the normalizing gaze of biomedical discourses of fatness
(Bell and McNaughton, 2007; Wright and Burrows, 2004; Monaghan, 2007). Jan Wright and Lissette Burrows (2004), for example, call for greater research into the attitudes boys and young men have developed towards body size and shape within the current preponderance of talk about obesity in popular and biomedical discourse, particularly as obesity discourse gains increasing prominence in the school’s health and physical education curriculum. I would suggest that such research is all the more timely given that obesity discourse is increasingly targeting boys and young men as at particular risk of obesity (see CLFRI, 2007; Monaghan, 2005). The present research has undertaken this task; however, before turning to the results of this research, I first want to spend some time overviewing the cultural relationship between masculinity and the male body.

**Masculinity, Body Size and Shape**

Masculinity is established and expressed in and through the male body (Connell, 2005). Despite the increased presence of stylized hard bodies in popular culture, Davis (2002) argues that it is not the muscular male body that is hegemonic in our contemporary western context. Drawing on the work of David Morgan (see Morgan and Scott, 1993) and Victor Seidler (1994), she argues that “real” gender power is to be found in the “Rational Man”, or the corporate executive whose power resides in his rationality and material wealth. While the muscular male body-builder, for example, may metaphorically embody hegemonic masculinity, she argues, his power is limited to the symbolic realm and, outside of a few narrow venues, garners modest power unto itself.

She writes that for masculinity, which is guided by the dictates of rationality (‘mind over matter’), the body is, at best, irrelevant, and, at worst, an intrusive obstacle to the more important activities of the mind. The body is something to be ignored, denied or, at least, kept firmly out of sight. (Davis, 2002, p. 59)
What, however, is the masculine subject supposed to make of the fat belly that refuses to be “kept firmly out of sight”, that spills sloppily over the belt buckle and jiggles uncontrollably? Moreover, what of the male body that is racialized, or the male that does move in normatively masculine ways? Not all male bodies, in other words, are as easily forgotten, suppressed, and contained, as Davis seems to suggest in her characterization of the white, professional class, “Rational Man”. Some bodies stubbornly refuse to be rendered “irrelevant” to masculine subjectivity and, in some cases, harbor the very real threat of spoiling the privileges that Davis assumes are inherent within the male body itself, when it is more properly the white, middle-class, heterosexual, able-bodied male body that procures such privileges.

I would argue that Davis (2002) overlooks that the body has come to represent an external reflection of the internal self (Bordo, 1993; Shilling, 2005) in our contemporary “somatic society” (Turner, 1992). The material surface of the body, in other words, has come to act as a proxy for the “true” self, where the loose, flabby, fat male body is culturally coded as reflecting a lazy, out of control, immoral, and unmasculine internal self (Atkinson, 2008; Bordo, 1993; Mosher, 2001). Given that the images of the lean, hard-bodied male body has come to dominate the visual content of popular men’s magazines and advertisements targeting the male consumer (Alexander, 2003; Dworkin and Wachs, 2009; Nixon, 1997; Pope et al, 2000), it has become increasingly difficult to argue that body image is irrelevant to boys and men. For instance, Susan Alexander found that the top two cover themes for the South African edition of Men’s Health magazine between 1997 and 2001 were instructions on how to achieve the “hard body” as
well as guidelines for body fat reduction. Similarly, Dworkin and Wachs (2009) found in their decade long content analysis of health and fitness magazines that “men’s and women’s body practices converge in several notable ways” particularly in that fat is “powerfully feared as a cultural transgression for both men and women” (p. 34). And while these mediated representations do not necessarily reflect what “real” men’s bodies are or do, they nonetheless reveal certain ideas about what the ideal male body is at the same time that they issue a set of instructional practices necessary to achieve such an idealized body. Indeed, Kathy Davis is correct when she suggests that the “real” power of the hegemonic male does not reside solely in the muscularity or leanness of his body; however, she does overlook the degree to which the fat male body may—but not necessarily—undermine the invisible spirit of the Rational Man.

In many social and historical contexts, however, the fat male body is constructed as consistent with a dominant masculinity. For instance, Lee Monaghan (2005) found that the men he spoke to—all of whom were enrolled in local weight loss clinics in the UK—deflected the pathologizing effects of obesity discourse that link fatness to sickness and death by engaging in what Monaghan referred to as “muscle talk”. Muscle talk involves the recognition of bigness as a central component of a proper masculinity where the large male body “derives symbolic meaning in relation to sex specific corporeality...[and] helps to preserve and project appropriate masculinities” (p. 595). Thus, while the men in his research were actively engaged in a weight loss regime, they maintained a highly ambivalent relationship with biomedical definitions of “healthy” body weights that were determined by the BMI. They tactically incorporated the biomedical model of “healthy” body weights into their everyday constructions of masculinity through “talk about the
compatibility of heaviness, healthiness, and physical fitness; looking and feeling ill at a putatively “healthy” BMI, and the irrationality of standardization” (p. 605) of the BMI measure.

Similarly, Joan Gross (2005) argues that within the context of black hip hop culture the large body does not necessarily represent pathology and moral weakness, but in many ways is represented as a sign masculine control and dominance. She writes,

First and foremost in this definition of masculinity is control—being in control of other men, women and financial resources. Through brute force, which is closely correlated with body size, men gain respect and access to wealth. Literally and figuratively, they can throw their weight around. Fatness is not viewed as a sign of lack of control but as a means by which control is attained. (p. 76)

In the context of sport the fat male body may also carry positive connotations. Research indicates that US high school football linemen are more likely than average youth to have BMI readings in the obese range (Laurson and Eisenmann, 2007). Within the context of football, larger, heavier bodies can be advantageously deployed as a means of dominating and controlling opposing players. While it is important to acknowledge that being “‘big’…having a big strong and powerful body” may be a “desirable trait” (Frost, 2003, p. 64) of masculinity in some contexts, it is equally important to recognize that not any big body will do. An excessively loose and sloppy fat male body connotes decidedly feminine qualities, such as lack of will-power and lack of control (Mosher, 2001). Thus, to achieve the most privileged male body one needs to be not only big, but “‘hard’, sporty and fit” (Frost, 2003, p. 67).

The cultural meanings attached to the “fat boy” (Gilman, 2004) are indeed too rich to recount in this brief review of literature. Thus it is especially disheartening when the complexity of the intersections of fatness and masculinity are crudely crystallized into
reductive typologies of masculine embodiment. Michael Gard and Jan Wright (2005) summarily gloss over the intricacies of the fat male body in their otherwise excellent and nuanced critique of the “obesity epidemic”. They write,

> What needs to be said here is that although few feminists would deny the oppressive and discriminatory practices experienced by fat men, it is social expectations around femininity that shape the stigmatization of women and the ways they internalize these. The argument goes back to Chernin and others who argue that women’s subordination requires that their power be contained, that they take up smaller amounts of physical space in society than men. This is not a requirement of men, large bodies can be powerful bodies, and appropriately masculine. (p. 161)

While I agree with much of what Gard and Wright are arguing—indeed, I do believe that the body size and shape of women is governed by narrow and strict disciplinary codes of patriarchy—I am uncomfortable with the manner in which the authors use this to rationalize their decision to not investigate the intersections of masculinity, men, and fatness. Implied in their argument is that because discourses of fatness construct boys and men’s embodied experiences differently than it does those of girls and women there is no need for an analysis of male experiences with fatness. This is the same logic that limits the scholarly exploration of male embodiment more generally, where it is assumed that male embodiment is largely irrelevant to masculinity. Such thinking inadvertently perpetuates the sexist mind-body dualism which assumes that men are of the mind and women are of the body (Bordo, 1993). In place of such academic silences, I am persuaded by Thomas’ argument that the failure to consider how gender power is rooted in the cultural invisibility of the male body is complicit in oppressive gender relations. Instead, he encourages a research agenda where the “theoretical project of making the production(s) of masculinity and of the male body visible [is] at least [a] potentially
transformative political intervention into the social reproduction of gender” (Thomas, 1996, p. 16).

In order to get at the complexity of male fatness, it is important to consider how the fat male body is experienced differentially depending on social, cultural, historical, and material indicators. The failure to take into account how the fat subject is “multiply interpellated” (Alarcon cited in Eng, 2001, p. 5) results in reductive and ultimately unhelpful conclusions about how individuals experience their fatness. Gard and Wright (2005) suggest that fatness is consistent with a space-occupying masculinity without acknowledging how other salient identity categories, such as race (see Gross, 2005) and sexuality (see Monaghan, 2005), to name a few, potentially alter the meanings and experiences associated with this particular embodiment of maleness. What is lost in their simplistic analysis is a nuanced examination of the “infinite number of ways in which the components of identity can intersect or combine to make up masculine identity” (Petersen, 1998, p. 62). In the following section, I explore how dominant masculinity is produced, reproduced, and stabilized through a space occupying performance.

**Masculinity and the Occupation of Space**

The male body is central to the construction of a dominant masculinity (Connell, 2005; Frost, 2003), with the lean, muscular male body gaining ascendancy within the current representational economy (Alexander, 2003; Frost, 2003). However, the “look” of the male body is not sufficient in and of itself to attain hegemonic masculinity. Rather, embodied performances are also crucial to the construction of a dominant masculinity (Frost, 2003; Messner, 1992; Pronger, 1999; Shogan, 1999; Whitson, 1990). In other words, the way one performs one’s muscles—“the ability to play sport, win fights and
‘stand up for [one]self’” (Frost, 2003, p. 65)—is also equally important to the construction of a dominant masculine identity. When Connell (1983 cited in Morgan, 1993) confidently states that part of being an “adult male is [to] distinctively occupy space, to have a physical presence in the world” (p. 72), he understands that not all manners of occupying space are equally represented. Rather, it is a particular occupation of space, an aggressive, forceful (Shogan, 1999), penetrative or phallic (Pronger, 1999) way of being in space, that marks dominant masculinity as distinctive. Sport is a primary social institution where boys and men learn and re-learn masculinity as a particular space-occupying mode of embodiment (Pronger, 1999; Shogan, 1999; Whitson, 1992).

Brian Pronger (1999) argues that competitive sport inscribes a phallic embodiment on boys and men. According to Pronger, phallocentrism can be defined as the “despotic imperative to take up more space and yield less of it, be it physical, cultural, fiscal, hierarchical, or other kinds of space” (p. 380). Thus, the masculine imperative to dominate space through a particular type of male embodiment is not limited to sport, but sport remains a central venue where boys and men are taught to “take away space from others and jealously guard it for themselves” (p. 382). Debra Shogan (1999) makes the case that sport plays a greater role than just teaching boys and men particular modes of phallic embodiment, but that “through the repetitive practices of sport, what counts as maleness is entrenched in an economy of impenetrability, forcefulness and strength” (p. 58). Sport naturalizes the culturally constructed ideal of maleness as a phallic enterprise, giving rise to the notion that men are naturally or inherently predisposed to particular aggressive, space-occupying ways of being. Boys and men that do not measure up to an aggressive, space-occupying masculinity run the risk of being marginalized as weak,
passive, and non-dominant, characteristics which are the culturally constructed antithesis of maleness and, as such, are commonly cast as “gay” (Mac An Ghail, 1994).

How one performs their body matters as much if not more so than what kind of body one possesses. A phallic identity “requires the permission of culture and/or the exercise of attitude more than the possession of a particular kind of body” (Bordo, 1999, p. 101). One important component of this embodied performance is the “compulsion to oppress the body of another” (Theweleit, 1989, p. 87). Thus, a phallic masculinity is organized around a series of binary oppositions with phallic masculinity always defined over and against those bodies that it oppresses, including those of women, children, and other, weaker men. However, the body itself, with its internal desires and unpredictable eruptions, characteristics that are culturally linked to the female body (Bordo, 1994; Grosz, 1994; Theweleit, 1989), threaten to over ride the phallic aspirations of the masculine subject, and thus have come to be an object of masculine anxiety and thus a target for control in the phallic imagination (Theweleit, 1989). The goal of phallic masculinity, therefore, is the absolute eradication of the feminine-flesh or at least the transformation of the flesh into the ordered predictability of the machine (Theweleit, 1989). Alan Petersen (1998) characterizes Theweleit’s appraisal of a phallic masculine body as one that is “controlled, emotionally bereft [and] expresses revulsion and fear of the soft, fluid, liquid female body which is seen to be the quintessentially negative ‘other’ lurking inside the male body” (p. 54). There are two diametrically opposed bodies at play in Theweleit’s analysis. The first is the “soft, fluid, ultimately female body—negative

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18 Although Klaus Theweleit was writing about a particular type of body culture that existed under Nazism, Barbara Ehrenreich (1987) makes clear that Theweleit’s theories have applicability beyond fascist contexts and in contemporary society “because [fascism] is already implicit in the daily relationships of men and women” (p.xv).
other lurking in the male body” (Benjamin and Rabinbach, 1989, p. xix). The second is the “hard, organized, phallic body devoid of all internal viscera [that] finds its apotheosis in the machine” (p. xix). The phallic male body both literally and metaphorically hardens itself to all soft or feminine attributes that threaten to disintegrate its isolated, organized, machine-like armour back into human flesh. The lean, muscular, dominating male body is the “hard body” of Theweleit’s phallic imagination, which exists in opposition to the loose, weak, vulnerable “soft body” of the feminine-Other. A phallic masculinity is thus both a body type and the performance of the male body. Below, I explore the epistemological foundations that underline the phallic masculine body as I use it in the present research.

**From Hegemonic Masculinity to Normative/Dominant/Phallic Masculinity**

Connell’s (1983; 2005) theory of hegemonic masculinity had secured a position of theoretical dominance in the field of masculinity studies (Pringle, 2005). The concept of hegemonic masculinity is rooted in Antonio Gramsci’s theory of hegemony. Hegemony is a particularly effective analytical tool for interrogating and exposing the dynamic construction of masculine subjectivities through cultural, institutional, and interpersonal practices of everyday life because it provides an anti-essentialist, anti-reductionist, analytic framework of gender relations. However, the analytical and theoretical domination that hegemonic masculinity has achieved has had the unfortunate consequence of narrowing both the issues of masculinity under consideration as well as the ways in which we understand those issues (Sparkes cited in Pringle, 2005). Moreover, the concept is not without its critics, as I demonstrate below.
A re-occurring critique of the concept of hegemonic masculinity is directed at the singleness of the concept (Jefferson, 2002; Petersen, 1998; Pringle, 2005; Wetherell and Edley, 1999), or the notion that “hegemonic masculinity is just one style or…one set of ruling ideas” (Wetherell and Edley, 1999, p. 351). For example, Archer and Yamashita (2003) argue that even though hegemony theory is designed to disrupt the notion of a hegemonic masculinity, much contemporary Western research on masculinity tends to reproduce the notion of a singular, privileged masculinity. Archer and Yamashita go on to demonstrate that multiple masculinities are produced at the intersections of race, gender, space, and place (Archer and Yamashita, 2003, p. 124).

Richard Pringle (2005) argues that the explanatory power of hegemonic masculinity falters because it attempts to capture a dynamic blend of multiple and independent discourses under the rubric of gender dominance within a particular gender order (Pringle, 2005). Thus, everything is reduced to gender without giving proper attention to the manner in which diverse discourses converge on the individual to construct the experience of masculinity within a particular socio-historic context. In this sense, hegemonic masculinity is more appropriately thought of as a “term of generalization and generalizations, [that] although useful for helping understand big picture accounts can be problematic for understanding the constitution of individual subjectivities” (p. 267). This critique is echoed by Edley and Wetherell (1999) who argue that the notion of hegemonic masculinity is insufficient for articulating the processes at play in the “nitty gritty of negotiating masculine identities and men’s identity strategies” (p. 336) at the level of the everyday interactions of the individual. The inability of the hegemonic masculinity framework to account for the multiple and nuanced relations
involved in the construction and re-construction of masculinity is the primary reason this research has elected to turn to the Foucaultian theory of subjectification as an analytical tool.

While Gramsci traces the functioning of power back to a ruling group, Foucault links the “workings of power to multiple discourses but avoid[s] fingering a set group as responsible for producing or controlling these discourses” (Pringle, 2005, p. 262). Foucault draws attention to the multiplicity of power by pluralizing his vocabulary. Thus, Foucault would speak of “hegemonies”, “regimes of truth”, “knowledges”, or “power relations” as opposed to the more common singular form, “hegemony”, “truth”, “knowledge”, or “power” (Olsen in Pringle, 2005). Such diversity, Foucault argues, makes it impossible for a ruling group of men to manage the multiplicity of discourses as a means of securing their patriarchal privilege. Indeed, discourses do converge to produce the more or less powerful, but these convergences are not by conscious design. There is, in other words, no individual or ruling group standing outside of power, manipulating its operations to their advantage, rather “everyone is caught” within the web of power, “those who exercise power just as much as those over whom it is exercised” (Foucault, 1980c, p. 156). Foucault suggests that this modern technology of power does not take its “historical origin from an identifiable individual or group of individuals who decide to implement it so as to further their interests or facilitate their utilization”. As opposed to power as a grand strategy organized by ruling groups, Foucault conceives of power as emerging from “local and particular needs” that gradually develop in a “piecemeal fashion” (Foucault, 1980c, p. 159) to the point where “certain positions preponderate” and function to “permit an effect of supremacy” (p. 156), and it is this “piecemeal”
“effect” which is often confused for the deliberate and orchestrated governance of a ruling group(s). Thus, a Foucaultian analysis of masculinity and fatness is suspicious of binary accounts of power, recognizing that the discourses of size, gender, race, sexuality, and social class, to name a few, may converge on young men’s bodies to position them differentially in social contexts, complicating simplistic notions of dominant groups (i.e. space-occupying fat male body) over and against dominated groups (i.e., women and smaller men).

A Foucaultian informed discourse analysis would search for the complex intersecting effects of discourse or the manner in which discourses of health, beauty, and fitness may converge with discourses of gender, race, social class, for instance, in the construction of situationally specific subjectivities. Martain Mac An Ghaill (2000) warns, however, that Foucaultian informed investigations into masculinity, although purportedly directed at the micro-production of identity, often end up re-producing a “unitary masculinity, represented by the Macho Man and the Jock Boy” (p. 210). A responsible post-structural analysis pays close attention to the situated knowledges of the research participants themselves, thus taking account of and allowing the multiple and local discourses of the participants to emerge. More importantly, such an analysis would explore how discourses are not deterministic, but rather are taken up, deflected, and/or resisted in complex ways in the construction of culturally meaningful, locally situated subjectivities through what Michel Foucault referred to as “technologies of the self”.

Conclusion

This chapter has overviewed relevant literature on masculinity, the male body, fatness, and subjectification. I have used this chapter as an opportunity to outline a
feminist-informed, poststructural theoretical framework for exploring the ways in which young men take up and embody health and body discourses. Additionally, I have highlighted several research gaps, especially the lack of research on the intersections of masculinity and fatness. I have also pointed out the need for more nuanced analysis of the shifting experiences of fatness across differently situated populations. In the following chapter I will discuss the methodological tools I will employ to answer the outlined research questions, while drawing particular attention to the way in which the research methodologies are informed by a poststructural sensibility.
CHAPTER THREE

METHODOLOGY

In this general struggle of which he is speaking, he is inevitably on one side or the other. He is caught up in the battle, had adversaries and is fighting to win (Foucault, 2003, p. 268).

Qualitative research methodologies today are confronted with a “triple crisis of representation, legitimation, and praxis” (Denzin, 1997, p. 3), which together mark what is commonly called the “linguistic turn” in the social sciences. The linguistic turn is characterized by a profound suspicion of the foundational tenets of Enlightenment ways of knowing, including reason, progress, and objectivity. Considering its broad-based critique, the linguistic turn might more appropriately be referred to as a “crisis of realism” (Scheurich, 1997). Although it is difficult to pinpoint the origins of this period of crisis it is generally attributed to the radical political criticisms emerging out of the feminist and civil rights movements of the 1960s and 1970s (McDonald and Birrell, 1999) along with the French “post”-foundational scholarly writings of Jean Francois Lyotard, Michael Foucault, and Jacques Derrida (Denzin, 2005; Rail, 1998). Regardless of its origins, the linguistic turn has had a profound impact on social theory, particularly on qualitative research.

As Norman Denzin (1997) suggests, it has instigated three “crises”. The first crisis is broadly referred to as the “representational crisis”. Here, the notion that experience can be captured and represented in an unmediated fashion is problematized (Denzin, 1997, 2005). Jacques Derrida, the famous French poststructuralist, contentiously wrote that “there is nothing outside the text” (Derrida cited in Fox, 1994, p. 163), meaning that everything is embedded within cultural systems of meaning or, in other
Whereas at one time language and discourse were thought to be neutral vehicles of conveyance, now it is understood that any attempt to represent an experience is at the same time a construction of that experience (Lather, 1991; Richardson, 1994; Richardson and St.Pierre, 2005). Thus, language and discourse are both inevitable and central to the construction of experience. The inability to purely and objectively represent “reality,” which is one of the foundational principles of “good” qualitative research, is recognized as the “representational crisis”. The second crisis emerges from the first because if it is no longer possible to objectively capture an event or experience without at the same time constructing that event or experience, it then becomes difficult, if not impossible, to measure and evaluate the accuracy of a given representation. This is a crisis of legitimization where the criteria for evaluating and interpreting qualitative research are problematized. The third and final crisis centres around politics. Given that there is no unmediated access to “truth” and, furthermore, no transparent criteria to validate representations of “truth,” it becomes difficult to engage in an ethically responsible politics. In response to the crisis of praxis, Norman Denzin (1997) provocatively queries: “Is it possible to effect change in the world if society is only and always a text [language and discourse]?” (p. 3).

Increasingly, contemporary qualitative researchers in the human disciplines are compelled to reflect upon and respond to the “triple crisis” in their research. This is not an easy task as there are no clear cut rules that guarantee an adequate account of each of the three crises. Instead, researchers who take the “crisis” seriously must reflexively experiment with the various stages of their research project, and struggle to think through
and re-work their project so as to produce a document that is complex, polyvocal, contradictory, and open-ended. In this chapter I intend to outline how I engage with and respond to the various crises so as to produce what Norman Denzin refers to as a “critical poststructuralist” research project.

Importantly, this document should not be read as a “realist” text. When I say “realist” I mean research that is governed by the assumption of a “valid” research design, carried out by a reasonably-minded autonomous researcher in the production of a “trustworthy” representation of “reality” (Scheurich, 1997). By these standards I will most certainly fall short. In its place, I offer a “model of truth that is narrative, deeply ethical, open ended, and conflictual, performance, and audience based, and always personal, biographical, political, structural, and historical” (Denzin, 1997, p. 266). My goal is not to produce a poststructuralist research project that is simply ludic aesthetic play, a critique that some theorists have leveled against those working from a postfoundational framework (Malik, 1997), but one that is steadfastly committed to a political project that exposes the power relations at work in the intersubjective and institutional domination of some bodies and privileging of others. In this chapter, which I have broadly—and not unproblematically—named “Methodology,” I offer you a “toolbox” for reading this document. I use the term “toolbox” as opposed to “instructions” to emphasis that this is your text to make of it what you will. In line with the postmodernist

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19 Poststructuralism and postmodernism, each in their own way, challenge the assumptions of qualitative research specifically and the foundation of ways of knowing more generally. Although the two terms are closely related and have been instrumental in shaping one another, they are often mistakenly conflated (Payne, 1997). Poststructuralism is a response to the structuralism of Claude Levi-Strauss and Ferdinand de Saussure, and is most commonly associated with the French theorists Michel Foucault, Roland Barthes and, in particular, Jacques Derrida. Language is no longer considered to be a transparent medium within the poststructural moment, but is thought to be constitutive of what it represents. Postmodernism, on the other hand, offers a similar set of challenges, but extrapolates its critique beyond language. Indeed, it may be antithetical to postmodernism to try and characterize it given the range of theorists that label themselves
privileging of polyvocality, there is no “one” correct way of reading this document, rather each reader will bring their own unique historical background, embodied experiences, and socially situated positioning to the process of making sense of my work. At points you will agree with what I have identified, at others you will see something else entirely. To the best of my ability I have resisted the modernist temptation to produce a hermeneutically sealed text with one “truth,” fostering, instead, a “plurality of interpretations” (Kvale, 1996). To this end, I have set out to produce a “writerly text,” (Silverman, 1983) or a text which leaves spaces for the reader to “write” their own graffiti into the text. In so doing, I have deliberately set out to challenge the well-established binary between the privileged “writer” and the impoverished “reader” (Richardson and St. Pierre, 2005). Of course, not all readers are equally positioned and some graffiti-writers will produce more legitimate re-inscriptions than others. In particular, I’m thinking of the members of my dissertation committee, who ultimately, have the legitimacy to read this document in binary terms—as a true/false, proper/improper, pass/fail. In this sense, it is important that minimally I provide a “toolbox” outlining the epistemological and ontological assumptions underlying the research questions, research design, data collection, data transcription, data analysis, and finally the write up.

“postmodernists” along with the sheer number of “postmodernisms” in common usage today (Rail, 2002; 1998). Here, however, I am using the term to loosely characterize a theoretical sensibility within the social sciences that is typically associated with theorists such as Jean-Francois Lyotard and Jean Baudrillard, which centres on a general suspicion of the founding assumptions of Enlightenment thought. In particular, postmodernism is skeptical about all truth claims and grand totalizing narratives, including the myth that technological innovation and reason are progressively moving us towards a “promised land”. Although there are differences between the two terms, I often use them interchangeably in this text/dissertation; however, I tend to prefer the term “poststructural” because I privilege language and discourse in the data analysis.
Crisis of Representation

The “crisis of representation” does not necessarily put an end to representation, it just signals the death of pure presence (Denzin, 1997). In its place, a form of writing that is conflicted, open, embodied, situated, and unabashedly reflexive is called for. Norman Denzin characterizes this writing in the following manner:

There is no secret key that will unlock its (truth’s) meanings. It is a labyrinth with no fixed origins and no firm centre, structure, or set of recurring meanings. All that can be sought is a more fully grounded, multisensual, multiperspectival epistemology that does not privilege sight over the other senses, including sound, touch, and taste (p. 36).

Stephen Tyler (1986) refers to this form of representation as “evocative writing”. The objective of evocative writing is not to produce a “truthful” account, but rather a “cooperatively evolved text consisting of fragments of discourse intended to evoke in the minds of both reader and writer an emergent fantasy of a possible world of commonsensual reality” (p. 125). With evocative writing, the emphasis is on dialogue, collaboration, and polyphonic voices, thus producing a “messy text” (Denzin, 1997) that does not have the narrative coherence of modernist research reports. In this way, these “new” writings challenge the power-laden binaries that are the foundational assumptions of modernist research protocols. Namely, evocative writing seeks to disrupt the power relations inscribed in the knower/known binary, as well as those of the writer/reader opposition. For example, my dissertation has multiple “voices” running through it, even though some are more apparent than others. This document is a collaborative construction, to be sure, with the voices of the research participants, my research advisor and committee, as well as the anticipated reflections of eventual readers all shaping, in one way or another, the writing of this dissertation. The goal of evocative writing,
therefore, is to disrupt the myth of the solitary, agentic author in control of the finished product by laying bare the interconnectedness of the writing process. Such writing sets out to both challenge the “author-function” (Foucault, 1991) of a text where one voice gains absolute authority over the final product, while at the same time deconstructing the myth of the “one”, “real” and “truthful” account of the social world. If successful, this “messy,” clamorous style of writing leads to a collapse of the ideology of the “real” and opens itself up to multiple readings where the reader/writer can inflect their own experiences and meanings onto the text, to challenge, critique, and build upon the existent representation. In this sense, evocative writing involves the production of a “writerly text”.

However, these “new” techniques of representation ought not be understood as more accurate or necessarily more authentic versions of writing (Gallop, 1988). We should not, in other words, understand them as a corrective or cure to more traditional scientific writing, but rather as techniques for laying bare processes of representation while at the same time challenging and problematizing those very processes (Lather, 2001). To this end, Patti Lather (2001) refers to a critical postmodern research as having a “doubled epistemology” where texts are simultaneously a site of a failure to represent as well as textual experiments which are not about solving the crisis of representation, but troubling the very claims to represent.

A postmodern decentred style of writing does not necessarily guarantee a collapse of the ideology of the “real” and the power relations it obscures. Jane Gallop (1988) cautions that postmodern modes of representation can themselves become de rigeur,
mere aesthetic play, and apolitical techniques of gaining instant legitimacy in postmodern times. She suggests that the

celebration of fragmentary “writing” is simply the latest ruse of style, the formulation of a style that is consistent with the inevitability of discontinuity. Choosing fragmentation is a strategy to recontain the violence of contradiction by means of an overarching theory of inconsistency, creating a work in which inconsistency would not be out of place, putting inconsistency in its place. (p. 18)

Thus, for the purposes of my research, I will suggest that it is not style or content that characterizes critical postmodernism, but its effects. The success or failure of my critical postmodernist research project should be judged on the degree to which it exposes and destabilizes the obscure power relations that shape the research and writing process.

Thus, “new” forms of writing are no substitute for a continued and explicit interrogation of the discursive subject positions that are produced and performed in the process of research and representation. For example, in the preceding paragraph I try and build the case that my dissertation is a collaborative text with multiple voices shaping its form. However, these voices are not equally positioned, nor are they equally heard and recorded in the dissertation. Furthermore, although I suggest that evocative writing is deconstructive of the “author-function,” it would be naïve to assume this outright. I still have the final decision over the voices that are included, emphasized, or erased. I also have control over the context in which these voices are immersed as well as the narrative they construct. And, ultimately, I am the one who will benefit both symbolically and materially if I successfully complete the requirements of a doctoral dissertation. To suggest that these “new” representational techniques are evocative is not to suggest that they are somehow liberating or egalitarian. Objectives of “freedom” and “equality” are premised on grand theories of the autonomous, agentic subject who can be set free from
the power relations that constrain them, a set of assumptions that postmodernism takes issue with (Lather, 1991; Rail, 1998). Rather, the task of critical postmodernist modes of representation is to “disrupt and subvert rather than (re-) construct totalities” (Flax, 1993, p. 139). One of the ways the postmodernist researcher can accomplish this is by refusing the “god-trick” of “seeing everywhere from nowhere” (Haraway, 1991). In other words, postmodernist researchers do not assume a location of objectivity in relation to their research, but embed themselves within it through a critical self-reflexive positioning.

**Positioning**

Although researchers from Western academic backgrounds often assume that they are doing “good” work by critiquing and dismantling the status quo, it is often the case that they unwittingly rely on deep civilizational biases that privilege certain ways of knowing that pay homage to some voices while silencing others, thereby producing a representation that perpetuates a particular dominant world view (Scheurich, 1997). This is not to suggest that we, as researchers, are “bad” people, but to emphasize that the “truth” frameworks available to us are necessarily embedded within a particular socio-historic context that privileges certain knowledges and bodies, while oppressing others. For Jane Flax (1993), this realization marks the “end of innocence” of Western ways of knowing. She explains:

> By innocent knowledge I mean the discovery of some sort of truth that can tell us how to act in the world in ways that benefit or are for the (at least ultimate) good for all. Those whose actions are grounded in or informed by such truth will also have their innocence guaranteed. They can do only good, not harm, to others. (p. 133)

We must avoid the seduction of “innocence” in our qualitative research, where our “good intentions” set up opportunities for more egregious exploitations of the Other (Lather,
Thus, it is crucial that we recognize that our “research is not an innocent or distant academic exercise but an activity that has something at stake and that occurs in a set of political and social conditions” (Smith, 1999, p. 5). To this end, we must “position” ourselves as political subjects within our research projects.

Michelle Fine (1993) suggests that we openly embrace our political positioning and explicitly write it into our research. Rather than hide behind the façade of innocence or objectivity, Fine encourages feminist researchers to “come ‘out’ about the political spaces” (p. 230) in which their work is embedded. She suggests that to do otherwise merely “camouflages” the “deepest, most privileged interests” (p. 209) of the researcher. However, coming “out” as a politically motivated and discursively constituted subject is not as simple as it might at first appear. It is not a simple case of stringing together a list of social descriptors of oneself (i.e., white, male, middle-class, heterosexual etc.) followed by an itemization of one’s political and epistemological sensibilities (i.e., left-leaning, post-Marxist etc.), as though this somehow clarifies who and what one is all about. There are no simple techniques of naming the self, because “we are not immediately present to ourselves” (Haraway, 1991, p. 192). In other words, the notion that we can name the discursive power relations that form us is a modernist assumption premised on a particular understanding of power. Judith Butler writes that

we are used to thinking of power as what presses on the subject from the outside….But if, following Foucault, we understand power as forming the subject as well as providing the very condition of its existence and the trajectory of its desire, in a strong sense, what we depend on for our existence and what we harbor and preserve in the beings that we are. (Butler cited in Davies, 2006b, p. 426)

The task of disentangling “who we are” from the cultural and historical conditions of our possibility becomes that much more complicated with the recognition that those essential
aspects of our self—our gender, our sexuality, our race—are in fact the outcome of complex discursive forces. Thus, to come “out” as a white, heterosexual, male is not merely a reflection of some core physiological and psychical being, rather such a declaration is itself a reiteration of pre-existing culturally meaningful race, sexuality, and gender norms that gain a materiality through constant repetition. Put simply, those identity characteristics that we assume to be essential to “who we are,” are in fact discursive materializations (Butler, 1993).

For Judith Butler (2008) there is no “real” referent, some foundational point of orientation outside of discourse, not even the body. She writes that “stories do not capture the body to which they refer. Even the history of this body is not fully narratable. To be a body is, in some sense, to be deprived of having a full recollection of one’s life. There is thus a history to my body of which I can have no recollection” (p. 37). Part of being human, argues Butler, involves a series of erasures, confusions, and elisions that allow the discursively materialized body to assume the facticity of natural flesh. In this way, we are never “immediately present to ourselves” (Haraway, 1991) and thus any attempt to give an “account of oneself” (Butler, 2008) is doomed to failure. The “I” that engages in self-disclosure is always radically “conditioned and produced within a matrix of conventions and norms governing the formation of the subject” (p. 20) and therefore never fully present to itself. But this does not mean that we abandon the critically reflexive project of positioning ourselves within our research. To this end, Butler provocatively asks “If I find that, despite my best efforts, a certain opacity persists and I cannot make myself fully accountable to you, is this ethical failure?” (37).
Donna Haraway (1991) anticipates Judith Butler’s question with her endorsement of a feminist epistemology of “situated knowledges”. She, like Butler, dismisses the idea of a completely transparent positioning, suggesting that the belief in a position of such transcendence is a “god trick” designed to conceal the power relations of the unmarked white, male body. In its place she makes the case for “politics and epistemologies of location, positioning, and situating, where partiality and not universality is the condition for being heard to make rational knowledge claims” where privilege is given to “the view from the body, always complex, contradictory, structuring and structured body, versus the view from above, from nowhere, from simplicity” (p. 195). Interestingly, Haraway employs the metaphor of “vision,” which has been aggressively critiqued by feminist scholars (Grosz, 1994; Harding, 1998). But she does so as a challenge to the modernist “ocular epistemology” (Denzin, 1997), which assumes that vision is a pure and “truthful” account of “reality”. Haraway’s “vision” is not a transcendent vision, but a perspectival vision, always situated in a body that is embedded in a particular set of social and historical conditions. She writes:

I would like to insist on the embodied nature of all vision, and so reclaim the sensory system that has been used to signify a leap out of the marked body and into a conquering gaze from nowhere. This is the gaze that mythically inscribes all the marked bodies that makes the unmarked category the power to claim to see and not to have been seen, to represent while escaping representation...I would like a doctrine of embodied objectivity…feminist objectivity means quite simply situated knowledges. (188)

For her, acknowledging the situatedness of all vision enables us to see the world differently, from situated vantage points, highlighting that all modes of vision are “specific ways of seeing, that is, ways of life” (p. 190).
An evocative, critical poststructural text deploys an embodied objectivity.

According to Denzin (1997) this necessitates that writers disrupt the visual and mimetic roots of modernist research techniques by corporealizing our writing, by challenging the reader to engage all of their senses, to hear, see, smell, and feel in new ways. It acknowledges the bodies of the participants, researcher, and reader as integral to the research process, not a nuisance to be controlled and overcome. To this end, Elizabeth Adams St. Pierre (Richardson and St. Pierre, 2005) suggests that researchers move to include embodied data, or what she variously refers to as “dream data,” “sensual data,” or “emotional data” in their research design. Of the unique nature of embodied data, St. Pierre writes that,

these data were neither in my interview transcripts nor in my field notes where data are supposed to be, for how can one textualize everything one thinks and sense in the course of a study? But they were always already in my mind and body, and they cropped up unexpectedly and fittingly in my writing—fugitive, fleeting data that were excessive and out-of-category. (in Richardson and St.Pierre, 2005, p. 970)

Embodied objectivity poses a direct challenge to Enlightenment dualism as it disrupts the boundaries between mind/ body, objectivity/subjectivity, and truth/fiction, boundaries which privilege a particular disembodied, white, masculinist, Western way of knowing.

In my research, I have taken several steps to “bring the body back in”. First, I have made embodied accounts of the research participants a priority in my research, using several different and innovative techniques (See the section on Photo(Focus) Groups for a more thorough explanation). Here, the body itself, and not just the spoken words of the young men, became part of the research data. Following Wanda Pillow’s (1997) lead, I positioned the bodies of the young men involved in my research as a “site of deconstructive practice” (p. 360). Here, I was looking for how the body itself is a
“messy text”, as it exceeds and disrupts “our theories, practices, and programs” (p. 390).

To this end, I have included corporeal biographies (see Appendix G) of many, but not all\textsuperscript{20}, of the research participants, as well as some of the key adult figures whose embodied presence was important to the research context. These biographies are constructed by splicing together diffuse discursive bodily traces that include the participants own embodied narratives, other participants readings of their bodies, as well as my own constructions/observations of their bodies and embodied practices. Second, I made specific notation of those moments during my “field work,” interviews, and focus groups where my body moved from the “backstage,” as the body of the “distant,” “objective” researcher, to the “frontstage” as the body of the researched, or the body that is under interrogation and discussion. Those occasions when my whiteness or body size, for example, was brought to the fore proved to be a valuable opportunity to highlight and unpack the intersubjective space that was produced between my body and the bodies of my research participants during the research encounter. Finally, as a method of positioning, I have corporealized my research write-up by including a life history account of my relationship with food, exercise, and body size in the introduction. Rather than merely stating the identity categories that I occupy (i.e., white, male, heterosexual, middle-class, of fluctuating body size) I have tried to narrate my experiences into a story form. This is not to argue, however, that my story is more truthful, but to present an evocative text that does the important work of presenting a partial, situated, and embodied account of myself. Linda Alcoff (1991-2) argues that it is crucial that those

\textsuperscript{20} As with any research protocol, some participants are more engaged and play a more prominent role in the research process. The situation is no different with this research, and some participants I came to have a better understanding of than others. Therefore, I have selected key participants to write corporeal biographies on.
who are “speaking for others” in their research engage in an analysis that constructs “hypotheses about the possible connections between [their] locations and [their] worlds” (p. 25) as a mechanism of resisting the seduction of studying everyone else’s discursively constructed bodies but their own. In other words, the objective of including my life history narrative is to situate myself as a researcher with a body and an embodied perspective. For Alcoff, positioning and representing the self is a central component of ethically representing the Other.

Representing the Other

Linda Thuwai Smith (1999) declares that “the term research is inextricably linked to European imperialism and colonialism” (p. 1). Such a claim is deeply problematic for Western academic institutions that are premised on the “great promises of Enlightenment” where it is thought that the “truth will set us free” (Flax, 1993, p. 133). Within this academic tradition, it is assumed “those whose actions are grounded in truth…will be the agents of progress and freedom for all” (p. 133). However, Smith turns this Enlightenment meta-narrative on its head by linking research and the production of “truth” with the darkest aspects of Western domination, exploitation, and violence. In so doing, Smith emphasizes that research is not inherently “good,” but harbors the potential to be an evermore elaborate technique of surveillance, normalization, and exploitation (Lather, 2001). In this section, I am specifically going to address the “dangers and difficulties of speaking for others” (Alcoff, 1991-2, p. 19).

All research, in one way or another, is an attempt to represent some categorically defined “Other” to a particular audience. In this sense, “speaking for others” is an essential aspect of the research process. However, the matter of representing others has
increasingly become a serious problem in critical qualitative research circles (Alcoff, 1991-2). The issue is not just that the “Other” has been excluded—a problem which could be resolved by “giving voice” to the other (a notion that is rife with its own set of problematic humanist assumptions)—but how the other has been included, under whose knowledge frameworks, and with what consequences (Smith, 1999). In other words, the problem is with “whose version of truth gets to be essentialized” (Scheurich, 1999, p. 68). This provocative statement highlights how Western hegemonic knowledge frameworks are a power play where multiple, situated, and competing truths are whittled into one hegemonic “truth”. Thus, speaking or representing the “Other” is a form of “discursive imperialism” (Alcoff, 1991-2, p. 17) where the “wild profusion of the Other…is reduced and refashioned to fit the modernist prison of the Same” (Scheurich, 1997, p. 70).

The recognition of this dominating tendency within research has led some theorists to abandon “all practices of speaking for [others] and assert that one can only know one’s own narrow and individual experience” (Alcoff, 1991-2, p. 17). However, Linda Alcoff argues that such an isolationist position is neither possible nor politically responsible. To limit one’s voice to speaking for oneself assumes that “one can retreat into one’s discrete location…that one can disentangle oneself from others’ locations, situations, practices” (p. 20). No matter how vehemently one states that “I speak only for myself,” their words will always have unanticipated effects on others because we are necessarily and unavoidably intersubjective social beings. Given that no one ever speaks solely for themselves, that the language and discourse they use to speak of the “self” preexists, anticipates, and is constitutive of the speaking subject (Butler, 1997; 2008), the notion of the detached, autonomous speaking-self is a ruse of discursive power.
Moreover, even if it were possible to speak for ourselves, to limit our discourse to the self “significantly undercuts the possibility of political effectivity” (Alcoff, 1991-2, p. 17). Thus, if I am disturbed enough and moved to action by prevailing social inequalities, does this not necessitate, on some level, a form of speaking for or speaking about the Other; in short, some representation of the unequal social relations that oppress the Other? For Alcoff, the abandonment of all practices of speaking for Others not only limits political effectivity, it may be that such a stance emerges from a more specious desire. She suggests that the “retreat response…may be motivated by a desire to find a method or practice immune from criticism” (p. 22). The desire for the production of a knowledge claim beyond critique has its origins in the Enlightenment ideology of the “real,” where the goal is objectivity, truth, and reason, concepts which we have spent the better part of this chapter undermining.

If it is politically dubious and pragmatically impossible to stop speaking for Others, as Alcoff (1991-2) argues, the question remains “How can I interact with Otherness without reducing it to the Same?” (Scheurich, 1997, p. 88). In other words, how can we engage with and represent the Other without violently reducing it to Western imperial categories of domination? I argue that there are three essential ingredients to a responsible, non-dominating politics of representing the Other\(^\text{21}\), including: creating the conditions for a different sort of dialogue; locating oneself and one’s knowledge within

\(^{21}\) I recognize that there is no such thing as a simple set of rules that will guarantee a “responsible, non-dominating” research design. The suggestions that follow are designed to help expose and disrupt the power imbalances that shape traditional research protocols and the prevailing social relations that they are embedded within but, alas, there is no such thing as an easy and assured “way out” of imperial research relations. In this sense, the recommendations that follow should be viewed as contingent, experimental, and forever evolving depending on the specificities of the research encounter and context.
broader power relations; and finally, maintaining an explicitly open and welcoming disposition to criticism.  

_Creating a different dialogue._  

Borrowing the work of Gayatri Spivak, Linda Alcoff (1991-2) suggests that Western researchers need to learn to “speak to” rather than “speaking for” Others. She writes that “if the dangers of speaking for Others result from the possibility of misrepresentation, expanding one’s own authority and privilege, and a generally imperialist speaking ritual, than speaking with and to can lessen these dangers” (p. 23). However, Linda Tuhiwai Smith (1999) observes that a corrective to “talk to” does not always result in cross-cultural “hearing”. She understands that different cultures know the world in radically different ways, and these ways of knowing are rarely equal, with Western, educated, predominantly, but not necessarily, white males occupying a stranglehold on “truth”. Given radically different orientations to the lifeworld, it is possible to see how dominant ways of knowing could easily make “alternatives disappear by erasing and destroying the reality which they attempt to represent” (Shiva cited in Smith, 1999, p. 100). For instance, I could easily dismiss and erase the stories of the young men involved in my research by over-laying them with more “accurate” and “scientific” accounts of body weight and health, but to do so would be to violate the conversational ethic of “hearing” across situated cultural, age, social class, and racial positions. This would be, to use Smith’s language, an imperial gesture of imposing a Western dominant knowledge framework onto the Other, in this case, the differently situated young men that participated in my research study.
In an attempt to create a research environment that de-stabilizes the imperial tendencies of qualitative research, I have taken several steps to encourage a talking to and hearing of the Other. This includes open-ended interview sessions and focus groups where the topic of discussion was, whenever possible, determined by the participants, and not a disembodied, abstract “interview guide”. For example, on several occasions the participants themselves brought in internet images for the focus group discussion. On another occasion the participants encouraged me to come to a different location where internet access was available to see a particular “You Tube” clip. Rather than denying these interactive gestures as outside research protocol, I embraced them as sincere conversational gestures that enabled me to gain greater insight into what mattered to these young men. In other words, my research was guided more by the principles of engaging in a respectful conversation than it was prescribed by an alienated and alienating research design distant from the everyday life worlds of the young men themselves. Moreover, the Photovoice technique was also designed in such a way so as to give the participants themselves some control over how they represented their life worlds (See “Photovoice” for an expanded discussion)\(^\text{22}\). However, with the imperative to hear comes the important work of determining what position one hears from and what knowledge frameworks shape what one hears.

*Locating oneself within matrices of power.*

Increasingly, self-positioning within qualitative research is considered essential to producing quality, credible results. However, positioning involves more than simply re-

\(^{22}\) It is important to note here that all of these techniques are to some extent governed by Research Ethics Review Board at University of Toronto. Thus, it is not a simple case that “anything goes” in the research environment. In fact, there is a burgeoning critique that ever-more vigilant ethical protocols are destroying the intersubjective research environment (MacNeill, 2006)
counting the various identity categories one occupies—i.e., white, male, heterosexual etc. Chandra Mohanty (2003) suggests that researchers also have to consider the context of their knowledge and the broader power relations such knowledge engenders. Specifically, Mohanty is critical of Western feminists who fail to interrogate the “context of the global hegemony of Western scholarship” (p. 21) when representing women of colour in the Third World. She argues that much of these representations have served to produce a universal Third World “Woman” category, as sexually subordinate, uneducated, poor, and victimized, which is than implicitly differentiated from the Western “Woman” as educated, modern, and empowered. This is an important point because it highlights the degree to which scholars involved in “good,” ostensibly emancipatory projects can inadvertently end up oppressing the group whose interests they set out to represent. From this account, we can see that the power to represent does not simply come from the individual, however privileged or marginalized they may be, but is at the same time rooted in a set of language, institutional, geographical, economic, and political discursivities that far exceed the “individual”. Thus, it becomes imperative that researchers engage in the difficult work of “seeing” the broader power relations that shape their work, its reception, and outcomes. Along these lines, Linda Alcoff (1991-2) proposes that perhaps this work would be “most successful if engaged in collectively with others, by which aspects of our location less highlighted in our own minds might be revealed to us” (p. 25). In the words of Donna Haraway, an open positioning of this sort is a dangerous one because it “resists the politics of closure, finality…and is insatiably curious about the webs of differential positioning” (p. 196). Indeed, this is a vulnerable
process for the researcher to engage in as it involves opening oneself and one’s work up to explicit criticism.

*Inviting criticism.*

Being accountable and taking responsibility for one’s work is the third criterion for an ethical representation of the Other. Here, the researcher forgoes the modernist temptation to produce the unassailable document and recognizes that their work is necessarily partial, incomplete, and situated. As mentioned earlier, “the production of knowledge about cultural and geographical Others is no longer seen as apolitical and disinterested” (Mohanty, 1994, p. 146). With this loss of innocence, the real political task is to produce a representation that is not dominative and exploitative of the Other. This is, as it were, a politics of collectivity, where one doesn’t hide behind “valid” or “truthful” accounts of reality, but embraces the notion that all representations are situated portraits of an irreducible social complexity, and therefore available to criticism from different situated perspectives. In this process, criticism should be understood as an opportunity for multiple perspectives of the reader, the researcher, and the participants to mark their “version” of the world onto the text. Linda Alcoff (1991-2) proposes that “this entails in practice…a serious and sincere commitment to remain open to criticism and to attempt actively, attentively, and sensitively to ‘hear’ (understand) the criticism” (p. 26). By availing oneself and one’s work to the critique of others it becomes easier to imagine how those stubborn opacities, ruses, and erasures of power can more easily be brought to light and examined for the dominating and exploitative tendencies that plague all representations of the Other.
As stated earlier, I have deliberately set out to produce an “evocative text” that is not governed by models of legitimation that hide the cultural work that goes into its production behind socially conditioned techniques of “trustworthiness,” “reliability,” and “validity”. Instead, my research-writing is heavily influenced by the epistemological stance that “ideas are commonly wrought, not privately owned” (Smith, 1999, p. 1) and thus I have opened my research text up to the vulnerable position of multiple readers and readings. To this end, I have purposely included long interview and focus groups excerpts, not to validate my version of the story, but to allow other situated readers to join in the analytic process. My writing is a partial text that seeks to ethically engage and represent the discursive resources and subjective constitution of the young men who participated in my research. By removing the burden of a singular “truth” or the one correct way of interpreting the data, I have, where possible, opened my writing, the knowledge frameworks that inform it, and myself as a critical poststructuralist researcher up to analysis, re-analysis, and critique. In short, rather than defending my writing and, by implication, myself from critique with conventional techniques of validation, I have attempted in several ways to invite the reader-writer of my dissertation into an open-ended, critical, analytic, embodied conversation with the text. However, suggesting that the “triple crisis” has brought about the realization that there are multiple readings of a text does not mean that any reading goes. Indeed, there are techniques of legitimation within poststructural research texts, a topic which I turn too in the following section.

Crisis of Legitimation

Recently, the founding assumptions underlying the rules, codes, and techniques designed to ensure “valid” research have themselves become the object of intense critical
scrutiny. This critique is partly directed at the assumption that there is a “real” and singular world out there waiting to be discovered and accurately re-presented through legitimate and trustworthy research procedures (Richardson and St.Pierre, 2005), but it is also directed at the power relations that notions of “valid” research serve to obscure. Supposedly, validity distinguishes “good” from “bad” research or, in other words, more or less valid portrayals of “reality” (Scheurich, 1997). According to Scheurich (1997), validity operates through a binary function, not only marking off valid from invalid knowledge, but is also embedded in a more deep-rooted “power relationship [that] is intrinsic to the Western knowledge project itself” (p. 85). Here, “validity” functions as a “boundary project” (Pronger, 1998), policing whose version of reality comes to occupy a dominant position (Scheurich, 1997). In this way, validity works to protect a particular worldview, affirming and legitimating as “true” some ways of knowing, while discounting others as irrational, uncivilized, and frivolous (Smith, 1999). Much of the power relations that are involved in negotiations of validity can be traced to the Western belief in a dualistic notion of “truth” and “fiction” as two mutually exclusive domains. In its place, we need to think of truth as multiple, situated, and partial, and recognize the power relations that are involved in affirming as “valid” or disregarding as “invalid” someone else’s version of “truth” (Scheurich, 1997).

To get at the inherent power relations within research Denzin (1997) suggests that we stop speaking of the “validity” or “legitimacy” of a research text, concepts which effectively erase those power relations, and openly embrace and confront these relations by speaking of a research text’s “authority”. Whereas with “legitimacy” the “truth” of the text is premised on abstract, disinterested, and distanced measures of objectivity,
“authority” relies on the proximal lived subjectivities of its readers to leverage its version of truth. “Authority” does not bury the socio-historically situated work that goes into its production but, where possible, lays that work bare for the reader-writer to witness, interrogate, and supplement.

Laurel Richardson (2005) challenges the assumptions underlying modernist qualitative research by suggesting that poststructural researchers shift metaphors from that of the “triangle” to the “crystal”. She argues that with “triangulation a researcher deploys different methods—interviews, census data, documents, and the like—to “validate” findings. These methods, however, carry the same [modernist] assumptions, including the assumption that there is a “fixed point” or an “object” that can be triangulated” (in Richardson and St. Pierre, 2005, p. 963). She suggests that the “crystal” is a more appropriate metaphor for qualitative research in these post-foundational times:

I propose that the central imaginary for “validity” for postmodernist texts is not the triangle—a rigid, fixed, two-dimensional object. Rather, the central imaginary is the crystal, which combines symmetry and substance with an infinite variety of shapes, substances, transmutations, multidimensionalities, and angles of approach. Crystals grow, change, and are altered, but they are not amorphous. Crystals are prisms that reflect externalities and refract within themselves, creating different colours, patterns, and arrays of casting off in different directions. What we see depends on our angle of repose—not triangulation but rather crystallization. (p. 963)

The crystal, according to Richardson, offers a more complex metaphor for envisioning the multiple, situated, and competing truths that are always at play in the social environment. Here, a research write-up is not a one-sided, fixed portrait of “reality,” but a fluid, evolving momentarily crystalline “snapshot” that will inevitably tell as many stories as there are ears to hear it and eyes to see it. This, however, is not to infer that anything and everything goes with postmodern research.
While a poststructural methodology “disrupts all methods equally,” a poststructural stance still “allows us to know ‘something’ without claiming to know everything” (Richardson, 2005, p. 961). In other words, there are techniques for evaluating poststructural research, albeit, radically different ones from measures of legitimation that are found in more conventional research texts. However, the question is, then, given the critiques posed by poststructuralism, where notions of “truth,” “objectivity,” and “reason” are deconstructed and exposed as congealed relations of power/knowledge, how is it possible to distinguish “good” research from “bad”? In the following paragraphs I am going to argue that the authority of my dissertation should be evaluated on the basis of four criteria, including: its “substantive contribution” (Richardson, 2005); its “situated knowledges” (Haraway, 1991); its political effectiveness (Denzin, 2005, 1997); and, finally, its “explication of procedures” (Kvale, 1996).

Substantive Contribution

With “substantive contribution” the objective is to determine if the research text sheds light on the complexities of social life (Richardson and St. Pierre, 2005). It is not about offering an objective account of reality, but a partial and situated representation that presents a credible version of the existing socio-cultural life world. From the perspective of substantive contribution, a reader might ask: Can I see myself or others in the social reality that is depicted? Does it reveal and account for those often invisible discursive relations that are at play in every day life? Does it offer other ways of thinking about the commonsensical and naturalized aspects of daily life? More specific to my research document, a reader might ask: Does this text seem like a credible account of how discourses of fatness shape the subjectivities of young men? Do the descriptions and
analyses provided have some resonance with my own embodiment? What sort of taken-for-granted assumptions about fatness and health does this research disrupt, if any?

**Situated Knowledges**

The second criteria of authority centres around the degree to which a research text openly embraces and makes obvious its situatedness. From the perspective of situated knowledges a reader could ask the following questions of a text: Is there some open attempt to reveal how the author’s subjectivity enters this text? Is there adequate exposure for the reader to make judgements about the author’s point of view? Does the author open him or herself up to a critical account of the reader and people he or she studies? (Richardson and St. Pierre, 2005).

I have attempted to highlight the situatedness of my research document in two ways. First, my analysis does not claim to find the “truth” about the intersections of youth, masculinity, and fatness. For instance, the goal of my research was not to determine whether the young men accurately understood biomedical perspectives on body size and its relationship to health. Nor was my objective to produce a truthful, generalizable understanding of how young men become embodied subjects. Rather, I take seriously the embodied and embodying narratives they deploy in the construction of a meaningful sense of self. In this sense, the truths that are produced through my research are multiple, competing, partial, and thus open to re-interpretation. Second, I have taken several steps to firmly embed my body and self into the research. This includes producing my own life history narrative of my relationship with food, exercise, and fatness/body size. Again, this is not to be taken as a “from the horse’s mouth” account of who I really am, but as a cultural narrative that is constructed through available discourses. Such a
narrative acknowledges that academic research and writing is “not separable from the
Self” (Richardson and St. Pierre, 2005, p. 965). That I cannot tidily hive-off my own personal—albeit, discursively constituted—experiences with food, exercise, and the body from my research on these same experiences in young men. My own embodiment will shape how I hear, see, and make sense of the stories the young men recount and, in this way, it would be irresponsible to pretend as though I can compartmentalize my “Other” non-academic self, from that of the distant, neutral researcher-self.

**Political Effectiveness**

With “political effectiveness” the question posed to the text shifts from “What does it mean?” to “How does it work?” (Alcoff, 1991-2; Denzin, 2002). For Linda Alcoff (1991-2) this means looking beyond the content of research claims and asking after the real, material effects of those claims. If we accept the postmodernist critique that all knowledges—no matter how marginal or how rigorous their production—are political, than we should interrogate the political work our research texts does. Norman Denzin (2002) takes this one step further and suggests that the true measure of success for a research project is in what political consequences it has because “we are in the business of not just interpreting but changing the world” (p. 899). Thus, a research document should be evaluated according to the effects it has in a particular socio-historical context. It should be evaluated, like any work of art, on the manner in which it engages the community, motivates them to empowered action, not on the basis of its truthfulness (Denzin, 2002; Richardson, 1994; Richardson and St. Pierre, 2005). Significantly, this explicit political positioning is in direct contradiction of the critique of relativism and
apoliticalism that is often directed at poststructuralist informed research. In its place we find a sort of contingent political positioning, where it is understood that,

the charge of relativism, and its associated problems, is only a viable charge if one is arguing from a realist position. If one ceases to be concerned about the truth/reality of the person or event, then rather than adopting a nihilistic stance, the ‘relativist’ is able to recognize the flexibility of a position in which discourses can be drawn upon strategically, to achieve a particular ends in particular contexts. (Hepburn, 1997, p. 30)

Thus, a postmodernist informed research project is a thoroughly political engagement. Rather than trying to conceal its political motives behind notions of “validity,” a postmodernist text takes the bold move of naming its political objectives and judging the success of its research on the basis of achieving those objectives. With this in mind, questions posed to the text on the basis of its “political effectiveness” might be: Is the author explicit about the place where he or she stands politically? Is he or she clear about the political objectives of his or her research? (Fine, 1993) Whose research is it? Who owns it? Whose interests does it serve? (Smith, 1999) What relations of power and oppression does the research reveal and disrupt? What power relations does it conceal and affirm?

To the degree possible, I lay bare my own political vision. My politics are informed by feminist poststructuralist thought. They involve deconstructing the “real” categories and “truthful” knowledges that naturalize unequal power relations. My research is governed by the desire to see an end to body discriminations of all sorts, including discriminations against certain body sizes. I desire a world where employees are judged on factors other than their body size and its shape; where school-yard bullying is not supported by powerful health discourses that characterize children as obese, lazy, and glutinous. I yearn for a world where biomedical science concedes that its knowledges
are not neutral, where it takes responsibility for the oppressions, hardships, and inequalities that it produces and perpetuates with its categories of “underweight,” “normal weight,” “overweight,” and “obese”. This is not a call for a more “truthful” science, but a more accountable and socially-aware and -connected one. I covet a social community where eating, exercise, and sport are conceived of as life-giving and pleasurable engagements, not moralistic over-determinations and biomedically compelled “musts”. I crave an embodied existence where the self can have a positive and loving relationship with the body, as opposed to a scientifically and commercially mediated one founded on hatred, control, and abuse. I envision a society where health is understood as a complex phenomenon that is not solely the responsibility of the individual; where broad social factors like racism, sexism, ableism, homophobia, and poverty are understood as very real life-threatening impediments to the health of the community and the individual. I hope for a social community where it is “normal” and “natural” for boys and men to “have bodies,” where the male body is openly discussed, debated, and celebrated in public discourse; where boys and men do not feel culturally compelled to cruelly and, in some cases, violently, project their embodiment onto more visibly embodied others, such as racial minorities, gender minorities, girls and women, and those living marginalized body sizes and shapes.

These are just some of the desires that motivate my research agenda. The reader can get a better understanding of what brought me to this interest by reading my life history narrative. My life history narrative and the preceding political entreaty, when read together, should give the reader a partial and situated sense of who I am, why fatness is important to me, and where my political ambitions rest.
Explication of Procedures

Principal in the production of good authoritative qualitative research is that researchers explicate the work that goes into the production of the final text (Patton, 1999; Kvale, 1996). Michelle Fine suggests that too often we “mystify the ways in which we select, use, and explain the voices” (p. 219) that we include in our research. She goes on to argue that she is “delighted” that we use the voices of research participants, but that “we fail to articulate how, how not, and within what limits it is a failure of methodology and a flight from our own political responsibilities to tell tough, critical, and confusing stories about the ideological and discursive patterns of inequitable power arrangements” (p. 219). Indeed, the proper explication of the decisions we make regarding our research data, and the theoretical assumptions that motivated those decisions, must be made apparent as part of the crucial task of rendering invisible power relations visible. In this way, an open and honest account of research procedures is integral to the production of a politically accountable research document.

If researchers do not account for the procedures they follow in the production of their texts, readers are left depending on “the researcher’s selection and contextualization of interview statements” (Kvale, 1996, p. 207) and thus readers are effectively blocked from engaging in the important work of critically reading and assessing the research document. Steiner Kvale suggests that one way around this impasse is to provide examples of “the material used for the interpretations and explicitly outline the different steps of the analysis” (p. 209). In so doing, the criterion for a text’s authority becomes whether the reader can see the stages—the research questions, analytic techniques, and modes of writing—that the researcher used to arrive at their conclusions and whether or
not he or she agrees with them. The fact that the reader can read another position onto the data is not the point (this is already accepted), but rather the significant point is whether the reader can see and understand the stages that the researcher used in the production of the final text. By articulating a clear set of research questions, posing them in a consistent fashion to the data, and explicitly articulating those procedures to the reader the researcher produces a “perspectival subjectivity” (Kvale, 1996), where researcher positionality and interpretative tools are clearly explicated. In the section that follows on analysis, I will spend some time explicating the procedures employed in analyzing the research data.

**Discourse Analysis—Theory**

A critical poststructuralist discourse analysis is not looking for the “truth” of the subject, but instead is interested in those socio-historically embedded processes that lead to the deeply held cultural assumption that there is a “truth” or a “real” human subject that lies beyond discourse. From a poststructuralist perspective, there is no essential raced, gendered, sexed self, rather the “Real Me” is the effect of a set of highly regulated discursive practices (Butler, 1993; Davies, 2000; Edley, 2001). Michel Foucault writes that “one of the prime effects of power is that certain bodies, certain gestures, certain, discourses, certain desires come to be identified and constituted as individuals” (cited in Hepburn, 1997, p. 30). A critical poststructuralist discourse analysis asks after those mechanisms by which bodies secure their status as “natural” and “real” through various everyday, mundane discursive practices such as conversation, movement, writing, photography, and art, to name a few. This, however, is not an apolitical project. Poststructuralists understand that “discourse is intimately involved in the construction
and maintenance of inequality” (Wetherell, 2003, p. 13). Thus, the “critical” aspect of discourse analysis seeks to establish “whose interests are best served by different discursive formulations” (Edley, 2001, p. 190). Critical poststructuralist discourse analysis is propelled by the twin practices of both establishing the mechanisms by which subjectivities are stabilized and normalized at the same time as determining the power constellations that these normativities serve to construct and entrench (Edley, 2001; Edley and Wetherell, 1997; Wetherell, 1998; 2003).

**Language and Subjectivity**

The relationship between discourse, bodies, and subjectivities is particularly relevant for my research. I am less interested in whether what the young men have to say about their bodies is “true,” than I am in how the young men come to experience their bodies as “truth”. In line with other poststructural theorists on youth (Burrows and Wright, 2004; Lesko, 2001), I see “youth” as a discursively constituted category that gains a symbolic and material significance through forever-evolving processes of negotiation, struggle, and compromise. In particular, I focus on how the “truth” of “obesity epidemic” discourse along with more popular constructions of beauty, muscularity, and body shape inter-lock with discursive identity categories, such as age, race, and gender in the formation of an embodied sense of self. This sense of self, although collectively constituted through socio-historic discursive practices, is commonly assumed to emanate from the individual. As will become clearer in the following paragraphs, language is the commonly shared “argumentative fabric” (Wetherell, 2003) through which this embodied sense of self is continually constructed and re-constructed.
Language is the central site of investigation for those doing a poststructural discourse analysis. As I mentioned earlier, poststructuralists dispute the claim that language is a neutral medium. They claim that there is no unmediated access to knowledge or reality, instead knowledge is necessarily mediated through socially and historically situated “language games” (Lyotard, 1984). Language does not refer to some tranquil and consensual universe of meaning, but to a domain of struggles, conflicts over what is or is not the truth and who has the power to pronounce truth, who is authorized to speak the truth and to whom. It is not, therefore, a matter of meaning but of truth, of the relation of power and truth. (Rose, 1999, p. xix)

This means that there is not “one” knowledge, but rather multiple conflicting and unstable knowledges. Given that language, and the knowledge frameworks or discourses that it constructs, is the fabric through which the subject makes sense of the world and their place in it, the subject is likewise fragmented, multiple, and contradictory. Within this conception of the subject, there is no stable, core subject at the centre of language, rather the subject is constituted through historically and locally specific languages which, in turn, enables the agentic potential of the subject (Butler, 1995; Davies, 2006). This is the enabling constraint of subjectification. In short, the individual is constituted in and through language and discourse.

Language and discourse provide patterned ways of giving meaning to and organizing the world. However, acknowledging these patterned ways of organizing the world is not to suggest that they are the only ways of giving meaning to the world or, in other words, that the subject is completely determined by them. Rather, there are a range of cultural or discursive resources available to the subject in any given socio-historic
language culture. Thus, the individual must make choices in how they talk, write, or move, for instance, themselves into existence.

However, these choices are not completely “free”-choices, nor are they ever made from the position of the autonomous individual. In fact, Bronwyn Davies (2000) defines subjectification as “the discursive process whereby selves are located in conversations as observably and subjectively coherent participants in jointly produced storylines” (p. 91). Hence, the construction of the subject is not only accomplished through a necessary recourse to collectively shared language and discursive resources, but it is at the same time unavoidably embedded in social encounters. Furthermore, Nigel Edley (2001) points out that not everybody has equal access to available cultural resources. He writes that the “options aren’t always equal. Some constructions or formulations will be more “available” then others; they are easier to say” (p. 190). Thus, individuals are differently situated in relation to the available cultural resources in a particular socio-historic context. For instance, socio-economic factors play a role in the availability of certain cultural (i.e., sport facilities, clothing styles etc.) and institutional (i.e, education, health care etc.) resources, which ultimately shape how one performs their subjectivity. Once again, it is important to note that the individual does not position him- or herself within discourse in a rational and controlled way. Rather, we are all situated or “hailed” by discourse as particular kinds of individuals or subjects (Edley, 2001). For instance, to be born with a biologically male body means that one is inserted into a discursive grid of intelligibility that hails them as a masculine subject. Part of an individual’s recognizability as an “individual” is constituted through their proper up-take and deployment of the “right” discursive resources once they have been identified as “male”.
Again, Nigel Edley describes this in relation to the construction of a proper gender subjectivity. He writes that

there are restrictions that apply to the construction of gender identities…certainly limited by what other’s will agree to or allow. People may be able to experiment with new versions or definitions of masculinity, but there is no guarantee that these will be accepted. (p. 194)

According to Judith Butler (1990), the construction of the gendered subject involves the reiterative performance of a highly regulated set of normative gender ideals. This is not to say that all bodies comply absolutely with these normative gender performances—in fact, Butler (1990) argues that it is the inevitable failings of reiterative gender performances that offer real opportunities for subversion—but that those who do not comply run the very real danger of social censorship, de-subjectification23, and alienation.

Given that language, talk, and social interaction are considered key sites for subjective construction, the research interview is uniquely situated to “tell us about the cultural resources people have available for telling their patch of the world” (Wetherell, 2003, p. 13). Within interview transcripts, poststructural discourse analysts search for patterns of meaning that are found within interview talk that works to construct the “truth” of the world and those who live in it (Taylor, 2001; Wright, 2004). Margaret Wetherell (2003) eloquently describes the richness that interview talk generates for the discourse analyst:

When over a large corpus of data the same kinds of constructions are repeated, it becomes apparent…how the social (collective) practices are not outside, but infuse, the individual voices of the interview. Interview talk is in no sense self-contained. The interview is a highly specific discursive genre, but it also often

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23 I use de-subjectification in this context to get at Judith Butler’s notion of an “unlivable” identity. She writes that “the abject designates…precisely those ‘unlivable’ and ‘unthinkable’ zones of social life which are nevertheless densely populated by those who do not enjoy the status of the subject” (1993, p. 3). I would argue, as others have, that the fat body is an abject body (see also LeBesco, 2001; Longhurst, 2005a).
rehearse routine, repetitive and highly consensual (cultural/normative) resources that carry beyond the immediate local context, connecting talk with discursive history. Speakers do not invent these resources each time. The argumentative fabric of society is continually shaping and transforming, but for recognized periods it is the same kind of cloth. Such resources are both independent of local talk in a limited sense and need to be continually instantiated through that talk. (Wetherell, 2003, p. 25)

Here, Wetherell is articulating how talk, interview or otherwise, is simultaneously entrenched in localized interactive conversational settings at the same time that it borrows language resources from a broader discursive social order. She argues that to privilege either the “interactional moment” or the broader “discursive history” (2003) inevitably leads to reductive research conclusions. The task of the discourse analyst, then, is not to contain analysis to the local setting, searching for a limited “truth” as defined by the interviewee(s). Such a rigorous reading of individual transcripts potentially leads to what Sykes (2001) refers to as “individualism,” where the assumption is that the humanist subject has some access to an unmediated or extra-discursive “truth”. Rather the chore is to connect interview talk to the “broader political climate, the organization of society, and the discursive resources available to its members” (Wetherell, 2003, p. 23) as a mechanism of revealing a locally articulated, historically constituted discursive “truth”.

Once the discourse analyst has determined a set of discursive “truths” circulating within the conversation the next task is to find out how the subject takes up and is subjected to these “truths” as a condition of his or her subjectivity. Put differently, the discourse analyst is searching for the subject positions available within the interview/conversation. The concept of subject positions enables the researcher to articulate the connections between the individual self and broader discursive patterns (Edley, 2001). Subject positions, in the simplest sense, refer to those subject locations
made available within a given conversation. However, these positions are not static and fixed, as Nigel Edley (2001) points out, but are fluctuating depending on the various discourses deployed within the conversation, the context of the conversation, and the various speaker-subjects participating in the conversation, to name a few factors. Moreover, this model of subject positioning should not infer that the subjects are passively engaged in the positioning process or, in other words, that their “identity simply follows in the wake of discourse” (p. 210). Instead, the discourse analyst should keep in mind that speakers are not only constituted through language, but are also active participants in their own constitution. Jan Wright (2004) contends that the primary chore of the poststructural discourse analysis is to ask,

how language works to position speakers (and listeners) in relation to particular discourses and with what effects…[and ask] questions about how selves are constituted, how power-knowledge relations change across times, places, and in the context of different social, political, and cultural contexts. (p. 20)

Thus, the discourse analyst needs to simultaneously identify what subject positions are available in a given conversation, how these subject positions function within that conversational context, and determine what the availability or existence of these subject positions tells us about the broader conditions of possibility at a particular socio-historic moment (Edley, 2001).

The above paragraphs have provided the theoretical background to a postructuralist discourse analysis. In the subsequent section, I am going to recount the actual methods I used to code and analyze the data-texts (including field notes, interviews, focus groups, and photographs) that I collected as part of this research.
Methods—Analysis

Given the slipperiness of the research encounter, it is hardly surprising that the data that emerges from such a context is irreducibly complex. It is likewise unsurprising that any one fragment of research data could be analyzed for a range of meanings. Thus, it is entirely conceivable that two researchers might look at the same fragment of data and arrive at two radically different conclusions. From a poststructuralist stance, this does not mean that the data analysis was somehow flawed or was lacking in rigour, nor does it mean that one interpretation was wrong. Rather, a poststructuralist perspective embraces this lack of closure as one of the greatest strengths of qualitative research methodologies (Kvale, 1996). However, Kvale goes on to suggest the multiple meanings that can be read into qualitative data does not mean that all interpretations should be treated equally.

Steiner Kvale (1996) cautions that if one operates from a poststructuralist stance, and embraces the multiple meanings inherent within the research encounter, it then becomes imperative for the researcher to explicitly identify their methodological perspective and analytic framework. I have spent considerable time unpacking my methodological framework in this chapter, now I want to spend some time articulating my analytic stance. Kvale takes issue with the rigid compartmentalization of the research project into largely artificial stages of design, collection, transcription, coding, analysis, and results write-up. He suggests that “analysis is not an isolated stage, but permeates [the] entire” (p. 205) research process. With Kvale’s critique in mind, under the umbrella of “analysis” I have brought together my sections on data collection—including non-participant observation, field notes, interviews, focus groups, and photo voice techniques—and data coding.
Data Coding

In the section on Authority I used postmodernist and poststructuralist theory to critique conventional techniques of validation. I argued, however, that this does not mean that poststructuralist research is beyond evaluation. Instead, it infers that techniques of evaluation look very different in the post-foundational moment. I advocated the “explication of procedures” as one technique of conducting an authoritative analysis. Here, the researcher meticulously outlines their analytic procedures, including: the questions they asked of their data; the steps employed in their coding procedures; and techniques of embedding data in both the local context from which it emerges as well as in the broader social and historical framework. By outlining the analytic procedures, readers of a particular text are able to see for themselves how the researcher arrived at the knowledges that he or she did. In this case, it is not a matter of getting it right, but of being clear, consistent, and thorough.

By way of explicating my procedures, I am going to provide an example of the various steps I followed to “code” and “analyze” a particular piece of data. In order to do this, I have included an excerpt from Phil, a participant from the Pinevale Community Centre, one of the two research locations, where he characterizes the “mental toughness” that one needs to take control of their body weight.

Phil: Like I was saying, ummm, before, ummmm, ahh frig, what was I gonna say…yeah, I was mentioning before like a whole toughness…ummm…I basically think that it is all about toughness an’ mental, ‘cause whenever you put something to your mind you could do it no matter…like let’s say if you weight 500 pounds and you are so big. If you put your mind to it and you try hard enough, you could do anything you want…accomplish anything you want in your life. Dat’s what I think. It’s all about de mental and de heart (FG#3_2, Feb. 8, 2006, p. 14).
**Coding: What do I see?**

Thus, the discourse analyst must both identify those categories that make up commonsensical cultural frameworks and then subject them to a deconstructive analysis. Within the above conversational excerpt I am looking for the explicit cultural resources or discourses that Phil deploys in order to articulate his argument about people and their body weight. As I see it, there are two central discourses that are the backbone of Phil’s story. The first is the discourse of individualism. Through words like “toughness,” “mental (toughness),” “effort,” “heart,” “mind,” and phrases like “try hard enough,” Phil paints a picture of the individualist subject at the centre, and in control of, their life. However, this only makes sense through reference to the more implicit mind/body dualism discourse, which is a prominent discourse in contemporary western discursive regimes (Bordo, 1993; Gallop, 1988; Grosz, 1994). This discourse can be detected when Phil equates the “mind” or “heart” with the self that takes control over the out-of-control five hundred pound body (this particular discourse emerges in relation to the larger discussion of the focus group).

*Bringing in the local context.*

The next task involves situating this discursive encounter into the local context in which it transpired. This could include articulating contextual details such as location of the exchange, characteristics associated with that space, other participants engaged in the discussion, and embodied characteristics that might help in making sense of the narrative, including body size and race, for instance. Phil’s narrative was part of a larger focus group discussion that took place in a mixed income area of Toronto at the local parks and recreation centre. There were many indications that all of the participants in the focus
groups were from lower income families. Phil, the person speaking in the above excerpt, is a white male, fifteen years of age. Phil self-identifies as first generation Serbian Canadian. In fact, all of the young men self-identified as first generation Canadian. Phil is the only white participant in this particular focus group, and one of two in “Paul’s basketball program”—or the program from which I drew the research participants. Two of the other members in the focus group identified as African-Canadian while the third identified as Sri Lankan-Canadian. The focus group takes place in a quiet board room on the second floor of the recreation centre. I am the only adult (person over 20 years old) in the room. The focus group took place immediately after their “basketball program” on a weekday evening, as did all of the focus groups at this particular recreation centre. In the basketball group Phil is known as one of the more “aggressive” players on the court. He is short and muscular in stature. He doesn’t have the best skills on the court, but prides himself on being hard-working and often claims that he will do “whatever it takes” to win. On several occasions during my observations of the games I have seen Phil go outside the rules and violently use his body to intimidate smaller players. He steadfastly believes in the “self-made man” type of ethos, and has little patience for those who try and suggest otherwise.

In terms of the dynamics within the focus group, Phil spends much of his time following the lead of John, who is a tall, muscular kid, with excellent basketball skills. The paragraphs leading up to Phil’s comments focused on physical “toughness” in terms of one’s ability to project a “tough” image. Phil takes the conversation in a slightly different direction by referring to “mental toughness,” but the other members of the discussion pick up on his argumentation and start sharing stories of “mental toughness.”
In this sense—as I will argue below—“mental toughness” in this localized context is consistent with the performance of a particular version of masculinity, one that is hard, in-control, and distinguishable from the “weak” Other.

*Connecting local themes to the broader social historical context.*

The next task entails inserting the localized talk into the broader socio-historic fabric. As I see it, this step is where the interpretative analysis and real political work begins. Here, I am interested in the implicit discourses or “argumentative fabric” (Wetherell, 2003) that acts as the undisclosed backdrop that serves to make Phil’s narrative culturally meaningful. Furthermore, I am interested in how the implicit and explicit narratives together inter-lock with the dynamics of the localized context in the production of relevant subject positions. In short, I am interested in how Phil literally “talks” himself into a partial, situated, and embodied subject position.

For example, Phil’s narrative implicitly sets up a binary between the fat, “mentally weak” body and the slender, “mentally tough” body. As Sander Gilman (2004) and others (see Bell and McNaughton, 2007) argue, the fat body has been pathologized throughout western history. In line with theorists working from a critical obesity studies perspective (see Campos, 2004, Gard and Wright, 2005; Oliver, 2006), I would argue that the pathologization of the fat body in the west has intensified over the last decade with the emergence of what obesity experts refer to as the “obesity epidemic” (WHO, 2004). The deluge of media reports, health promotion campaigns, and scholarly biomedical articles chronicling the supposed “obesity epidemic” has provided the general public with a common discourse or cultural resource to help make sense of and understand the fat body. Here, fat people are judged through a medico-moralistic lens, where fatness is
reductively assumed to be the outcome of sedentary behaviour and irresponsible eating practices (Gard and Wright, 2005). Fatness is assumed to be an aspect of embodiment that the individual has control over. “Obesity epidemic” thus provides a framework for reading fat people as irresponsible, unmotivated, and mentally weak. Given this broader socio-historic background, it is hardly surprising that Phil comes to these conclusions about the fat body.

Moreover, “obesity epidemic” discourses that place the burden of responsibility for health on the individual connect up with a broader neo-liberal agenda (Davies and Bansel, 2007; McDermott, 2007) where broad social problems—such as poverty, education, health care—are increasingly downloaded onto the individual. Robert Crawford (1980) refers to the moral imperative that the individual take responsibility for their own health as “healthism” (see also White, Young, and Gillet, 1995). By taking up and deploying the discourse of healthism, Phil’s narrative produces two distinct subject positions that are culturally meaningful at this particular historical moment. The first is that of the morally responsible, controlled, healthy subject—the position that he implicitly inserts himself into—while the second is that of the immoral, out-of-control, unhealthy fat subject. Using poststructural theories of subjectification, it is possible to see how Phil’s appropriation and deployment of health discourse serves to establish a boundary between himself and the Other. Given the localized context of the conversation, I would suggest that the binary Phil constructs through the deployment of discourses of health and body size could be further mapped onto gender binaries. More specifically, I am suggesting that Phil’s reference to the weak, out of control body implicitly constructs a marginalized gender position as separate and distinct from the position he occupies, that
of the subject who exercises rational or mindful control over his corporeality. The production of the binary opposition between self and Other, and the policing of the boundary that serves to mark these two positions as distinct from one another, are central mechanisms by which the subject constructs the appearance of a stable and autonomous identity (Davies, 2006a). Bronwyn Davies refers to these twin processes as “border-work” (Davies, 2006a) and “category-maintenance work” (Davies, 2000) respectively.

Finally, I would like to re-emphasize that Phil does not stand outside nor pre-exist the discourses that he takes up and deploys, but rather these discourses are the very conditions of his possibility as an agentic, masculine subject. In contrast to the modernist perspective, where it is assumed that there is an individual that precedes the power relations that press down on the subject, the subject in poststructural thought is understood to be constituted in and through power relations. Because discursive relations of power are multiple, complex, and contested, the subject is likewise forever evolving, shifting, and re-working the power/knowledge matrices that are the conditions of his or her possibility. Now that I have outlined the theory and techniques of analysis, in the following section I overview methods of “data construction”.

From “Data Collection” to “Data Construction”

Postmodern (Denzin, 1997; 2002; Scheurich, 1997; Rail, 2002, 1998) and poststructural (Cheek, 2000; Davies, 2000; Weedon, 1997) researchers are careful to ensure that their epistemology and ontology inform their methodology. One way this is accomplished is through challenging the positivistic epistemology that underlies and shapes many conventional qualitative methodologies. For instance, implicit in the term “data collection” is the modernist assumption of a “real” or “truthful” experience waiting
to be discovered and brought to “light”. In its place, poststructuralist researchers would endeavour to disrupt the positivistic assumptions inherent within the notion of “data” by highlighting the discursive forces that go into its production. Thus, instead of speaking of “data collection” I will refer to “data construction” as a means of drawing attention to the way in which data is not found but constructed.

If the goal of my research project is to identify the salient cultural resources through which the young men construct an embodied identity, the question then becomes what is the best way of conducting my research to achieve these ends (Wetherell, 2003). This is not always an easy question particularly when studying young men and their embodied constructions. Feminist scholars have consistently identified the Western metaphysical construction that connects gender binaries with the mind-body split where men are associated with the mind and women the body (Bordo, 1993; Gallop, 1988; Grosz, 1994; Shildrick, 1998). The male body is everywhere, to be sure, but it is its utter unremarkability that renders it invisible or “absent presence” (Shilling, 2005). This is an important point to make because I invited my research participants to talk about the male body—both their own and those of others. In other words, I’m asking them to discuss the absent present, the highly visible, invisibility of the “norm”. This poses a unique set of problems for a research methodology. I opened the section by suggesting that the goal of a poststructuralist research protocol is to form a comfortable research for my participants’ environment that fosters creative and subversive responses. How do I create such an environment while at the same time fostering difficult discussion that will bring to the fore the cultural resources the young men employ to construct an embodied sense of self?
Methods of Data Construction

This research employed three methods of data construction. The first was non-participant observation. The second was a combination of focus groups and the Photovoice technique (Wang and Burris, 1997), what I will call Photo(Focus) groups. The third method was one on one semi-structured interviews. In the following sections I will outline the specific techniques used in each of the three methods.

Non-participant observation.

The initial phase of data construction in each of the research settings was non-participant observation. Non-participant observation involves gathering ethnographic traces of the research setting. Norman Denzin (1997) suggests that ethnography provides “glimpses and slices” of the everyday lifeworlds of the research participants. While non-participant observation is not as thorough and engaged as a full-fledged ethnography, it nonetheless allowed me to observe and record the participants in a more “natural” context than the other methods I deployed could provide for. This enabled me to gather some insight into the beliefs, motivations, and behaviours of the research participants (Tedlock, 2000). Moreover, it also provided me with an opportunity to observe their embodied practices in action. This is beneficial given that my objective of the research was to study young men and their embodied subjectivities. Thus, I paid close attention to how the young men talked about and made reference to bodies, how they dressed, how they carried themselves, and how they reacted to differently sized and shaped bodies. All of these observations were recorded as field notes. All entries were hand-written and dated, and later transcribed into a Microsoft Word document.
I kept two separate sets of non-participant observation field notes for each of the research settings. At Lawson\textsuperscript{24} the non-participant observations took place in co-ed grade 9 and 10 physical education classes from October to November 2005 and again from late March to May in 2006. Classes ran for approximately fifty minutes. Because of rotating schedules at Lawson I was unable to attend classes on a regular basis, but did attend as many as possible. Depending on the class under observation, there were between twenty and thirty students in each class. At the Pinevale Community Centre\textsuperscript{25} I mostly observed the youth (13-16 years old) basketball program. This program ran twice a week for two hours. I attended the vast majority of basketball sessions between January to June, 2006. There were eleven regular male participants in the basketball program, all of whom participated in the focus group sessions. However, there were many other participants who periodically joined the regulars in the basketball program, some of whom participated in the research focus groups in a peripheral capacity.\textsuperscript{26} I also attended and observed an all-day basketball tournament during the March Break in 2006. This tournament consisted of twenty-two competitors, with nine of them being participants in my research study. Finally, I was also involved in other sessions and programs linked to the Community Centre, such as youth advisory seminars, neighbourhood planning sessions, and additional basketball programs for more senior players. My motivation for attending these settings were multiple and not always related directly to data collection. For instance, on several occasions I was called upon by Paul—the basketball coach at

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{24} Fictitious name of a Toronto-area private school. See Appendix H for a more in-depth description of Lawson.
\item \textsuperscript{25} The Pinevale Community Centre is a fictitious name describing a Community Centre in Toronto. See Appendix H for a more in-depth description of Pinevale.
\item \textsuperscript{26} For instance, there were two participants who joined the “regulars” for pizza during one of the focus groups. There was also a young man who came to one focus group but did not return to the centre.
\end{itemize}
\end{footnotesize}
Pinevale—to share my “expertise” with different groups of athletes/patrons of the Community Centre. I also sat on a committee overseeing the development of an extended hours “store front” drop-in centre for the youth in Pennington.²⁷ In both cases I saw these involvements as an opportunity to share my time and experiences with the communities who were supporting me in my research. My experiences in these capacities helped me gain even greater insight into both the community and its relationship with the Community Centre.

The non-participant observations were beneficial in two additional ways beyond providing critical insight into the daily lives of the participants’. First, I was able to draw on the observations of their practices in the gymnasium as key themes for the focus group discussions. In so doing, I effectively brought the focus group discussions closer to their everyday embodied lifeworlds. The non-participant observations were also relevant in introducing contradictions between the participants’ embodied practices and their focus group narratives. For example, on one occasion at Pinevale the participants were talking about fat people as slow and poor athletes. However, when I pointed out the contradiction between fat people as slow and the performance of Paul—their basketball coach who was widely considered to be “fat” by these young men—who had just beaten them on the basketball court, the focus group discussion took a very different, more nuanced direction. Second, by “hanging” around their gym classes and sports programs, the perspective participants gained a level of comfort with me, as well as I them. After seeing me for several days sitting on the sidelines, chatting with them on the bench, and after the

²⁷ Pennigton is the fictitious name I have used to describe the Toronto neighbourhood where the Pinvale Community Centre is located.
program, the participants gained a level of familiarity with me that I suspect was very helpful when it came to recruiting research participants.

*Focus group/photovoice technique.*

All of the focus groups were conducted on the premises of the respective research locations. At Lawson the focus groups either occurred in a classroom or in the boardroom. In either case, the environment was relatively quiet and uninterrupted. At Pinevale all of the focus groups took place in either the Community Centre’s board room or in what was referred to as the “community room”. The board room was located on the second floor and was locked during the evening and thus we were the only ones in that part of the facility. The community room was more centrally located, but still was private and relatively quiet.

The focus groups at Lawson occurred over the lunch break, which was thirty-five minutes. Taking into account the additional time the participants needed to both get from their classes to the location of the focus group and back to class again, focus groups were between twenty and twenty five minutes. At Pinevale, the focus groups occurred immediately after basketball practice in the evening. The focus groups at Pinevale were not as rushed as those at Lawson, and generally lasted between 50 and 90 minutes.

As partial compensation for their participation in the research, I purchased pizza and drinks for the participants. Given the timing of the focus groups (lunch hour and after basketball practice), the participants were grateful for the food and voraciously ate it. Several of the participants commented on the hypocrisy of eating pizza while talking

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28 For the sake of expedience, I am going to refer to the combination of focus groups and the Photovoice technique as Photo(Focus) Groups.
about issues related to health and health practices, but when I suggested that we could switch to “healthier” options, the participants were reluctant to take me up on this offer.

Although I had a prepared list of questions to guide discussion, I let the participants themselves take charge of the topics that were discussed. Given that I was less interested in addressing specific questions as opposed to gaining insight into how the participants discoursed about bodies, health, and health practices, I was quite comfortable letting them lead the discussions. I would often intervene with a probe, but was careful to make sure that they understood that it was what mattered to them that was most interesting to me. Such a position necessitated that at times I would let the conversation go in directions that were of little interest to the specific research questions, however this was a small price to pay for gaining the confidence and increasing the comfort level of the participants. Moreover, having three consecutive focus groups with the same participants allowed for greater flexibility in how the discussions proceeded. Other techniques were used to encourage participation amongst the participants.

Kimberly Oliver (2001), in her research into girls’ constructions of embodiment, used popular media images that were of interest to the girls as conversational prompts. She argues that incorporating media images into research methodologies fosters “a number of possibilities to engage girls in critical dialogues about issues surrounding their bodies that they find relevant to their bodies” (p. 159). Oliver argues that the use of media images as a conversational prompt offers three advantages. First, it allows the participants to discuss potentially sensitive body issues by focusing on the bodies of distant and abstract others rather than on the bodies of the participants themselves. Second, having the participants involved in the selection of the images that are included in the
discussions has the advantage of allowing the participants to identify the embodied issues that are of concern to them (Oliver, 2001). Too often research with young people is determined by the researcher’s agenda rather than issues of concern to the young people themselves (Oliver, 2001; Valentine, Skelton, and Chambers, 1998) and the use of images helps to mitigate against this as research participants are actively involved in the research process. The third and final advantage of using media images is that it provides a platform to critique dominant discursive constructions of embodiment (Oliver, 2001). By collectively looking at and discussing media images the group is able to expose and challenge the normative ideals that regulate embodiment. Although Oliver’s rationale for image use is specific to girls, I would argue that it was usefully employed in the focus groups settings with the young men in the present research.

There are, however, two additional reasons why media technologies are useful conversational prompts for boys and men. First, as mentioned previously, masculine embodiment is culturally coded as an invisibility. In other words, the proper performance of a normative masculinity involves the active denial of all things associated with the body. According to the normative codes of masculinity, men are not supposed to worry about their appearance, including the shape and size of the body, nor are they supposed to display concern for the health of the body. It is these codes of normative masculinity that make it difficult for men to talk about their bodies, particularly issues surrounding its health, appearance, and size (Gill, Henwood, and McLean, 2005). In the present research, media prompts allowed the young men who participated in my research to talk about issues of relevance to their own bodies by discussing the bodies of others. Second, it was assumed that media technologies would be more appealing as conversational prompts for
the young men than other data collection strategies, such as journal writing, because technology is culturally constructed as a safe and properly masculine engagement (MacNeill, 2000). Margaret MacNeill concluded that research strategies need to methodologically accommodate the gender differences of the research populations under investigation. Furthermore, others have suggested that use of media technologies as a research tool is attractive to young people saturated in media cultures (Thomson and Gunter, 2007).

It is for the reasons mentioned above that I used various media technologies—including media images, internet videos, and popular television media—to foster a familiar and comfortable space for the young men to talk about their bodies, particularly in relation to discourses of body size and shape. In the initial focus groups I showed the young men a series of media images of different bodies that I selected from the internet. I tried to show a range of bodies including differently racialized, gendered, sized, and aged bodies (i.e. muscular men and women, Bowflex bodies, fat bodies, skinny bodies etc.) as well as bodies represented in popular culture (i.e. Beyoncee Knowles, Fat Joe, characters from The Simpsons and Family Guy etc.) in order to initiate discussion. Early on in the research process I also showed images of practices that could be linked to the production of body size and shape, including images of food and exercise equipment (i.e. Vegetables, Canada Food Pyramid, the Gazelle), but found these images to be ineffective at generating discussion. I then uploaded the images onto Windows Power Point and would bring my lap top to each Photo(Focus) Group sessions and scroll through the slide show, stopping to talk about each image separately. For the most part, I used the same set of images with each focus group. However, the set of images did change slightly as some
of the images did not seem to elicit much discussion depending on the themes that emerged from the discussion.

Immediately following the initial focus group, I would transcribe (when possible) the audio-taped focus group discussion and try and pick up key themes that seemed to be of interest to that particular focus group. Additionally, I was looking for any sort of media reference the participants themselves might bring into the conversation. On several occasions I would even pointedly ask the group what were the issues that mattered most to them or what popular television shows, for example, were their favorites. For the second focus group I would bring in media images or video clips that reflected these interests. The major themes emerging from the group were different depending on the participants, of course, and where one group might spend a lot of time talking about *Family Guy* or *The Simpsons*, another group might spend more time talking about Big Baby Davis. In each case, to the best of my ability, I would bring in media materials that reflected the interests of the group. This was an attempt at collaboration, where the research participants had an opportunity to give direction to the conversation and identify the issues of particular reference to them. On one occasion a participant brought in his own media images (which I personally reviewed before sharing with the group) that they had downloaded from the internet. On another, the members of the focus group encouraged me to follow them across the street to the public library where they showed me a You Tube video. Although these instances were beyond the research protocol, I

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29 Big Baby Davis was an NCAA basketball player who, at the time of the focus groups, was popularly known as “Baby Shaq” because of his huge body.

30 Unfortunately, I have a limited record of these images as the young man who brought them was unable to leave me with the CD containing the images. We made arrangements for him to email me the images, but this never happened. All I have is the audio-recordings, transcribed conversations, and a few of the images that I was able to track down on the internet on my own.
considered them valuable gestures where the young men engaged as active participants in the construction of data. Increasingly there are calls to disrupt research hierarchies between the researcher and researched (Lather, 1991; Thomson and Gunter, 2007; Oliver, 2001; McIntyre, 2003) and this was accomplished, to the degree possible, in the focus groups by encouraging the participants to bring their own cultural texts to the research environment. In this way, the participants themselves had some determination over the embodied issues that were introduced and discussed within the research.

There are, however, limitations to using media productions to prompt discussion. Relying on consumer-driven media representations potentially limits group discussion to the “white supremacist capitalist patriarch[ical]” (hooks, 2004) discourses of the media industry (Oliver, 2001). In an attempt to counter-balance the over-determining and constraining potential of media discourses, I turned to the Photovoice technique, where the young men produced their own images related to body size, shape, fitness, and health.

Photovoice

As mentioned previously, the Photo(Focus) Group sessions were a combination of focus groups and the Photovoice technique. The Photovoice technique has its origins in Paulo Freire’s Photo Novella method. Freire was a Brazilian Marxist who spent his life challenging the hierarchical power relations that inscribe institutionalized education. He creatively used photography as a means where students were empowered to co-create knowledge with their teachers by fostering a space of listening, dialogue, and action (Carlson, Engebretson, and Chamberlain, 2005). The creator of Photovoice (see Wang and Burris, 1997) generally positions it as a participatory method that aims to increase understandings across differently situated communities using stories and photographs.
This is accomplished by giving the participants the opportunity to form their own representations of their everyday lives through the use of cameras. The participant-researchers photographed their lived realities and these pictures then became the subject of the focus group discussions. This method is heralded by its supporters and practitioners as being both participatory (Thomson and Gunter, 2007; Carlson, Engebretnson, and Chamberlain, 2005; Wang and Burris, 1997) and empowering (Booth and Booth, 2003; Wang and Burris, 1997), at the same time that it fosters a familiar and comfortable research environment (Hurworth, 2003; Thomson and Gunter, 2007). While I acknowledge that Photovoice has the potential for the co-production of knowledge, and does differently enable research participants, I want to provide a few words of caution as a counter-balance to the unproblematic endorsement of the Photovoice technique as an empowering strategy.

Ostensibly, Photovoice works to unsettle the “established politics of representation by putting people in charge of how they document their own lives” (Booth and Booth, 2003, p. 431). Here, the power to represent is shifted from the “powerful to the powerless” (p. 433) by giving a photographic voice to the voiceless. Such an empowering methodology is thought to enable research participants to “express themselves in their own images, words, and reflections” (McIntyre, 2003, p. 48) thereby giving them a deeper understanding into their own lives. For a researcher working from a feminist poststructural framework, the language of “empowerment” that both implicitly and explicitly informs Photovoice is quite problematic.

In previous sections, I spent considerable space articulating my feminist poststructural-informed methodology. Such an articulation is only valuable to the degree
that it informs research methods. Thus, it would seem imperative that I spend some time aligning my feminist poststructuralism with the critical liberational politics of the Photovoice technique. In the section on “Representing the Other” in this chapter, I reviewed feminist poststructural literature that problematizes research objectives that set out to “empower” research participants by providing voice to the voiceless. Empowerment centres around a modernist understanding of power, where power is assumed to be centralized in certain institutions and individuals, while other individuals and institutions are thought to be “powerless”. Here, power is conceptualized as a tangible and localizable force that presses down on the Enlightenment humanist subject from the outside. According to this conception of power, the research interview would involve one humanist subject—the researcher—“empowering” the Other—the voiceless participant—by “giving” them “voice”. These assumptions are problematic from a Foucaultian perspective where neither the researcher nor the researched are understood as standing before an externally imposed power. Rather, the historical conditions of possibility of both researcher and researched are a consequence of complex and emergent power relations embedded in everyday local, lived contexts. Power, in this sense, is unavoidably present in the research encounter.

Sara Bragg (2007) argues that research protocols informed by notions of “empowerment” run the risk of producing governmental subjects. She contends that strategies of “empowerment” are consistent with modern technologies of governmentality, where the research participants are interpellated to produce themselves as self-governing, rational subjects. Sara Bragg points out that governmentality is not in and of itself negative, but that researchers ought to be cautious about the sort of
subjectivities their “empowering” research methodologies produce and what sort of unforeseen and possibly dubious ideological allegiances they foster. These concerns were taken into consideration in the present research, and the Photovoice technique was not deployed as a means of “empowering” research participants, but as a mechanism of promoting discussion and producing a more collaborative, complex, and “messy” research text.

The participants for the Photo(Focus) Groups were recruited from the participants I was observing as a non-participant observer (see section Recruitment below). In total, there were seven Photo(Focus) Groups, with four from Lawson and three from Pinevale. There were between three and seven participants in each focus group, with a total of thirty-one participants involved in all of the focus group sessions. The Photo(Focus) Groups ranged from thirty-five minutes in duration to one and a half hours. In all research locations I provided the participants with pizza and drinks.

At Lawson, the focus groups were held during lunch hour, which proved to be difficult because Lawson had shorter lunch hours than public schools, which often meant that the focus group discussion was interrupted before they were complete. On several occasions I arranged for a fourth focus group session so as to provide an opportunity for the participants to fully articulate themselves. The Photo(Focus) Groups were held in either a quiet board room or one of several classrooms at Lawson. In total, there were twenty youth that participated in all three of the Photo(Focus) Group sessions. None of the participants at Lawson racially self-identified themselves. However, using commonly

31 There were several participants that came for one or two of the focus groups, but not all three, these participants are not included in the total figure of 31.
32 See Appendix H for spatial and architectural descriptions of all the research locations.
accepted criteria that mark “race” as visibly identifiable, fifteen of the young men were “white”, while four were “Asian”, and one was “black”.  

At the Pinevale Community Centre the Photo(Focus) Groups were held immediately after basketball practice in the evening (after six pm). The participants were usually quite sweaty and hungry from their basketball activities. The focus group sessions lasted between one hour and one hour and a half. All sessions were held in a quiet board room on the second floor of the recreation centre. In total, there were eleven youth from Pinevale that participated in all three of the Photo(Focus) Groups. All but two of the participants who took part in the Photo(Focus) Groups at Pinevale self-identified as “black”, with the other two self-identifying as “white”.

**Interviews.**

Stage three of the research called for one on one interviews with a sample of the research participants. However, a research methodology informed by a feminist poststructural epistemology must be cautious of the modernist assumptions of the research interview. Most importantly, poststructural theorists have been critical of the research interview for its modernist assumption that positions the humanist subject at the centre of language (Scheurich, 1997; Sykes, 2001). From a modernist perspective, the subject exists prior to language and is able to articulate their “life story” through the agentic manipulation of discourse. In contrast to this perspective, the poststructuralist position understands the humanist subject to be a ruse of power where the subject is in fact constituted in and through their positioning in the deployment of language (Butler, 1997).

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33 Although the determination of racial identity through visible markers is problematic because there is the potential to “essentialize, homogenize, and fix identity in such characterizations” (Cooky and McDonald, 2005, p. 162), I deemed it to be an important exercise in my research because I wanted to unpack the process by which notions of ‘race’ and racial hierarchies are produced through health and body discourses.  
34 See Appendix G for Corporal Biographies of a selection of the participants.
1997; Davies, 2000; Rose, 1999). Nikolas Rose (1999), for example, summarizes the poststructural relationship between human subjectivity and language:

Many have emphasized the significance of language in the historical construction and transformation of personhood. They have argued that human beings actually live out their lives as “narratives”, that we make use of the stories of the self that our culture makes available to us to plan out our lives, to account for events and give them significance, to accord ourselves identity…Talk about the self actually makes up the types of awareness and self-understanding that human beings acquire and display in their own lives, and makes up social practices themselves, to the extent that such practices cannot be carried out without certain self-understandings. (p. xviii)

Thus, a poststructural perspective views language and “language games” (Lyotard, 1984) as central aspects in the construction of the self. The subject, therefore, does not speak the “truth” or provide insight into the real self. Rather, the self comes into being through their prior subjection to discourse (Butler, 1995). From a poststructural lens, the research subject is not thought of as a psychological core self that grapples to define itself through language, rather the subject is thought of as a sedimented effect of language. Thus, language (or what I have variously called cultural or discursive resources throughout the dissertation) is central to poststructural methodologies because it provides some insight into the building blocks the individual has available to them in making themselves a culturally meaningful or “intelligible” subject (Butler, 1993). Poststructural interviewing, then, is less concerned with accurate representations of the self, and is more intrigued by how and with what cultural resources the subject narratively constructs a culturally intelligible subjectivity. In the case of the present research, I was interested in how the participants took up and deployed health and body discourses in the construction of a healthy governmental subjectivity.
Although I had originally intended to conduct ten one-on-one interviews, in the end I only conducted four. This was for a variety of reasons including lack of time, lack of interest amongst the participants, and difficulty scheduling interviews. In general, however, the four interviews were beneficial to the extent that they provided an opportunity for the participants to expand on the themes that emerged from the focus groups. Nevertheless, the interviews did not accomplish their intended purpose of elaborating on the life history circumstances (i.e. family background, family values around eating and exercise etc.) of the participants in greater depth than the focus group sessions. Given that the focus groups met three times, along with my continued presence in the programming in a non-participant observation capacity, there was ample time, opportunity, and comfort for the participants to share much of the details of their life circumstances with me. Additional interviews would not have provided more insight into the lives of the participants.

The interviews ranged from 50 minutes to an hour and twenty minutes in duration. Although there was an interview guide, the interviews were semi-structured. Thus, the interviews were guided by preexisting questions, but not determined by them. This was advantageous in that it allowed the freedom to explore and follow up on emerging themes. Steiner Kvale (1996) advocates semi-structured interview settings where participants are “given ample freedom and time to unfold their own stories” and researchers are able to “follow up with questions to clarify the main episodes and characters in the narratives” (p. 130). One interview was conducted with a participant from Lawson, and three were conducted with participants from Pinevale. All of the interviews occurred at the respective institutions where the research was being
implemented, with the interview at Lawson being held in a classroom setting, while at Pinevale, one interview was conducted in a quiet board room, another in quiet lounge area, and the third at a desk in a quiet hallway. With the consent of the parent/guardian and assent of the participant, the interviews were audio-recorded.

**Research Locations**

There were two research locations selected for this research (see Appendix H). The first was an exclusive private school, which I have given the pseudonym “Lawson”, located in downtown Toronto. Lawson has an annual tuition fee of $10,000 and a difficult entrance exam and is widely reputed to be one of the best academic schools in the city. The second research location was a City of Toronto Parks and Recreation Centre, which I have given the pseudonym “Pinevale”. Pinevale is located in what is generally considered a “poorer” area of Toronto, but there is evidence that the neighbourhood is undergoing a phase of gentrification. The patrons of the Community Centre itself, however, appeared to be from lower socio-economic backgrounds. Although I did not specifically come out and ask the participants, there were indications that they were from working class backgrounds (i.e. first generation Canadians, parents working multiple jobs, several of the participants themselves working multiple jobs, shortage of money to compete in basketball at the level they wanted to).

These two very different locations were selected for several reasons. The first reason is the simple practical consideration that these were two locations where I was able gain access to young male participants. Second, the diverse social and cultural circumstances of the two locations complemented a central objective of this research, which was to determine how differently situated youth take up and embody health and
body discourses. Most social scientific literature on fatness treats body size as a unified identity category, regardless of racial, ethnic, class, and age locations (see the edited collection Braziel and LeBesco, 2001). With this research project, I wanted to add more nuance to the existing body of literature examining how youth with different social, cultural, and material resources experienced and embodied discourses related to body size and health. However, I did not want to merely compare and contrast the experiences of the young men in the two different research locations, a technique that would surely preserve the ontological “reality” of the very categories I was trying to reveal as constructed (i.e. ethno-racial, age, class, gender, and body size), but rather focus on how embodiment differentially comes into being through the everyday practices of the self of diversely positioned and located young men.

**Recruitment**

Formal institutional consent was sought for all aspects of the research protocol (including non-participant observation, focus groups, and interviews) at each of the research settings (see Appendix H). Additionally, informal consent was sought from the respective program leaders and physical education teachers at each of the research locations. Parental consent and participant assent was also sought for the focus groups and interviews. In an attempt to recruit participants into Phase II (focus group/Photovoice) of the research, I did a presentation to the group I had been observing explaining what my research was about and what the focus group settings involved. Following this presentation I circulated a sheet where those interested could sign their name and leave their phone number. Those who signed the sheet were sent home with a package containing a letter of information, consent form, and assent form. I then did
follow up calls, speaking with parents/guardians and the potential participants themselves, answering any questions they may have had. With those participants that expressed a continued interest in the research I arranged focus group sessions.

Participants for the interviews (Phase III) were recruited through the focus groups. During the second and third focus groups, I informed the participants that there was a third phase to the research and sent those interested home with a letter of information, consent form, and assent form. Once again, I would call the participants, speaking to parents/guardians, answering any questions they may have had. With interested and eligible participants I then arranged interview sessions.

Participants were recruited on the basis of their age (13-15 years), their gender (male), and their involvement in programs offered through the research locations (i.e. school physical education program and recreation centre basketball program). The participants were offered pizza and drinks during the focus group sessions. To the best of my knowledge, participation in this research involved no expense on the part of the participants.

**Transcription**

All of the audio-recorded Photo(Focus) Group sessions and interviews were transcribed. Transcription, however, is not without its problems. Denzin (1997), for example, suggests that “embalmed transcribed speech is alien talk” (p. 41). Similarly, Kvale (1996) suggests that talk that is translated into research transcripts produces “de-contemporalized” and “de-contextualized” oral discourse. Thus, Denzin (1997) and Kvale (1996) argue that something is lost in the transcription process, that the “life”, the embodied here and now of spoken language is sucked out of the text. Fusco (2003)
argues that such characterisations serve to privilege the recorded voice over the transcribed voice. She argues that “the idea(l) of an original and complete voice recording from which something is rendered is also problematic” (p. 146). There is no original, authentic text that exists uncontaminated outside the research encounter. The voice of the participant, the recorded voice, and the transcript are all copies of copies, or simulacrum “of which no origin(al) exists” (p. 146).

James Schuerich (1997) presents a more pressing critique of research transcription as he argues that it is a modernist technology. He suggests that the preoccupation with transcribing verbatim and rigorous coding has at its roots the modernist dream of producing a “truthful” representation. He writes that,

the claim of accurate or valid representation, especially in terms of such techniques as line numbering, identification and quantification of comparable meaning monads, statistical techniques, or even discourse analysis, simply serves to hide the overwhelming absent presence of the researcher and her/his modernist assumptions. (p. 63)

With this critique in mind it becomes essential that as many of the traces of data construction as possible be made apparent to the reader. This serves to make evident the representational work that goes into the production of the data and, in so doing, curtails the misguided conception that the data is pure and naturally occurring, an out there “reality”. Thus, data is not “real”, “authentic”, or “natural”, but constructed, worked on, re-presented, and shaped by the skillful researcher. If, as this chapter has argued, data is constructed, what criteria, then, does the researcher use to assess the best way to make use of—in this case transcribe—the data?

Fusco (2003) argues that since there is no “authentic” data that can be transcribed with accuracy, the researcher must forgo questions of validity and replace them with
questions of instrumentality, and ask “what would be the most useful transcription for my research purposes?” (p. 147). In posing this question to my own research data, I made two critical decisions in order to maximize the use-value of my data. First, I opted to transcribe the data verbatim, not in an attempt to capture the “real’ voices of the research participants, but to be sure to more fully represent the conversational context in which the various narratives were embedded. Indeed, many tracts of the focus group discussions or interviews were seemingly irrelevant to my specific research questions. Nevertheless, they did reflect what the participants found relevant at the time. For instance, the “mental toughness” extract that appears above was embedded in a conversational context that spoke of “physical toughness” more generally. While my research is not necessarily interested in masculinity in terms of “toughness”, it is not entirely unrelated either. It was telling that there was a slippage between “toughness” in the ability to take control over one’s own body and “toughness” in the ability to control the bodies of others. In this way, conversational context was relevant, and for this reason I chose to transcribe verbatim.

The decision to transcribe verbatim presented problems or ethical issues of its own, however. For instance, some of the participants spoke with pronounced accents that clearly marked them as different from normative “white speak”. The second question I faced was whether to transcribe the data in their accent or correct it to normative “white speak”. Thus, should I transcribe words the participants pronounced as “dis”, “dat”, and “dey” or convert them to “white speak”, “this”, “that”, and “they”? The

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35 I recognize that all Canadians have “accents”. However, some are marked as normative while others serve to mark those who speak with them as different, deviant, racialized and marginal. In my research, I have done everything possible to resist the temptation to understand those who speak differently—or with accents—as inferior.

36 By “white speak”, I’m referring to the middle-class accent that is normative in dominant Canadian culture. This accent is to be found on popular television programs and commercials, the radio, and amongst most of the country’s politicians. It is the dominant mode of speaking and those who differ from the “white speak” norm are typically marginalized as Other, and are often ethno-cultural and/or racial minorities.
very fact that I can in all seriousness pose this ethical question demonstrates the degree to which transcription is a process of “constructing” data rather than “representing” the data in a neutral and unbiased manner. Whichever option I chose, I am constructing the data, molding it into a form that lines up with my epistemological framework. In the end, I opted to do my best to transcribe the recorded interviews and focus groups in a manner that reflected their language use. I chose this option because Smith (1999) argues that “research is one of the ways in which the underlying code of imperialism and colonialism is both regulated and realized” (p. 7-8). To transform their language use into one that both myself and my prospective readers are familiar and more comfortable with is itself an imperial gesture, reducing the Other to the self-Same. James Scheurich (1997) writes that the postmodern perspective sees the research interview as a process where the “‘wild profusion’ of the Other (the interviewee) is reduced and refashioned to fit the modernist prison of the Same (the researcher’s project)” (p. 70). By refusing to correct their language use and leaving the transcripts in their language the hope was that the participants cultural worlds and the subjectivities they are able to carve out of those worlds would serve to disrupt the modernist ambition for smooth, linear, and monovocal research narratives.

Conclusion

Through the review of postmodern, poststructural and feminist epistemologies, this chapter has articulated a critical poststructural research methodology. This methodology informed all stages of the research process, and was specifically designed to produce a “messy” or “readerly” research text that challenges the often implicit and obscure power relations that are at play within processes of knowledge production. This
text is not to be read as a singular “truth”, but rather as a particular and situated version of “truth” that operationalizes fluid, transgressive, and subversive thoughts, readings, and ways of experiencing the intersection of fatness, embodiment, health, and subjectivity. In the subsequent chapter, I examine how the discourse of fatness was taken up and deployed by the participants in fluid, complex, and contradictory ways.
CHAPTER FOUR

THE DISCOURSE OF FATNESS

In this section I challenge dominant biomedical assumptions about the fat body by highlighting the multiple, conflicting, relational, and contextual manner in which body fat is interpreted in the everyday lived experiences of the young men in the present research. Rather than understanding fatness (or the more “scientific” term obesity) as a “real” biomedical problem, I argue that in the everyday lives of the participants “fatness” was narratively constructed as a shifting historical, social, and cultural concept that was deployed in the production of particular subjectivities. I approach fatness as a discourse that provides a way of talking about and making sense of both the “fat body” as well as the normative slender body that defines itself against it. The discourse of “fatness”, I argue, acts as a representational horizon, enabling some statements about the fat body, while constraining others at the same time that it provides a backdrop against which the “slender”, “normal” body can differentiate itself as such. In the following paragraphs I use the narratives of the young men involved in the present research to accomplish two tasks: first, I demonstrate that “fatness” is a complex and shifting concept that cannot be easily classified with an agreed upon definition; and second, I expose how the discourse of “fatness” is used to construct both the “fat-Other” at the same time that it constructs the “normal-self”. In short, I first undermine the biomedical perspective that constructs “fatness” as a stable and coherent category and second demonstrate how the discourse of “fatness” is taken up and deployed in the everyday lives of the young men who participated in my study.
This chapter is divided into four sections. The first section explores how “lay” and “biomedical” definitions of fatness converge and conflict in the narratives of the young men as they struggle to create categories of “self” and “Other”. The second section examines how obesity discourse is deployed by the young men in the construction of national subjectivities. The third section is an exploration of the ways in which obesity discourse positions speaking subjects. More specifically, I argue that individuals who articulate non-normative constructions of fitness, healthfulness, and body size were marginalized as irrational subjects, a positioning which I argue could potentially align with, entrench, and naturalize oppressive raced, classed, ethno-cultural subject positionings. Finally, I look at how one group of participants at the Pinevale Community Centre constructed fatness, fitness, and healthfulness as a set of shifting, fluid, and contextual performatives.

**Obesity Discourse and the Construction of the “Self” and the “Other”**

The clear demarcations between “underweight,” “normal weight,” and “obesity” provided by the Body Mass Index do not easily translate into the more complex and messy categorizations employed in the everyday lived experiences of the participants at Lawson. Lee Monaghan (2007) suggests that abstract biomedical standards do not take into account the “possible discrepancies between medicalised measures and everyday gendered meanings and practices” (p. 585). In short, the way in which embodied subjects take up and make sense of fatness, Monaghan argues, may have more to do with

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37 Although obesity science tends to present the Body Mass Index as an exact science with a reading of 25 indicating “overweight” and 30 indicating “obese,” there has been much controversy and disagreement about where these categories should be situated and if they are worthwhile measures at all. The internal debates that have plagued obesity science have led some commentators to suggest that the categorization of body weight is more political than scientific (see Campos, 2004; Gard and Wright, 2005; Oliver, 2006). In other words, even at the seemingly objective level of obesity science, there is no consensus on what constitutes healthy body weight.
embedded social structural circumstances than inflexible biomedical categories. This is not to say that biomedical categories are irrelevant to the sense making repertoires of people in their everyday lives, but rather to suggest that biomedical categories are always interpreted through a socio-cultural lens. This was evident by the way the young men at Lawson struggled to provide a biomedical definition of “obesity” while, at the same time, trying to incorporate these more “scientific” definitions into their own lay framework for understanding body size and shape.

Ted: Can you tell if somebody’s obese? Okay. Let’s start with this one, what is obesity?

Misha: Isn’t it a certain amount of body weight over your ahhh…

Collin: Height?

Misha: …well, ah…

Dominic: What’s the difference between overweight and obesity? Like is obesity supposed to be like fat? I mean, overweight would mean the weight you’re over…like your mass compared to thin…I have no idea…compared to your height. Is that like fat?

Misha: Well, I think it would be fat because I don’t know if having muscle would you gain as much muscle mass as for your height? I mean there is a certain amount of… I don’t know. Typically, it is thought of as someone who puts on a lot of fat and is really heavy.

Ted: That brings up a second question, can you tell by looking at someone if they are obese?

Dominic: Like Santa Claus? (Group laughs) He’s just like your stereotypical fat obese person. If you look at, okay say Santa, stereotypically massive stomach, I guess it’s obvious that its fat not muscle.

Ted: So you can tell?

Dominic: Yeah.

Misha: But you can’t necessarily tell by definition if they’re obese. You can’t necessarily calculate it just by looking at them, but you can get a general idea depending on…

Sam: What if its extreme?

Misha: Yeah.

Sam: Than it would be pretty obvious.

Ted: You were saying there’s points when you can’t tell if somebody’s obese. You were a little hesitant on that.

Dominic: Um, well, it depends on how obesity is defined. If it’s to do with your fat than you would have to…

Misha: I think it usually has to do with your fat because I’m not sure you could put on enough muscle to be obese. Not for your size, ‘cause putting on
muscle involves losing fat. So, yeah, I guess it is just people of large body size who are mostly made up of fat and cellulite and, um, yeah I guess that is probably a visual cue.

Collin: Big boned. (Laughs)
Ted: What do you mean by “big-boned”? 
Collin: (Giggling uncontrollably) It’s just something I heard on South Park. There’s the overweight kid that insists that he is big-boned rather than fat. (FG #2_#2, Nov. 9, 2006, pp. 3-4)

Bodies are inscribed within an entire spectrum of cultural codes and conventions, with the biomedical model being one among many inscriptions. Thus, while biomedical perspectives on body weight are powerfully positioned in terms of constructing meaningful social bodies (Gard and Wright, 2001; 2005; Herndon, 2005), they do not act in isolation. Rather, the fat body is situated at the cross-roads of multiple and at times competing discourses—or “regimes of truth,” to borrow Foucault’s term—emerging from a range of socio-cultural practices and institutional settings, all struggling over the fat body to achieve a sort of explanatory supremacy. In the preceding narrative we can see at least three discourses, including biomedical definitions of fatness, popular cultural references to Santa Claus and the popular television cartoon series Family Guy, as well as “lay” conceptions of fatness and muscularity. What is important to emphasize here is that “fatness” is a complex and multiply constituted identity category that cannot easily be reduced to simplistic biomedical definitions.

In the above exchange there are multiple tensions between the “scientific” and “lay” perspective of “obesity”, between the “muscular” and “obese” body, and finally between “obesity” as immediately visible and “obesity” as more discrete and difficult to

38 Below I have included a transcription and citation chart of terms and symbols:

| FG   | Focus Group |
| FN   | Field Notes |
| […] | Section of the transcript/narrative was removed |
| …   | Speaker paused or re-directed comments |
determine. The first tension pits the “lay” person’s articulation of fatness against the more “scientific” definition provided by the Body Mass Index (BMI). When asked to define “obesity” the group works together and demonstrates a relatively sound understanding of the Body Mass Index scale. However, they raise some questions of their own, and Misha struggles with one of the central critiques of the BMI—that it is unable to distinguish whether “excess” weight is from fat or muscle mass (see Campos, 2004). Even though he is not fully aware of it, Misha has identified an inconsistency in the BMI model that, for many critics (see Campos, 2004; Evans, 2003; Gard and Wright, 2005; Oliver, 2006) renders it too blunt an instrument to be valuable as a predictive tool.

The tension between “fat” and “muscle” is an important one. For this group of participants at Lawson, the use-value of the BMI scale rests on its ability to distinguish between muscle and fat. Implicit in this discussion is the category-maintenance work of separating the “good,” muscular, and therefore “healthy” body, from the “bad,” fat, “unhealthy” body. Deborah Lupton (1995) suggests that health discourses are commonly constructed around a dualism between the healthy, contained, “civilized body” and the out of control, unhealthy, “grotesque body”. Such discursive constructions compel subjects to categorize their own bodies as well as the bodies of others into binary hierarchies of “good” and “bad” or, to use Lupton’s language, “civilized” and “grotesque”. Similarly, the young men in the above excerpt expect the BMI to achieve categorical precision in dividing bodies into polar opposites. In this sense, the practices of health, including those that narrate, measure, and categorize “healthy” and “unhealthy” bodies, are part of a “boundary project” (Pronger, 1998). According to Brian Pronger, boundary projects separate and police the boundaries between bodies and, in so doing,
are productive of particular racialized, sexed, and gendered subjectivities. In the case of
the boundary projects of “health”, producing and policing the boundary between the
“civilized” and “grotesque” body is constitutive of both the “unhealthy” subject as well
as the “healthy” subject who defines him or herself against the “unhealthy-Other”.

For Misha, Collin, Dominic, and Sam it was imperative that the BMI scale be able
to usefully distinguish between muscle mass, which is culturally coded as “healthy,” and
body fat, which is constructed as “unhealthy,” such that the boundary between the
healthy-self and the unhealthy-Other was secured. Interestingly, however, the boundary
between the healthy muscular body and the unhealthy-fat Other is more leaky than the
young men acknowledge. For instance, the BMI measures body weight—not body fat—and
as such is unable to distinguish whether weight is derived from fat or muscle
(Campos et al., 2004, 2006; Ross, 2005). Technically, it is possible, therefore, to have a
high percentage of lean muscle mass and be categorized as “obese” by the Body Mass
Index. Furthermore, the muscular body itself may not be as “healthy” as the young men
are inclined to believe. “Unhealthy” practices of dieting (Pope, Phillips, and Olivardia,
2000), excessive exercise (Jones and Crawford, 2005; Pope, Phillips, and Olivardia,
2000; Ricciardelli, McCabe, and Ridge, 2006), drug use (Adams, Turner, and Bucks,
2005; Monaghan, 2001), and body enhancing surgeries (Atkinson, 2008) are often
associated with the lean muscular male body. Thus, the evaluation of the “healthy” body
is more complex than it appears. Despite these inconsistencies, health discourse continues
to assert the notion that “healthfulness”, through the identification of “healthy” body
weight, can be determined through simple height-weight measurement charts. This
persistence in the face of scientific uncertainty has led Michael Gard and Jan Wright
(2005) to suggest that the “war on obesity” is more of a moral crusade against certain bodies than it is a scientific quest to preserve the health of the population. Thus, I argue that health generally, and “obesity” or fatness more specifically, are cultural categories that are taken up and deployed by the young men generally, and this group of youth more specifically, in constructing a meaningful sense of self.

The visibility of bodies was fundamental to how they categorized the bodies they encountered. When I asked the group if it was possible to tell if someone is “obese” by looking at the body, several members of the group agreed that you can see “obesity”. Yet Misha argued from the perspective of the BMI, claiming that you cannot necessarily determine whether someone meets the clinical definition of “obese” just by looking at their body shape and size. Sam pushes Misha and asks “what if it’s extreme?” Misha conceded that in the extreme cases it would seem to be apparent. This exchange should not necessarily be seen as the search to define the “truth” about body size and shape; rather, it should be understood more broadly as a struggle over who has the authority to make sense of bodies.

The discussants were not prepared to give interpretive power to science alone. Rather the participants insisted that the “lay” person has the appropriate acumen to determine who was “obese” and who was not. The notion that the participants could determine who was “obese” or “fat”, and therefore “unhealthy”, was a common theme across the focus groups. However, their definitions of fatness and health varied widely both within and across research settings, thus demonstrating the slipperiness, leakiness even, of the concept of fatness. Nevertheless, both biomedical and popular constructions of fatness proved to be central cultural resources for making sense of bodies. For the
participants, the ability to define who was fat and thus “unhealthy” proved to be an important resource in constructing an identity constituting boundary between the slender, healthy self and the fat, unhealthy-Other. The ability to draw the boundary between the healthy-self and the unhealthy-Other is fundamental to the constitution of the subject (Ahmed, 2000; Butler, 1993). This is important because the boundary between self and Other is a constitutive boundary, dividing inside from outside, belonging from that which does not belong. At first glance it may seem strange to speak of health using metaphors of place, belonging, and exclusion, but Simon Williams (1998) suggests that “health…is not simply something one has or is, rather it…is a prime site from which claims to social membership are demonstrated and the material re-workings of the body occurs” (p. 410).

Thus, health, like any other embodied social category, is discursively constituted through reiterative practices of producing and marking boundaries between those on the “inside” and excluded Others. Therefore, what is at stake in the young men’s defense of their ability to see and recognize “obesity” is far greater than simply labeling a physical state of embodiment; rather, they are defending their competence at taking up and deploying culturally meaningful categories that not only situate the Other, but simultaneously orient themselves as normatively slender, healthy young men. Thus, the function of “obesity” is not only about defining the fat body it, at the time, serves a crucial purpose in forming the margins of the slender, healthy body. In other words, fatness is central to how we read and make sense of bodies and its everyday usage is far more complex and nuanced than simply a physiological state of embodiment, as the biomedical model would assert. In the ensuing section I explore how notions of fatness are not only crucial in constructing and
re-constructing the boundaries of self, but also the borders of the body politic more generally.

**Obesity Discourse and the Construction of Nation**

As mentioned above, fatness was a useful construct in policing the boundary between the healthy-self and the fat-Other, but it was also a productive category in forming the boundaries of national identity. On many occasions the participants constructed the “obesity epidemic” as an American problem (FG#1_2, Oct. 26, 2005; FG#3_2, Feb. 8, 2006; FG#7_1, May 26, 2006). While the participants recognized that there were “obese” or “fat”39 people in Canada, they nevertheless talked about America as being the “real” heart of the “obesity epidemic”. Despite media representations that paint Canada as the second fattest nation in the world (Hall, 2007) along with constant public health warnings about Canada’s epidemic of obesity (Canada’s Report Card on Physical Activity for Children and Youth, 2008; Chief Medical Officer Health Report, 2004), many of the participants did not necessarily see Canada as in the middle of an “obesity epidemic”.

According to the participants, a constitutive difference between Canada and America was located in the size and shape of the bodies of their respective citizens. The difference in bodies between Americans and Canadians was thought to be reflective of a cultural difference between the two nations. This sentiment was exemplified in the way Kyle, a participant from Lawson, talked about Canadian and American bodies in an interview.

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39 Elsewhere in the dissertation I talk about how different socially and culturally located communities used different terms to categorise the fat body (see Chapter #5 Men, Masculinity, and Fatness).
Kyle: If you look at the US, if you walked around and see the number of people who are overweight down there, I mean, people who are overweight up here don’t even compare to that…

Ted: What do you think of that?

Kyle: It’s all culture. It’s just kind of like almost a carelessness down south and like Texas where you see like one in four people are obese or something like that. It’s like, something like that I’m just kind of thinking it’s not the individual people’s fault40, if there’s that many, it’s the culture, the kind of culture McDonald’s is portraying and stuff like that. There’s no incentive for them not to be overweight (Int. #3, June 2, 2006, p. 18).

Here, Kyle contrasted the American and Canadian experience, suggesting that American culture was more conducive to overweight and obesity. Kyle paints an image of a McDonaldized, “obesegenic” (Smith, 2006/07), sick American culture. Medical categories of “health” and “pathology” serve to mark and entrench the border between the “good” and the “bad”, with the “good” in this case being Canadian culture, where multinational corporations do not determine our desires and body weights, and where there continues to be “incentive…not to be overweight”. By projecting the “bad” onto the “unhealthy” Other, both at the level of the body politic (i.e. America the “bad”) and the individual (i.e. Other as “unhealthy”), the self is by implication cleansed of the burden of ill-health, degeneracy, and disorder. The constitution of the stabile, organized self thus requires that,

we project…anxiety onto the Other, externalizing our loss of control. The Other is

40 The suggestion that it is “not the individual people’s fault” is an interesting comment given that in Chapter Six I argued that the participants from Lawson tended to attribute body size to “lifestyle” factors that were understood to be within the control of the individual. There are two reasons that I do not consider Kyle’s comments to be a break from the individualist argument. First, within the broader interview, Kyle clearly situates body size as something that the individual is responsible for controlling. He uses words such as “self-motivation”, “driven”, and “hard work”—all of which are terms that infer an autonomous, self-governing subject—to characterize what it takes to achieve and maintain a normatively slender body. Furthermore, he suggests that there is an absence of “incentive” within the American context for people to lose weight, thereby insinuating that if there were “incentive” people would take control of their bodies and cease to be fat. Second, in this narrative he is speaking of the American experience, and it is evident that he sees Americans as having a very different cultural milieu than the Canadian context. Thus, his suggestion that individual’s are not responsible for themselves is specific to the American context.
thus stereotyped, labeled with a set of signs paralleling...our loss of control. The Other is invested with all the qualities of the “bad”. (Gilman, 1985, p. 20)

Similarly, by projecting weight pathologies onto American bodies the research participants in both locations were able to construct a version of a healthier, more responsible Canada. Even though there has been an explosion of mediated coverage with respect to the “obesity epidemic” in the Canadian context (Fusco, 2007; McDermott, 2007), there was a strong sense among the participants that “we’re not as bad as them”. Thus, obesity discourse was productive of a particular national sense of self, where some Canadians were understood to be fat, but generally speaking, the “obesity epidemic” was assumed to be an American phenomenon.

Many of the participants at Lawson recognized, however, that the stereotype of the “fat”, “obnoxious”, and “stupid” American was a mediated construction. Nevertheless they regularly drew upon this stereotype as an important construct in articulating and highlighting the difference between Canadian and American identities. During a focus group discussion at Lawson we were talking about the popular television comedies, *The Simpsons* and *Family Guy*, and one of the participants suggested that Homer Simpson and Peter Griffin, the fat father figures from the respective television series, were characterized as typical Americans.

Jack: The stereotypical person, or American, is supposedly thought of as...I know they’re [creators of *The Simpsons* and *Family Guy*] just trying to...it isn’t true, but a lot of people think of American’s as fat and stupid and obnoxious, and they’re just portraying that [with Homer and Peter]. (FG#1_2, Oct. 26, 2005, p. 1)

Jack realized that the construct of Americans as “fat” and “stupid” was a stereotypical construction, but nevertheless it powerfully shaped the way the young men understood their own bodies, and the body politic of Canadian culture more generally, over and
against their American neighbours to the south. According to this logic, Canadian culture produces bodies that are leaner, more intelligent and, by implication, healthier. Thus, the participants were implicitly arguing that the normative Canadian body meets a slender ideal, unlike the fat American body. Citizenship, then, is embodied through corporeal contours, with the slender, “healthy” body representing what it is to be Canadian, while the fat, “unhealthy” body reflects an American corporeality. Kathleen LeBesco (2004) argues that “body type, citizenship, and moral type have long been linked” (p. 55). National imaginary of what constitutes the “good” and “proper” citizen is marked in and through the size and shape of the body. Narratives that construct the American body (politic) as fat and stupid, as Kyle and Jack participants articulated in the present research, serve to construct a boundary between the normative slender and healthy Canadian body as separate and distinct from those less-than-Canadian fat bodies. Citizenship, therefore, has its own set of interpellations, compelling particular embodied subjectivities. Canadian bodies that fail to comply with these normative standards, I would argue, are seen as less-than-Canadian subjects. As subjects that fail to live up to and embody the norms of Canadian citizenship. This has serious implications for Canadian citizens who have different notions about the relationship between body size, beauty, and healthfulness. In the following section, I explore how differently situated racial and ethno-cultural communities have different notions of what constitutes “beautiful” and “healthy” bodies, and how these differences may serve to mark and further entrench their identities as non-normative and thus racialized subjects.
Obesity Discourse and the Construction of Racialized Bodies

The notions of what constituted fatness shifted across various racial and ethnocultural communities. There is evidence to suggest that the normative slender ideal (Bordo, 1993) is not universal and that members of some racialized communities express a preference for larger, fuller bodies (Massara, 1997; Duncan and Robinson, 2004; LeBesco, 2004), and are less likely to engage in body transformation practices such as dieting, rigorous exercise, and surgery in the name of achieving normative body ideals (LeBesco, 2004). Similar patterns were found in the present research, where the participants from Pinevale generally expressed a wider range of acceptable body sizes and shapes. For instance, during an interview, Omar commented that normal embodiment for the men in Ghana, his birth country, was “short” and “stocky” (Int. #4, June 8, 2006). When I asked Omar what he meant by “stocky”, he explained that the men were “big”, “strong”, and “chubby”. He then went on to suggest that he desired such an embodiment for himself. The broader definitions of acceptable body sizes and shapes were not exclusive to boys and men as the participants from Pinevale were at moments quite critical of the social pressures girls and women experienced to attain a slender ideal (FG#3_2, Feb. 8, 2006; FG#4_1, Feb.22, 2006; FG#4_2, Mar. 1, 2006). Many of the participants from Pinevale—but not all41—lamented that the music icons Beyoncé and Missy Elliot were “forced” to lose weight to maintain their popularity. John, for instance, commented that Missy Elliot “lost weight and right now, I say she

41 Several of the participants from Pinevale articulated a preference for “skinny”, “healthy” female bodies. Similarly, on several occasions the mostly white, middle-class participants from Lawson expressed concern over the normalizing pressures their female peers experienced to attain a slender body ideal. I think this is important to point out because I do not want to give the impression of two homogenous, polarized interpretive communities. Rather, there was diversity in the way both communities spoke about desirable body sizes, however, there were also interpretative patterns that marked differences between the two research locations.
looks okay, because I don’t tink she has to go like a drastic change and go skinny, ye know” (FG#3_1, Feb. 1, 2006, p. 19). For many of the young men at Pinevale, the skinny ideal was not something that they found particularly desirable in the bodies of girls and women.

Achieving a “healthy weight” according to biomedical standards was not necessarily something the participants at Pinevale saw as essential to living an active, healthy lifestyle. The young men often spoke about the compatibility of fitness, healthfulness, and fatness in the bodies and performances of their peers. Such narratives were almost non-existent at Lawson. Thus, notions of what constitutes “fatness” (as well as “fitness” and “healthfulness”) shifted across the two research locations. This was particularly evident in the positive narratives John shared about his mother’s embodiment. In the following extract, John expressed surprise at what he perceived to be an incongruence between his mother’s weight on the scale and her embodied appearance and performance. In other words, John grappled with the conflict between her measured weight and her socially experienced body.

John: If you are weighing yourself and you don’t…‘cause my mom was weighing herself yesterday ‘cause…okay, my, my step father came over yesterday. I dunno, we jus’ had a conversation, an’ den my brother brang down de scale an’ was like “Okay, let’s weigh everyone”. So my brother was like seventy and my sister 40, ‘cause she like five, an’ I was 150, an’ den my step father was 200 an’ he looks bigger den my mom, but my mom weighed like 210. I’m like “Wow! What de hell!” I’m like “Okay dis guy has a belly an’ my mom doesn’t and she weighs”…It could be because my mom is like, she been stayin’ home awhile, an’ she hasn’t been really active, so that’s probably why she gained a little weight.

42 LeBesco (2004) correctly points out that scholars should proceed with caution when they reductively situate a woman of colour’s sense of self worth in the heterosexual gaze of the masculine-Other, as though black women, for example, strive to attain larger, fuller bodies solely to please black men. Rather, LeBesco suggests there are multiple and diverse reasons that black women may come to privilege larger bodies or, for that matter, reject such bodies and actively pursue the slender ideal associated with white femininity (Shaw, 2005).
because she was like 200, she probably gained like 10 pounds, yeah, dat’s what I think. (FG #3_2, Feb. 8, 2006, p. 23)

According to biomedical standards, John’s mom would have been “obese”\(^{43}\). However, John did not see or talk about his mother in terms of “obesity” with its pathological medical and moral connotations. Rather, he spent time positively reflecting about how his mother was a “healthy” adult woman who was physically active. According to John, she regularly went out to dance clubs and used dancing as a means of physical activity.

Comparing his mother’s body to that of his step father’s, John was shocked to find out that his mother weighed more than his step father\(^{44}\). He talked about his step father’s “belly” and used this as a measure of body weight.

I included this narrative to demonstrate how notions of fatness are shifting and fluid. In particular, I wanted to demonstrate how differently situated racialized and classed subjects invest diverse meanings in bodies and, more to the point, how the proximity of the body under evaluation (i.e. mother versus step father or mother versus stranger etc.) shapes how one talks about, sees, and experiences fatness. In other words, the way situated subjects “perceive” bodies is always embedded in what Alcoff refers to as “tacit body knowledges” (cited in Murray, 2007, p. 362). Tacit body knowledges are the effect of “sedimented contextual knowledges” (Alcoff cited in Murray, 2007, p. 362), where knowing is “not primarily a cognitive function” but “intercorporeal ways of knowing and ordering the meanings of our various ways of being…they are constitutive of our bodily being in-the-world” (Murray, 2007, p. 362). Thus, ways of understanding,

\(^{43}\) On a different occasion, John shared that his mother was 5’3” tall, and with a weight of 210 pounds, her BMI would be 35, thus putting her in the “obese” category.

\(^{44}\) During a different focus group, John talked about how for a woman to be bigger than her partner was a violation of gender norms (FG#3_3, Feb. 15, 2006). He went on to suggest that “big” women violated both the masculinity of their partners as well as their own normative femininities. Thus, in his estimation, absolute “bigness” in women is an undesirable trait.
evaluating, and experiencing bodies cannot be isolated from one’s socio-culturally constructed position as a raced, gendered, sexed, sized subject. Therefore, fatness is not an objectively interpreted phenomenon, but rather is always viewed through one’s framework of tacit bodily knowledges, which is embedded at the intersection of multiple and conflicting discourses, including, normative performances of masculinity, femininity, and motherhood, as can be seen in the above extract. To reiterate, I found that racialized subjects understood and articulated body weight in divergent ways, a finding that is consistent with the conclusions of other researchers (see Duncan and Robinson, 2004; LeBesco, 2004; Massara, 1997; Wright and Burrows, 2004).

Dominant models of health reflect normative white, middle class values (Crawford, 2006; Lupton, 1995; Wright and Burrows, 2004). Within this context, little consideration is given to how other constructions of health might be more “meaningful to cultural groups other than the white middle class” (Wright and Burrows, 2004, p. 226). Moreover, those groups that adhere to non-normative notions of health and embodiment are constructed as deviant (LeBesco, 2004). Thus, subjects that articulate compatibility between fatness, healthfulness, and fitness, as some of the participants from Pinevale did, are marked as using erroneous, irrational logic, and are constructed as “deluded” subjects (LeBesco, 2004). Such characterizations serve to erect distinctions between “rational”, “healthy”, white middle class subjects and “irrational”, “unhealthy” marginalized subjects (i.e. the racialized and poor). In other words, dominant health discourse does not simply name “healthy” and “unhealthy” bodies, but draws a constitutive boundary between “good” and “bad” bodies, and this boundary serves to entrench the white, middle class populations as “good” and “proper” citizens, as compared to “unruly”, “irrational”
dark, poor bodies. In short, by refusing to acknowledge as legitimate health meanings other than those emerging from dominant white, middle class values, health discourse is productive of white, middle class compliant subjects, on the one hand, and poor, racialized, irrational subjects on the other. In the following section, I continue the exploration of fluid and shifting notions of fatness by looking at how the young men at Pinevale talked about fatness as embodying multiple meanings.

**The Multiple Categories of Fatness**

For the young men at Pinevale there were multiple types of “fat”. They variously talked about “jelly fat”, “over fat”, “little fat”, “healthy fat”, “semi-healthy fat”, “pig fat”, “lazy fat”, “tumour fat” (FG#4_1, Feb. 22, 2006), “fat suicide”, “sporty fat”, “thick skin fat” (FG#4_2, Feb. 8, 2006), “fat, fat”, and “booty fat” (FG#4_3, Mar. 8, 2006). For these participants, “fat” was not articulated as an either/or state of embodiment, nor was it merely understood as a continuum with some bodies being fatter than others. Rather, there were many types of fat, each with a different set of meanings and performances. For instance, during one focus group I asked the participants to clarify what they meant by “healthy fat”. The following discussion ensued.

**Ted:** What were you sayin’ about healthy fat, what’s that?
**Sean:** Dere’s different kinds of fat…
**Omar:** Like, um, dere’s fat people dat can run faster den I can.
**Jamie:** Yeah! Dis guy named Jeffery, he can run faster den Ajay! He’s fat, but dis guy is so fast, yo!

[…]

**Ted:** What do you think of different kinds of fat?
**Sean:** Dere’s different kinds of fat, dere’s not just one fat and dat’s like lazy fat.
**Omar:** Dat jus won’t go away…
**Sean:** …dat affects you, yeah, dere’s fat on de body…
**Jamie:** Like tumour.
**Ajay:** Yeah, tumour.
**Omar:** Okay look, dere’s lazy fat, dat’s fat dat jus won’t go away so people get
For this group of young men there are multiple types of “fat”, each with its own set of associated performatives, and each characterizing a particular subjectivity. Fat, in other words, was defined as much by what the person does as it was an inherent property of fat itself. Thus, “healthy fat” is a fat person who can run fast, “sweats a lot” (FG#4_2, Mar. 1, 2006), and actively works to lose their weight (FG#4_3, Mar. 8, 2006). “Lazy fat”, in contrast, characterizes a person who does not put a lot of effort into losing their body fat, and takes the easy way out by getting liposuction, as Omar suggests above. During a different focus group the participants talked about “muscle fat”, which Sean characterized as “like thick skin fat” (FG#4_2, Mar. 1, 2006). “Muscle fat”, they argued, was different than a “ripped body” type of muscularity, but it was still very strong and muscular, and you “wouldn’t want to mess with muscle fat”.

Unlike biomedical accounts that tend to reduce fat to a few simple indicators—amount and location on the body—these young men articulate a wide range of “fats”. Implicit in their narratives were distinctions between “good” and “bad” fats, with “good” fats being physically active and strong, while “bad” fats were sedentary and unmotivated to lose weight. Thus, “good” and “bad” fats were constitutive of “good” and “bad” subjects. In this way, there were still moral assumptions within their narratives, but the criteria for assessing the morality of others is of a different order. Being physically active, strong, and trying to be healthy are all constitutive performances of the “good” subject, regardless of whether they attain a biomedically normative sized and shaped body.

Although the participants talked about multiple types of fat subjects, there did not appear to be universal consensus on how to apply the categories of fatness. For example,
categorization of certain bodies shifted across context. For instance, on one occasion they talked about Tiny as being fat but extremely good at sports. In this case, they labeled Tiny a “healthy fat” (FG#4_1, Feb. 22, 2006). However, in a subsequent focus group Omar was talking about how much Tiny eats and suggested that Tiny is an “unhealthy fat” (FG#4_2, Mar. 1, 2006). Omar went on to comment that the unhealthiness of Tiny is in how he thinks of food, “he’s always thinkin’ about food, how big of lunch he’s gonna buy, tings like dat” (FG#4_2, Mar. 1, 2006, p. 16). In the gymnasium Tiny’s fat body was interpreted as “healthy fat”, whereas Tiny’s desire for food resulted in him being labeled as “unhealthy fat”. Thus, the manner in which the young men administered the various categories of fat that they collectively constructed shifted across context.

Moreover, the participants often argued over which category a particular body fell into. In the following extract, for instance, I showed the participants an image of a shirtless man grabbing his large belly and smiling proudly. I asked the participants to categorize his body and an argument ensued.

Ted: Is that right? Since we talked about different types of healthy—you guys talked about healthy fat, there’s won’t go away fat, and there was lazy fat—what would this guy be?

Jamie: A fat, fat!

Ajay: I would say, fat and ahh…

Sean: Me, I dunno, healthy fat.

Omar: Dat’s not healthy fat.

Ajay: Yeah, he, he he’s healthy, but…

Sean: Healthy fat is like Leo.

Omar: No, no, no, dat’s lazy fat. Look, dere’s another fat guy in de background. Dey must of jus’ came from some eatin’ contest, dat’s lazy fat.

Ted: Why do you say they just came from some eating contest?

Omar: Look at de set up an’ everything. After eatin’ contests, dey all take photos of your belly to see “Oh, dis guy ate dis much”. Dat’s lazy fat.

For the record, I would have defined the figure in the photo as “fat”. He had a large, loose, pendulous belly held between his hands. I include my interpretation of the body here to reiterate the observation that notions of fatness shift across context and situated perspective.
Disagreements of this sort often erupted as a result of differing opinions on how bodies should be categorized. However, the performance of the fat body remained central to how the body was categorized. In the above extract Omar evaluates the fat body as “unhealthy” on the basis of his assumption that he has just been at an eating contest. Similarly, as the above discussion progressed, Jamie argued that “healthy” and “unhealthy” fat can not be determined visually, but must be determined based on how fatness is performed.

Ted: Can you tell by looking at somebody’s body if they are lazy fat, healthy fat…?
Omar: Yes.
Te: What’s the difference, how can you tell the difference?
Ajay: If, if you’re a healthy fat…
Jamie: I don’t think you can, if someone walks up to Tiny, right? They’d be like “Ah, he’s not good at sport” an’ den he starts to score, wow! (FG#4_2, Mar. 1, 2006, pp. 14-15)

For these young men fatness was not just a type of body, rather it was a style of embodiment. Fatness thus is constituted through embodied performances. While the participants articulated a distinction between “healthy” and “unhealthy”, “good” and “bad” fat, they did so using a different set of criteria. Their articulation of the dividing line between “good” and “bad” bodies was fluid and embedded in embodied practices of the self as opposed to reductive biomedical binaries of “health” and “pathology”. Their construction of “health” was very much embedded in their everyday social realities, where a healthy body was a body that could fulfill the requirements of dominant masculinity (i.e. playing sports, performing toughness, containing one’s desires, and taking responsibility for the self) and actual body size was largely irrelevant to how they understood healthy subjectivities.
Notions of fatness are not universal, but shift across social and cultural locations (Duncan and Robinson, 2004; LeBesco, 2004; Massara, 1997; Sobo, 1997). The present research has demonstrated how differently situated interpretative agents made sense of fat bodies using a range of criteria, much of which extends beyond biomedical definitions of fatness. This section has explored the narratives of one group of young men of colour at the Pinevale Community Centre. I have shown how these young men take up different criteria for understanding and articulating health in relation to body size and shape. For them, health and wellbeing were determined by a set of performatives which constituted a socially healthy subjectivity, and not necessarily static definitions of “overweight” and “obesity”. By “socially healthy subjectivity” I am referring to a subject who is able to perform traditional masculinity through playing sports, being tough, and containing one’s desires. Social health, unlike biomedical models of health, was defined by attaining a culturally meaningful subject position within a particular social community. Although I focused mostly on this one group of young men at Pinevale to demonstrate how notions of health and fatness were fluid, shifting, and embedded in social and cultural context, I do not want to give the impression that the other groups of young men at Pinevale did not also articulate alternative versions of health and fatness. Indeed, they did, but in more subtle ways, and I explore these constructions in other places in this dissertation.

Similarly, the participants at Lawson also articulated fluid definitions of fatness, but were less likely to stray from dominant notions of health and normalcy in their readings of bodies, which I argue in this chapter and elsewhere.

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46 There were four participants in this focus group. They all self-identified (without prompting) as first generation Canadian’s. Two of the participants self-identified as Trinidadian, one as Sri Lankan, and one as Ghanese.

47 See Chapter #6 Obesity Discourse, Heathism, and the (Neo)Liberal Governmental Subject.
Conclusion

In this chapter I have explored how fatness is a fluid, shifting, and contextually constructed concept. Furthermore, I have argued that “health” and related notions of body size and shape are moral constructs invested with meanings of “good” and “bad” practices and bodies that serve to produce, police, and entrench distinctions between insider/Other identities. The participants took up and deployed obesity discourse in ways that produced themselves as “healthy” subjects over and against “unhealthy” Others. The discursive construction of the Other was not limited to intersubjective relations, but was also prominent in how the participants constructed notions of nation and national identity. The “obesity epidemic”, they argued, was an “American problem”. Although implicit, the narratives of the young men constructed the national Canadian body as “healthier” and “slimmer” than the American body. Thus, to be Canadian is to have a normatively “healthy” body size and shape that reflects certain white, middle class values including autonomy, rationality, and self-governmentality. By implication, individuals that endorse non-dominant notions of health, wellbeing, and body beautiful, as did some of the participants at Pinevale, were marginalized by dominant health discourse as less-than-citizens—less rational, less autonomous, and less-disciplined—all of which serve to further entrench their marginal status as racialized subjects. I argued that it is imperative that health discourse consider how it produces categories of “good” and “bad” health practices and thus health subjectivities and how these categories overlap with and entrench already existing socio-cultural binaries of, for example, “race” and social class. In the final section, I explored how the young men at Pinevale narratively constructed multiple categories of “fatness”. These categories were not embedded in notions of the
static, biological body of biomedicine, but rather in lived social bodies engaged in everyday practices. In the following chapter, I examine more specifically how notions of body size and shape were experienced and lived by the participants and how these experiences shift across social and cultural positioning.
CHAPTER FIVE

MEN, MASCULINITY, AND FATNESS

While there has been much scholarly research into the ways in which girls and women experience body size and shape, there has been relatively less interrogation into the experiences of boys and men (Bell and McNaughton, 2007; Gilman, 2004; Monaghan, 2007). This chapter aims to partially fill this gap in the literature by examining how the young men from two locations—a Toronto private school and a Toronto Community Centre—took up fatness discourses in the process of forming their embodied identities. This chapter does not assume that fatness is universally experienced by all men, but endeavours to explore how differently situated subjects (i.e. raced, classed, etc.) diversely take up and experience their bodies through health, body, and fatness discourse.

Fatness as an “uninhabitable subjectivity”

Because boys and men are supposed to maintain an aloof disposition to their bodies as part of their performance of masculinity there is the common perception that men do not care about their bodies, particularly about its fatness. Kristen Bell and Darlene McNaughton (2007) suggest that although men have concerns about fatness they tend to be guarded or less public about these concerns which leads to the assumption that the “fear of fatness is something that only women experience” (p. 110). Far from being unconcerned about their fatness, participants in the present study expressed considerable

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48 An “uninhabitable” subject position refers to those positions that do not conform to normative codes of embodiment and thus exist beyond the limits of “cultural intelligibility” forming the “constitutive outside”, for “normal” or “inhabitable” subjectivities Butler (1993, p. 3).

49 See Chapter #8 Masculinity and Health and Body Discourses.
anxieties about body weight and shape. Specifically, they were unable to imagine living in a fat body. For example, when the young men from the Pinevale Community Centre were asked how they would feel if they were fat like the man in the image\textsuperscript{50} we were looking at the group responded in the following way.

Ted: Okay, well let’s take a look at this one [Fat guy in a box]  
Group: Oooo [Prolonged and collective reaction of disgust]  
Ajay: Too fat, too fat!  
Sean: Whaaa! Is dis guy in a cage.  
Jamie: What is dis guy in a box?  
Sean: The problem with dat, I would never take the rest of my life…never go outside.  
Ajay: Dat guy would never go outside, I am telling you, people would laugh at dat.  
Omar: You know what, dis guy…  
Jamie: I wouldn’t go outside, I would drop. (FG#4_1, Feb. 22, 2006, p. 28)

In this excerpt the men explicitly abjected the fat male body in the photo. You may recall that abjection is the process of violently casting Otherness, in this case, fatness, beyond the pale. Abjection is the process of forming a boundary between self and Other (Kristeva, 1984). The participants’ strong reactions of disgust, horror, and aggressive laughter were abjecting reactions, clearly demonstrating that the fatness they saw in the image of the fat man was Other to their normatively sized and shaped bodies. Their violent reactions made it evident that the image of this fat body was a disgusting, horrifying, laughable even, image of masculinity. For the participants, extreme fatness of this sort represents an uninhabitable subjectivity. By this I mean that the participants cannot imagine living in such an embodiment, with Ajay going so far as to suggest that

\textsuperscript{50} The image comes from the *Bloodhound Gang’s* 2005 album *Hefty*. It is of an extremely fat, hairy, and seemingly naked man folded into a box that is too small for his large body. I selected this image because it reflected some of the imagery that was circulating in popular music iconography at that time of the research. I tried to select at least some images that reflected the media representations the young men were consuming. The fat male body was, and continues to be, a prominent theme in popular cultural media (i.e. Peter from *Family Guy*, Homer Simpson from *The Simpson’s*, the *Hefty* album, etc.) and I felt it was necessary to examine how these representations of maleness shaped the manner in which the participants talked about and experienced the intersections of masculinity and fatness.
he would never go outside again. The abjection of the fat body was also apparent in another focus group at the Pinevale Community Centre.

Ted: Would it bother you to have a belly like that?
Akeem: Yeah, of course.
Ted: Do you think he’s healthy?
Josh: It’s like wakin’ up tomorrow morning with a big belly, I wouldn’t go to school.
Akeem: (In background Akeem answers my question) Ah, I don’t think so.
Ted: What would you do if you woke up with a big belly like that?
Josh: I wouldn’t go to school, I don’t know.
Akeem: I would come in here and run it off, run until it goes back down. [Giggles]
Ted: Would you do the same?
Josh: Yeah, I would go crazy.
Ted: You’d just go crazy?
Josh: Yeah.
Ted: You wouldn’t like that?
Josh: No. (FG#5_3, April 19, 2006, p. 15-16)

Maleness in contemporary western culture is a mark of disembodiment (Gallop, 1988; Grosz, 1994; Thomas, 1996). Feminist authors argue that to be male is to be mind, not body, subject, not object, yet fatness in its immense visibility, is the mark of embodiment (Moon and Sedgewick, 2001). Thus, the young men recognized that to be fat was to be reduced to the body. In other words, a fat identity is an embodied identity, where dominant cultural readings of fatness situate it as lazy, gluttonous, unhealthy, and sick.

In this sense, they understood fatness as what Judith Butler (1993) refers to as an

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51 Ajay’s suggestion that he would never go outside again is interesting in the broader context of the focus group discussions, where the participants often brought up stories of extremely obese men and women they had seen on television shows such as Muarry Povich and Jerry Springer. What was most fascinating to the young men was that these fat people were unable to leave their homes. They were literally too big to go outside. However, given Ajay’s comments, it is interesting to consider how extremely fat bodies may not simply be physically unable to leave the house, but are at the same time under house arrest, so to speak, because of the powerful social discriminations against fatness they experience in the outside world. Ajay’s comments give insight into how fat discrimination shapes the experience of (un)living a fat embodiment.

52 Petersen (1998) and Harding (1998) point out, however, that not all male bodies experience the privilege of disembodiment equally, rather the white, heterosexual, middle-class body is disproportionately privileged.

53 The construction of fatness as lazy, gluttonous, and unhealthy was prominent in the narratives of the young men in the present research, findings which are supported in the literature (for example, see Burrows and Wright, 2004; Campos, 2004; Gard and Wright, 2005; Moon and Sedgewick, 2001)
“unlivable” identity. For Butler fatness represents “those ‘unlivable’ and ‘uninhabitable’ zones of social life which are nevertheless densely populated by those who do not enjoy the status of the subject” (p. 3). Body shape and size are thus integrally linked to masculine subjectivity. To become fat would fundamentally alter who one is and the young men suggested that they would refuse to go outside or go to school if they were as fat as the bodies in the pictures. Thus, reading these narratives it is difficult to make the assertion that boys and men do not worry about fatness. On the contrary, the young men in these focus groups seemed to be quite terrified of what the fat male body represented for their masculine subjectivities.

In the preceding narratives, what the participants do not say is as revealing as what they do say. For instance, the only reference to “health” was made by me. The participants themselves never talked about his health status, which is fascinating given that “obesity epidemic” discourse was (and continues to be) such a prominent health discourse during the period when the research was conducted (see Campos, 2004; Gard and Wright, 2005; Oliver, 2005). This is because fatness is more than just a biomedical health concern. Fatness is at the same time—and perhaps more importantly—a mode of embodiment rich in symbolic meaning. To be fat in a fatphobic society (Rice, 2007) is to occupy an uninhabitable subjectivity. Thus, the participants do not talk about fatness in terms of diabetes, heart disease, and cancer, as biomedical experts do, but rather talk about it as a de-subjectifying embodiment. They do, however, pick up the discourse of physical activity and exercise as a means of restoring normative body weights, not for the purposes of achieving “healthy weight” standards, but as a means of warding off the abjection that fatness poses to their selfhood. The participants took up and deployed
physical activity and exercise as technologies of the self that were productive of a socially normative body size and shape; in other words, physical activity and exercise were practices that ward off the de-subjectifying potential of fatness\textsuperscript{54} thereby preserving the proper, normatively sized and shaped masculine body.

Contrary to the assumption that the “fear of fatness is something that only women experience” (Bell and McNaughton, 2007, p. 110), this section has shown that fatness was a very real threat to masculine sense of self. While many feminist scholars have acknowledged that boys and men experience oppression and discrimination because of narrow body shape and size ideals (see Gard and Wright, 2001), the assumption remains that the negative consequences are particularly “exacting and far-reaching for girls and women, who encounter frequent evaluation of [their bodies] as part of their social experience of gender” (Rice, 2007, p. 158). What I want to argue here is that young men are also experiencing discriminations around body size and shape. I am not arguing, however, that boys and men have it as bad or worse than girls and women. Rather, I am suggesting that more attention needs to be paid to the way in which normative body standards influence the way men understand and experience embodiment. In the following section I make some progress towards this objective by exploring how male fatness is spatially constituted.

**Fatness and the Occupation of Space**

Michael Gard and Jan Wright (2005) are correct in their assertion that “large [male] bodies can be powerful bodies, and appropriately masculine” (p. 161). Indeed, “to

\textsuperscript{54} Interestingly, the participants often spoke of exercise as an antidote to “poor” eating habits. For instance, Akeem spoke about eating lots of chocolate bars, but then feeling compelled to come to the Pinevale Community Centre to “work it off”. The manner in which the participants used physical activity and exercise was almost like a penance or a purifying activity for health “bads”.
be an adult male is distinctively to occupy space, to have a physical presence in the world” (Connell cited in Morgan, 1993, p. 72). However, not all manners of occupying space are equal. To simply suggest that masculinity and fatness are compatible, unlike fatness and femininity, leaves the complex, relational, and contextual processes that go into the construction of a dominant space-occupying masculinity unexamined. While some of the young men in the present research talked about the fat male body as though it had the potential to fulfill cultural expectations of dominant, space-occupying masculinity, these constructions of the fat male body differed across racial, spatial, and social class lines. Moreover, practices of taking-up space were as much about performances of “hardness”, “toughness”, and “attitude”—or a “phallic masculinity” (Pronger, 1999)—as they were inert characteristics of the fat male body. In the sections that follow, I want to unpack how the fat male body can not be read as a homogenous identity, but is constructed at the crossroads of multiple discourses and within diverse contexts and is thus necessarily imbued with fragmented and hybrid meanings and experiences.

The Sporty Fat Guy

As we saw in the previous section the young men constructed the fat body as unathletic, laughable, and abject. However, the fat male body was not always limited to these negative readings. For example, the powerful, sporty fat male body was often read quite positively by the participants at Pinevale. Physical competence in sports and recreation has been identified as a central component of dominant masculinities (Connell, 2005; Wright, O’Flynn and Macdonald, 2006). Although the fat male body faces considerable stereotypes and discriminations in sport and physical activity, the fact that
large, heavy male bodies can be used as a tactical advantage in some sporting contexts means that the fat body is not entirely blocked from attaining the status of dominant masculinity. Several of the participants spoke of how the fat male body was strong, and big, and that these characteristics could be used to the fat person’s advantage on the basketball court. In the following exchange, the young, mostly black young men from the Pinevale Community Centre assessed the athletic skills of their basketball coach, Paul.

Ted: What about Paul?
John: Paul, yeah, he has de mouth an’ he can back it up. He’s strong! He’s strong, I know that. But Paul, he’s a little bit slow.
Syed: Yeah, he’s slow.
John: ‘Cause everytime you pass him, he has to foul us, hard!
Kareem: ‘Cause he used to be fast.
John: An’ George, an’ George, too. George is not fat, but…Phil, if you drive in he’s gonna hack you hard. An’ he be “Yo, don’t come down low”. He’s intimidating you like dat.
Kareem: Paul’s good at basketball.
John: Exactly.
Phil: I love talkin’ trash to Paul. I love to…One time we were playin’, an’ Parks Schools down dere at de elementary school, an’ after he’s like “Oh yeah, bring it, bring” an’ I stripped him of it like three times, four times an’ he couldn’t do nothing…an’ he got mad, he’s like “Damn it!”
Syed: Paul is strong. He’s strong.
John: He’s slow. I know dat for sure, he’s slow.
Kareem: Lookit him, he’s huge!
Ted: What’d ya mean “lookit him”?
Kareem: He’s big now.
Syed: He’s fat. (FG#4_1, Feb. 22, 2006, pp. 19-20)

Although Paul was “slow”, he still garnered much respect as a “huge” man who uses his physical strength and large body size to intimidate his younger, smaller opponents. In a different focus group setting at the Pinevale, the young men narratively identified other instances of fat men who were “big”, “strong” and good at sport.

Ted: Do you think, do you think…last week…ah…I wanted to come back to…um, we started talking about how fat people are “lazy”, do you think all fat people are lazy?
Jamie: Yeah.
Ajay: Ahhh…
Sean: Dey are.
Ajay: How about de wrestlers who are fat, like Big Show or (indiscernible) ya know? Dat guy is like a brick a wall, ya know. Ya know Tiny is jus’ like him, ya know.
Omar: Except he can’t ran, though…
Ted: Who was the guy wearing the Warren Sapp shirt downstairs?
Jamie: De big, black fat guy, dat’s Tiny.
Ted: His name’s Tiny?
Jamie: No, dat’s his nickname. Remember we was tellin’ you?
Ted: Yeah.
Jamie: Yeah, his name is Anthony.
Ted: But he uses his weight to his advantage?
Ajay: Yeah.
Jamie: He gets under the net and…
Ajay: But he’s a good hockey player, dat’s what I’m talkin’ about.
Omar: Dat’s what I’m talkin’ about, he’s a sporty fat guy. He’s sporty, yeah.
Sean: Yeah, when you’re doin’ a sport like dat…
Jamie: He’s good at ping pong too!
Ted: Does he play on school teams at all?
Ajay: Yeah…no, not de teams, but he plays on house league. (FG#4-2, Mar. 1, 2006, pp. 12-13)

Ajay breaks with cultural constructions that paint the fat male body as lazy, slow, and unathletic by introducing examples of fat men who are good at sport. According to this group, the strength, size, and heaviness of the fat male body has the potential to meet the cultural imperative of an aggressive, space-occupying masculine embodiment. In this sense, notions of fatness were unstable, wavering between binary poles, with the fat male body being lazy, slow, and unathletic, on the one hand, while strong, intimidating, and athletically competent on the other. Although occupying space is necessary to the proper performance of a phallic masculinity\(^\text{556}\) (Pronger, 1999; Shogan, 1999; Whitson, 1990), in the excerpt below it is apparent that being big was not sufficient in and of itself.

\(^{55}\) In this dissertation I have used the terms “phallic”, “dominant”, and “normative” masculinity interchangeably. I have deliberately elected to forgo Connell’s term “hegemonic masculinity” because the epistemological roots of Gramsci’s theory of hegemony are incompatible with Foucault’s theory of power relations (Pringle, 2005).
It became evident that a large or fat body did not necessarily guarantee phallic masculinity. Indeed, there were multiple and ambivalent readings of the fat male body. At points, different focus groups would talk about the same fat body using a different set of narratives and sometimes narrations of the same fat body would vary within the focus group discussion. For instance, the young men from the Pinevale Community Centre talked about Paul, their basketball coach, in gender positive terms as “strong”, aggressive, and intimidating, while another group talked about Paul as “slow”, “not havin’ it anymore”, and “old”. As you will see, however, these negative narrations of Paul’s body shift in the course of a few seconds to construct Paul’s body in positive, normatively masculine terms. In this way, Paul’s fatness was multiple, ambivalent, and unstable.

Ted: So if this guy came to the basketball court you guys would all be pretty sure you could beat him?
Omar: Yeah.
Sean: Yeah, because we’re quicker den him and we’re younger too.
Ajay: Because he can’t run up and down de court, right. So we can take advantage of dat.
Omar: Like Paul. Today I felt sorry for Paul, because like I am like “Paul doesn’t have it no more” because he can’t even run properly. Dis guy almost dropped Paul. I was like “Paul’s gonna drop today”.
Ajay: Phil fell today, eh.
Omar: Yeah, he dropped today. Dis guy ran around Paul, Paul couldn’t even do anything and den once Jamal almost turned de ball over and he passed to Paul, Paul was like strugglin’ to bend down to get de ball…and when he lost it he got so angry.
Ajay: I did a pick on a player and Paul was right dere and I was right here…
Jamie: You put a pick on Paul!
Ajay: …yeah, and he didn’t do nothing, he couldn’t go…he couldn’t move, dat’s it.
Ted: Well…who couldn’t move?

56 The term “phallic masculinity” brings together Pronger (1999), Shogan (1999), and Whitson’s (1990) notion of masculinity as a space-occupying performance of maleness. I prefer this term to alternatives (i.e. hegemonic masculinity) because it highlights masculinity as a space-occupying way of performing the male body. Thus, phallic masculinity is not just a type of body (i.e. large and muscular frame), but an entire way of embodying maleness (i.e. the aggressive occupation of space). In this way, multiple body types (i.e. fat body, skinny body, muscular body) can perform phallic masculinity, but there is always the recognition that regardless of body type their must be a particular spatial relationship between the embodied self and other bodies.
Ajay: Paul. He jus stood dere and he couldn’t move, he’s doesn’t know where to go. (FG#4_2, Mar. 1, 2006, pp. 29-30)

Unlike the first group who talked about Paul’s fatness as an advantage, where he was able to use his large body to aggressively take up space, this group of young men emphasized his age, slowness, and implicitly referred to his fatness as a disadvantage. Thus, the fat male body is differently constructed in two different conversational communities, where in one context it is represented as an “advantage” while in another it is narrated as a disadvantage. I had watched Paul play basketball against the young men in the focus group and had seen him dominate play, so I push the discussion a little further.

Ted: But he’s pretty athletic, isn’t he.
Ajay: Yeah.
Sean: Yeah, he could, he could, like if he burns dat fat, if he burns dat fat, he could have healthy fat.
Omar: He’s semi-healthy fat. He’s semi-healthy fat.
Ted: If he what?
Sean: If he burns dat belly he could have healthy fat.
Omar: But its mainly because of his legs...he’s has some kind of...
Sean: He has problems in his legs.
Ajay: If he wasn’t fat, I am tellin’ you, he would be a good baller.
Omar: No, if he had stronger legs, its ‘cause of his legs...Remember how...his legs are still...ummm, so bad like you could poke it and you would see your finger printed inside. Dat’s how bad it got, yeah. And he started takin’ medicine and stuff. (FG#4_2, Mar. 1, 2006, pp. 29-30)

Here, the participants acknowledged that Paul has skills, but take up and deploy obesity discourse to suggest that he needs to lose weight to reach his “true” potential. In other words, the “real” Paul—the excellent basketball player—was trapped inside and beneath layers of fat waiting to emerge. Paul’s current embodiment was flawed, according to this group of young men, and was in need of a weight loss regime in order to get back to the point where he can play basketball competently. Thus, the participants unknowingly reiterate the cultural refrain that maintains that trapped within every fat man was a thin
man trying to get out. In this narrative construction of Paul’s body, fatness is not compatible with a physically competent masculinity, but rather was constructed as a burdensome weight that imprisons the “real” Paul. Their narratives are firmly embedded in dominant health and body discourses that construct that fat body as pathology (Bell and Valentine, 1997; Campos, 2004; Gard and Wright, 2005), as a weakness to be eradicated through diet, exercise, and weight loss. To me, this was incongruous from what I saw on the basketball court, where Paul often dominated this group of young men.

So, I press again,

Ted: Now, if that’s the case, why did Paul win most of the games he played today?
Omar: He’s a good shooter.
Ajay: He’s a good shooter.
Jamie: And he uses his body.
Sean: He uses his body. He uses his body.
Ajay: His attitude. He knows what to do when.
Omar: Yep, he used to play OBA and umm
Sean: ‘Cause his body is de advantage.
Omar: He knows how to spin. How to use his hands…
Ajay: And he has de footwork.
Ted: So, would you say its healthy fat den?
Omar: Yeah, he’s semi-healthy fat.
Ted: Semi-healthy fat, then?
Omar: Yeah.
Ted: Okay. To look at him would you know dat…like if you just, let’s say you didn’t know Paul and you walked into the room…
Jamie: Nah, I would think he is fat and…
Ajay: You’re underestimating him when you come because you think he’s fat and he can’t do nothing, but then when you get on the…
Sean: But then he starts beatin’ on us.
Ajay: Exactly.
Ted: Yeah, okay. (FG#4_1, Feb. 22, 2006, pp. 30-1)

The discursive construction of the fat male body was neither singular, nor stable. Rather, multiple discourses converged in the construction of the fat man, including discourses that interpellated strong, aggressive, space-occupying ways of being male (Pronger,
along with obesity-informed health discourses that situated the fat body as medical pathology. The convergence of multiple and, at times, incompatible discourses, produced the fat male body as an ambivalent body, that was read and experienced in multiple and shifting ways. The manner in which the participants narratively constructed Paul’s fat body demonstrates this ambivalence. Paul was both represented as strong, aggressive, and dominant—characteristics consistent with an ascendant form of masculinity—at the same time that he was constructed as old, slow, and sickly—attributes more likely associated with subordinate forms of masculinity.

Across the focus group settings at the Pinevale Community Centre the fat body oscillated between two poles. On the one end, the fat body was constructed as a powerful, space-occupying, embodiment that could be deployed in an instrumental capacity to control the bodies of others. This is somewhat contradictory to obesity discourse and dominant discursive representations of the fat body which construct it as out of control, irrational, and morally weak (Bell and Valentine, 1997; Gard and Wright, 2005), and feminine (Longhurst, 2005; Lupton, 1995; Mosher, 2001). While obesity-informed health discourses powerfully shape how bodies are seen, understood, and experienced, these discourses do not operate in isolation. Rather, health discourses converge with discourses of masculinity (i.e. the phallic imperative to aggressively occupy space) in the production of intelligible subjects. In this way, fatness is not lived as a singular identity, but is inscribed by multiple discourses, thereby giving rise to diverse and shifting cultural readings and embodied experiences of the fat male body. Thus, scholars are right to suggest that the large male body is consistent with particular dominant ways of being male, but the supremacy of the large male body is not marked into its size. As I will argue
in the following section, if the fat male body is a privileged body, it gains such privilege through specific and regulated performances of masculinity.

**Fatness and the Embodiment of Attitude**

Attitude or “hardness”, as the young men called it, seemed to be as, if not more, important than body size or shape in the performance of an aggressive, space-occupying masculinity. Susan Bordo (1999) contends that the phallus is not a body type, but the performance of a particular type of embodiment. She reminds us that the phallus “requires the permission of culture and/or the exercise of attitude more than the possession of a particular kind of body” (p. 101). The distinction between having a particular type of body and performing a particular type of embodiment came up in relation to “toughness” in a focus group discussion with the young men from the Pinevale Community Centre. Here, the participants were commenting on an image of a skinny boy in a bathing suit.\(^57\)

Ted: Would you say this kid is tough then?
John: I dunno, like, it’s de way you bring yourself up, like if you...like okay, if you’re skinny and you dress a certain way and you act a certain way, then people won’t really think dat you’re strong, right, and you’re tough, so you jus’ don’t wanna like, say you’re de kinda person dat’s smart, right, an’ you jus’ wanna stay with your homework an’ stuff, ya know, people won’t even think you are de kinda person dat wants to fight, an’ you don’t wanna fight yourself probably haven’t fought in your whole life, right. But if you have someone dat dresses like, okay, you know how de hip hop stars do it now? You know, baggy pants an’ everything, an’ you’re skinny, but you bring yourself up as a tough person, right, dey’ll think “Yo, dis guy tough. He’ll be able to take you”. Say if like dis skinny person were to go up to Syed an’ like “Hey, I’m gonna beat you up” De people would be like “Yeah, he’s gonna beat you up, dis guys tough”. Even dough Syed is

\(^57\) The image was of a boy—likely between 11-14 years of age—that was pulled off Google Images. He was wearing a “Speedo” bathing suit (tight fitting, thin suit that is often used by competitive swimmers) and appears to be walking to or on the beach. The boy was quite skinny—his ribs are clearly visible—which was the reason I selected this particular image given that I wanted to generate discussion around a variety of body shapes and sizes.
bigger den em, he would be like “Yeah, dis guys tough, I dunno know about dat, man”.

Phil: Yeah, it’s because de way he dresses, you mean. (FG#3_2, Feb. 8, 2006, p. 5)

A tough attitude is embodied through a hip-hop style of dress where “men’s clothing expands their bodies’ contours so that they take up as much space as possible” (Gross, 2005, p. 71). In this way, a big male body—even if it is enlarged through clothing—is read as consistent with an aggressive, dominant, and “tough” masculine performativity. However, this reading of the male body is a culturally specific reading, as will become clear in the following paragraphs.

As the discussion continued, John suggested that stylized toughness does not necessarily correlate with one’s ability to “back it up”. In other words, stylized toughness can be read as a façade.

John: Yeah, it’s de way he dress, ‘cause we think, I dunno, I am not tryin’ to get all sciency, but, like, people…dese days de always think like, okay, it’s de way you dress and de way you bring yourself is de way dat like, you know, you say “Okay dis guy is gonna beat ‘em up” Like, dere’s a bunch a guys I seen dat dress a certain way. You know, like, like, Carl, dis guy has a mouth but he’s weak…

Syed: Yeah.

John: …He acts like he’s so tough, but he’s weak on de inside. Like if you hit him he’s done. He’ll start cryin’. (FG#3_2, Feb. 8, 2006, p. 5)

“Toughness”, a central component of an aggressive, space-occupying masculinity, was not merely culturally inscribed on the body, but was actively performed through style of dress, manner of movement, way of talking, in short, it was an entire way of being.

Stylized toughness, however, does not necessarily reflect a “real” body, as John made clear when he referred to Carl’s mouth. Thus, the material body does not reductively stand in for the embodied subject. This distinction between being a certain body and
performing a particular embodied subjectivity was evident in the comments of a different group of young men at the Pinevale Community Centre,

Ted: Do you think that when you have muscles that you are necessarily strong?
Jamie: No!
Omar: No. Dere’s dis big guy, his name’s Mark, he’s so big, some guys are jus’ born muscular, an’ dis gy, everyone’s like, “Oh, look at his muscles, he’s so strong!” He can’t even fight for garbage. I’m tellin’ you he’s weak! He punches like dat. [Demonstrates an awkward punching style]
Ajay: An’ he’s a nerd too, ye know. (FG#4_2, Mar. 1, 2006, p. 5)

Phallic masculinity, in this sense, was a particular embodied performance. Just being large was not enough to command the cultural privileges associated with phallic masculinity, rather one had to perform a particular toughness. Furthermore, it was also clear across the focus groups at Pinevale Community Centre that it was possible to be too “fat” or too “soft” (FG#3_2, Feb. 8, 2006), which likewise spoiled the conditions for phallic masculinity. Thus, phallic masculinity was an embodied performance that relies on both a “tough” or “hard” attitude along with a body that was neither too small nor too fat.

It is important to note, however, that positive representations of the fat male body were limited to the research settings at the Pine Grove Community Centre. At Lawson the participants almost entirely represented the fat male body as an unhealthy, undisciplined body. Once again, we can see how constructions of embodiment were not unified but were always embedded at the cross-roads of local contexts and socio-cultural categories. In the following section, I explore how notions of “toughness”—as cultural performance of space occupying masculinity—were in fact racialized across the various focus groups.
Race and the Embodiment of Attitude

In the preceding sections I have argued that fatness can be consistent with a space occupying phallic masculinity. Moreover, I have argued that embodying a particular masculine subjectivity necessitated a certain performance of embodiment, or an embodied attitude. In this section, I want to argue that not all bodies are embodied in the same way. More specifically, I examine how the participants in different research contexts spoke about and experienced their own bodies and the bodies of others along racial lines. Race, as well as other social and material factors, thus impacted the manner in which the young men experienced embodiment and this, in turn, affected the ways in which differently situated young men understood and talked about fatness.  

Omi and Winant (1994) argue that race is not a biological essence, but rather comes to appear as such through a set of “sociohistorical processes by which racial categories are created, inhabited, and destroyed” (p. 55). Racial categories, they argue, are given the appearance of essence through reiterative, everyday culturally compelled racial performances. Thus, the way we talk about race categories, and the assumptions about race that are embedded within racial narratives, forcibly materialize particular racialized ways of being and embodied identities. In this section, I explore how the young men talked about “toughness” and “discipline” in racialized ways, and how these narratives materialized socio-historically specific racial identities.

Earlier, John had suggested that “toughness” was a matter of “de way you bring yourself up”, thereby suggesting that it was an individually cultivated way of being, or technology of the self. However, as his explanation of toughness continued it became clear that embodied performances of “toughness” were in fact socially and culturally

58 I will develop this argument in the section ‘Racialized Readings of the Fat Male Body’ in this chapter.
regulated ways of being. Race and social class were prominent discourses in the

production of phallic masculinity.

Ted: So what’s…de, de…what’s the baggy clothes, why the baggy clothes?
Kareem: I dunno, it’s de style.
John: Yeah, jus’ like de gangsta style, like okay, de Cripps an’ de Bloods, de Cripps an’ de Bloods started it. You know, so…that’s brings out like “Yeah, we’re tough, yo, you mess around with us you know what’s gonna happen to you” You know, you either get shot, beat up…so everyone starts talking dis style an’ stuff…an’ den most of de people dat wear baggy pants an’ stuff listen to rap, an’ hip hop and reggae, I’m not sure…Or people dat wear de tight pants maybe like listen to rock, you know. You know, punk an’ I dunno…Not necessarily, but I dunno, people…de way you dress is mostly de way you bring yourself up to de people. Yeah, dat’s what I think.
Ted: Does it matter…ahhh, race?
John: Yeah. [Giggles]…Phil: Sometimes…
John: …yeah, sometimes, especially down here, like if a black person is fighting a white person, like “Ahh de black person is gonna win ‘cause he’s tough”.
Phil: Yeah.
John: But it’s not always like dat because I’ve seen a white guy [said with exaggerated emphasis] beat up a black guy and den de black people end up beatin’ up de white guy because a dat.
Ted: Okay.
John: Yeah, all de black people around started beatin’ him up. Dat was a couple of years ago when I saw dat, but I didn’t join in, I’m not racist…Yeah, I love my white people, you know what I am sayin’ [acknowledges Phil with a fist bump]. (FG #3_2, Feb. 8, 2006, p. 6)

Earlier John talked about baggy clothing styles as the embodiment of a “tough” space occupying performance of masculinity (FG#3_2, Feb. 8, 2006). In the above narrative his reference to rap and reggae music, notorious gang culture, and street violence were all culturally constructed repertoires of urban black masculinity (hooks, 2004). Thus, John was not talking about just any mode of embodiment, but was more specifically constructing a racialized, embodied attitude.

59 The Bloods and the Cripps are two rival gangs centred in Los Angeles, USA that formed in the early 1970s. They are two of the largest and most violent street gangs in the US.
His discursive construction of race continued as he expressed shock and disbelief at the prospect of a white guy beating up a black guy. John suggested that in this particular neighbourhood\textsuperscript{61}, blackness was constructed as powerful, aggressive, and physically dominant over whiteness. In so doing, John reiterated the discursive construction of blackness as more “body” (i.e. as naturally powerful and violent) as compared to whiteness, which is constructed as more mindful, controlled, but physically subordinate (Bordo, 1993; Dyer, 1997; hooks, 2004). Thus, John demonstrated how broader discursive constructions of race were taken up and deployed in everyday narrations of embodied social interactions. Race discourse, in other words, provided a powerful social script for understanding, articulating, and experiencing bodies. These racialized scripts do not simply provide a social map for understanding the world, but are also involved in providing instructions on how to produce oneself as an intelligible and properly subjected racial being. By reiterating racializing discourses, John implicitly legitimated the discursive construction of blackness as more body than mind and, in so doing, provided a powerful interpellative that forcibly materialized racialized performances of masculinity in both himself as well as the other members of the group. However, black racial identities were not the only racializing modes of embodiment being forcibly materialized, as the youth at both the research sites had lots to say about Asian bodies.

\textsuperscript{61} With his reference to “down here”—referring to Pennington, where Pinevale Community Centre is located—John demonstrates how spaces are racialized and racializing (Razack, 2002). John, himself a young black man, constructed Pennington as a tough, mostly black neighbourhood, where black patriarchal masculinity prevailed over other, lesser modes of racialized embodiments (i.e. whiteness). Thus, the way in which John draws on particular cultural resources or discursive repertoires to characterize his neighbourhood served to construct bodies that resided within those spaces along particular racial coordinates.
Asian masculinity was constructed as femininized at both Lawson and Pinevale. Racial stereotypes—or discourses—that construct white masculinity as more mind than body (Dyer, 1997; Shogan, 1999) and Asian masculinity as “racially castrated”, or “materially and psychically feminized” (Eng, 2001, p. 2), structured the way in which the young men and teachers at Lawson talked about and experienced their school. Miss MacDonald, the senior girl’s volleyball coach and a co-ed physical education teacher, explained that the Lawson boys are at a disadvantage when it comes to inter-collegiate sport because they were not as big or “skilled” as players from other schools, particularly schools with a large black population. She largely attributed this disadvantage to the high percentage of “Asians” at Lawson who, she explained, “are generally smaller” (Field notes, p. 2). Miss MacDonald resorted to biology to explain racial differences in body size and sporting performance between Asian, black, and presumably white student-athletes. By turning to biological—as opposed to socio-historical—explanations to characterize the Asian students at Lawson, Miss MacDonald not only naturalized the Asian body as unathletic, scholarly-oriented, and femininized but, at the same time, legitimized a racializing framework that compelled Asian-Canadian students to pursue scholarly as opposed to athletic endeavours. Indeed, her comments were not simply reflective of pre-existent constructions of racial athletic competencies, but were simultaneously constitutive of those very competencies by perpetuating and legitimating racializing discourse that outlines the “boundaries or limits” of what raced bodies “do and should do” (James, 2005; Shogan, 1999). The feminized Asian-Other was also

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62 Indeed, Miss MacDonald’s characterization of Asian athletes as small and athletically incompetent can easily be challenged given the recent dominance of China at the 2008 Summer Olympic Games.
63 I have included Miss MacDonald’s racializations as an example of how body size and racial performance were forcibly materialized through the discursive practices of institutional agents at Lawson.
materialized in the narratives of the young men at the Pinevale Community Recreation Centre.

The gymnasium at the Pinevale Community Recreation Centre was racialized as a black, masculine space. Both the participants and the staff of the Community Centre talked about black and Asian bodies in racializing ways. For example, black youth were understood as strong, aggressive, loud, and dominant, while Asian youth (particularly Tibetan youth) were considered as physically small, weak, demure, and non-aggressive. These racial constructions of blackness and Asianess are consistent with dominant discursive constructions of raced bodies (Lei, 2003), where Asianness is normatively constructed as a “racially castrated” (Eng, 2001) masculinity. During a focus group at Pinevale, the mostly black participants of the group explained that Tibetan men were not only physically small, but also lacked toughness. When I asked about muscular Tibetan men, the group broke up into gales of uncontrollable laughter. When I inquired about what was so funny, Ajay commented that “none of them [Tibetan men] are muscular” (FG#4_2, Mar. 1, 2006, p. 22). And to accentuate the point, Omar went on to explain that they were not only physically small and weak, but also lacked “toughness”. “If you were to go beat up on one of dem,” Omar explained “dey won’t even stand up for each other. The reason why people are so scared of black people is ‘cause we stand up for each other” (FG#4_2, Mar. 1, 2006, p. 22). Thus, the Tibetan body at this research site was forcibly materialized as a physically small, weak, passive, and thus feminized mode of embodiment, while Black masculinity was discursively constructed and materially

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64 According to the participants at Pinevale, the neighbourhood of Pennington was under siege by Tibetan immigrants. During one focus group someone commented that Pennington is a “black neighbourhood” in response someone else screamed out in indignation, “dis area is Tibetan area now, guy!” According to the staff at the Community Centre, Pennington was experiencing an influx of new Tibetan immigrants. The staff had identified and were concerned about on-going tensions between black and Tibetan youth.
constituted as its opposite—strong, aggressive, athletic, and loud. Whiteness was also implicitly and implicitly constructed at both research locations.

Paul, the basketball coach, consistently referred to whiteness as physically uncoordinated, as lacking creativity on the basketball court, and as bland or spiceless culture. For instance, if one of the black athletes in his basketball program fell or made an uncoordinated play Paul would routinely call out “why you playin’ like a white guy” (FN, Jan. 26, 2006). Although Phil (a white male in the basketball program) had achieved an honourary black status on the basketball court for his aggressive and skilled game (as evidence by his nickname “white chocolate”), his status was precarious and vulnerable to re-racialization, as Paul demonstrated by referring to his play as “whitenese,” which was intended as a hybrid of “white” and “Chinese”. Given the construction of Asian masculinity as castrated, to be referred to as “whitenese” was a de-subjectifying racial insult that displaced Phil from his honourary black status.

Blackness was also co-constructed alongside whiteness. For example, Omar, a black participant from Pinevale, articulated a hyper-(hetero)sexual version of black masculinity in relation to the disembodied, uncaring white subject. He quite simply stated that “Black guys care about de girls more [than white guys], so dey’re always workin’ out” (Int. #4, June 8, 2006, p. 18) in order to achieve a lean, muscular, heteronormatively appealing appearance. Omar’s clarification of black masculinity as a concerned embodiment was contrasted with white masculinity as a dis-concerned disembodiment. “De white guys, dey jus’ sit at de corner an’ talk about dis an’ dat. Like dey don’t care. Like dese guys are cool” (Int. #4, June 8, 2006, p. 18). Omar draws upon dominant
discursive repertoires that construct blackness as more embodied then the disembodiment of whiteness (Dyer, 1997; hooks, 2004; Shogan, 1999).

The discursive construction of whiteness as disembodied was also deployed in the narratives of the staff and participants at Lawson. Generally, the students and staff considered Lawson to be an “academic school” not a “sports-oriented school”. They consistently talked about how the students at Lawson were brilliant, highly-motivated, and disciplined, but by and large unathletic. Both Miss MacDonald and Mr Kinnear (another physical education teacher/coach at the school) explained that what Lawson students lacked in physical competence compared to other, more athletically talented schools, they more than make up for in discipline, strategy, and “spirit”. The characterization of Lawson student-athletes as successful because of “spirit”, intelligence, and self-discipline—presumably as opposed to the “natural” athleticism of black student-athletes—reiterates a race discourse which stereotypes whiteness as embedded in an invisible “spirit” or strength of character (Shogan, 1999; Dyer, 1997). As it becomes increasingly unacceptable in contemporary western societies to inscribe racial differences in biological essences and skin colour (Carrington and Macdonald, 2000), race discourse has turned towards characterizing “white spirit” (Dyer, 1997). According to Richard Dyer, the systemic privileging of whiteness is no longer simply an attribute of white skin, but is understood as an invisible essence, a will-to-power, that marks the white body as superior to racialized others. Race discourse holds that it is the spirit of whiteness, the “energy, will, ambition, the ability to think and see things through—and of its effects—discovery, science, business, wealth creation, the building of nations, the organization of

65 I read this comment as a euphemism for schools with large black populations. The racial assumption being that schools with large black populations are self-evidently better at sports than schools with a higher percentage of white and Asian students.
labour” (p. 31) that marks whiteness with superiority, not biological essence. What race discourse obscures, however, is the role sociohistoric structures and representations occupy in producing privileged, white bodies, while marginalizing, stigmatizing, and disabling racialized-Other bodies.

What I want to highlight here is the manner in which the participants and staff at the various research sites took up and deployed racial discourses in practices of talking about and engaging with particular bodies. Thus, raced bodies were compelled or hailed into culturally meaningful modes of embodiment by preexisting racial discourses which construct whiteness as disembodied and mindful, blackness as embodied, aggressive, and physically dominant, and Asianness as passive, weak, and scholarly. Discursive practices both locate individuals within particular subject positions and individuals take up and speak from those subject positions as though they emanated from a core “inner” self (Davies, 2000). Central to the subjectification of the individual, or the process by which the individual becomes a subject, is the relationship between self and the body. In the above paragraphs I have argued that racial identities are mediated through discursively constructed embodied relations. In other words, the relationship one has with their body is both constrained and enabled through racial discourse. However, racializing discourses do not act in isolation. Rather, they inter-lock with other regulatory ideals and material conditions in the production of embodied subjectivities.

According to the participants at Pinevale, the ability to perform an appropriately racialized phallic masculinity is also dependent on one’s ability to purchase “gear”, or stylized commodities that reflect one’s situated subject position. This became evident in a focus group discussion with John, Phil, Syed, and Kareem.
Ted: Do you think... ummm, is baggy clothes a black style more?
John: No, everyone’s doing it now, okay if you go down to ahh... for instance, where I live Julie and Farth, right, you see everyone doin’ it. ‘Cause dat’s de style, dat’s how dey bang it up down dere, so everyone is wearing baggy pants an’ everything. If you don’t have gear you’re not rough an’ no one wants to hang around with you, right.
Phil: Yeah, I know. It’s true.
John: You need, you need gear for people...
Ted: Are you in danger if you don’t have the gear?
Phil: No.
John: No. You’ll be bullied, yeah for sure, yes, you will be bullied.
Phil: “Who is dis kid?”
John: Exactly, dey won’t wanna hang out with you. If you don’t have... I dunno why, but like... okay, dis society right now, we’re all talkin’ about clothes, if you’re not, you know, if you’re not rich, if you don’t have gear, or you’re nothing, you’re not popular, like c’mon. (FG#3_2, Feb. 8, 2006, pp. 5-6)

In our contemporary consumer culture, social identities are increasingly located in the ability to consume commodities that appropriately situate the subject (Featherstone, 1991; Norman, 2000). Here, the ability to buy and wear consumer goods or “gear”, as John refers to it, is constitutive of a particular racialized attitude. However, not all of the young men involved in the focus groups had equal access to the material means necessary to consume their discursively preferred embodied identity. Some styles or “gear” were quite expensive and the members at Pinevale in particular talked about limited resources

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66 I wanted to further the discussion about “race” given that it was clearly an organizing discourse at the recreation centre. There were lots of racializing comments during basketball games and amongst the recreation centre staff and patrons. However, discussions of race remained almost invisible within the narratives of the focus groups. There was, it appeared, to be a reluctance to talk about race. Carl James (2005) argues that the reason for this silence around race could be that Canada’s multicultural policy teaches us that race is irrelevant to one’s success or failure. Because Canada is a “free” and racially diverse culture, the logic goes, race no longer influences institutional policies, practices, and programs and, as such, Canadians succeed or fail on their own merit as opposed to larger racialized conditions. Thus, race was effectively removed from the sense-making repertoires of these young racialized men and if they were to cite ‘race’ as a meaningful identity category they could be accused of going against the culturally-engrained notion that Canada, because of its “celebration” of racial and cultural diversity, is a raceless society. Indeed, my whiteness may have also played into the participants reluctance to talk about race, as they may have felt that I represented the dominant Canadian discourse of racelessness. Either way, the absence of race discourse within the focus group discussions proved to be a notable absent-presence.

67 Julie and Farth is a fictional name used for the sake of anonymity. It is, however, a racialized neighbourhood in the GTA (Greater Toronto Area) that is known—and by this I mean that it is discursively constructed through public discourse—as a “high needs” area with high levels of poverty and violence.
to consume such commodities and their associated social meanings. For example, in response to an image of a white young man wearing FUBU, Josh explains that “It’s not funny. People can’t afford things, dey’re gangster but dey can’t afford things.” (FG#5_2, Apr. 22, 2006, p. 36). Josh’s comments acknowledge that FUBU is a “gangster” style that has particular social meanings that are rendered unavailable to many people because they can not afford to buy the label. Lack of material resources were not the only barriers the young men articulated in relation to forming embodied identities. During the focus groups at Lawson, it became apparent that some styles were racially unavailable to the mostly white, middle-class participants.

Although John argues that big, baggy clot thing is not identifiable as a black style and that people of all racial backgrounds are wearing “gear”, other focus group discussions with predominantly white boys suggested that this particular style is strongly linked to blackness. In response to images of a white male dressed in FUBU clothing, the participants from Lawson had the following to say,

Michael: Like we do it to kids around like where they’re actually wiggers, we call them wiggers.
Alex: I don’t know, if they want to be like that, than be like that, but don’t think they’re impressing anybody.

FUBU is a popular clothing brand that is discursively connected to black urban culture (Norman, 2000). While differently situated groups of youth had interpreted the label to be an acronym for ‘For Us By Us’ with the “Us” being black people, this group had a more violent, patriarchal masculinist, in-your-face understanding of the acronym, where they understood it to mean ‘Fuck U Bitch Up’.

Although Josh makes no reference to ‘race’ and FUBU, other groups of mostly white youth did racialize FUBU as a black style.

“Wiggers” is a racially derisive term used to characterize white kids who are “black wannabes” (Archer and Yamashita, 2003). The term, of course, is loaded with essentialist assumptions about the relative stability of racial identities as well as the subtle association that links blackness with degeneracy (i.e. gangster life, violence, and crime). Moreover, the participants’ comments suggest that this particular performance of white masculinity is a freely chosen subjectivity. In fact, performances of masculinity are not merely lifestyle ‘choices’ (Malik, 1997), but are constrained choices that are made at the intersection of locally situated and socially embedded power relations. Thus, the broader conditions of possibility that constrain and enable particular performances of white masculinity (i.e. social class, family background, neighbourhood etc.) are left unexamined in the narratives of the participants and masculine styles or performances are re-presented as ‘free choice’. 
Michael: Like I don’t understand why people want to dress like that, to be like gangsters and violent, I don’t get it.

Robert: I know, who wants to get shot?

Ted: Do you see [style of dress] this in [your neighbourhood]?

Group: Yes.

Luke: Well, there’s a few kids.

Michael: Most of them, well to stereotype, but most of them are like from low income families and like, that’s what I noticed, they’re all kinda like wiggers and I’m like, “Why do you act like that?” (FG#7_2, May 29, 2006, pp. 18-19)

Unlike John, who suggested that the big, baggy clothing look was culturally available to “everyone”, this group of young men made it clear that it is an inappropriate style of dress for white youth, at least from their situated point of socio-cultural reference. Young white men performing a black masculinity are subject to censorship from this group of men. Despite John’s suggestion that racial identities were freely chosen and a matter of “how you bring yourself up”, these narratives suggest otherwise, where situated racial identities are highly regulated ways of being that compel specific performances from particular racialized bodies. However, social class and local context also influenced what raced bodies can wear. When looking at the same image of a young white man dressed in FUBU, one of the focus groups from Pinevale suggested he looked like Phil. I inquired whether Phil’s whiteness was in any way contradictory to FUBU, which was popularly constructed as a urban, black label. The participants responded that Phil can wear what he wants. Thus, in one research setting, whiteness is rendered incompatible with black style, whereas in another setting it is understood as an acceptable style. In this way, young masculine identities are “culturally entangled” productions that are comprised of “complex racial and diasporic influences” embedded within particular material conditions.

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71 Phil is a white, working class youth who was a regular at Pinevale and was well known and friends with most of the participants in this particular focus group. Phil participated in a different focus group than this one.
of possibility (Archer and Yamashita, 2003, p. 129). Similarly, the relationship between body size and the embodiment of phallic masculinity is a complex, shifting, and messy relationship, where no one corporeal characteristic can be definitively identified as consistent with a dominant masculinity. Factors such as “race”, social class, and local context shape what constitutes a proper phallic “attitude” and there was no right way of performing phallic masculinity, just differently situated, locally embedded, and culturally constructed performances. In the next section, however, I explore how notions of “hardness” and “softness” are central to the performance of a phallic masculinity.

“Hard” and “Soft”

The male body is culturally coded as concrete and solid as compared to cultural representations of the female body as fluid and leaky (Grosz, 1994; Longhurst, 2005). The theme of “hardness” as a desirable masculine trait over and against “softness” as an undesirable feminine trait came up throughout the focus group discussions and non-participant observations at the Pinevale Community Centre. Paul, the basketball coach, repeatedly instructed the young men on how to properly perform their manhood through citations of a masculine ethic of “hardness”. On one occasion, for instance, Paul screamed at Ajay, “You look like an ol’ man out dere. You wanna shoulder to cry on? Here, use dis guy, he’s soft. You gotta be tough! Dis is not easy. We’re gonna see if you’re a man or a mouse!” (FN, Mar. 1, 2006, p. 16). To be a man, then, was to not be “soft”, but rather “tough”. On another occasion I ask for clarification around the terms “hard” and “soft”.

Ted: What does it mean to be soft on the basketball court?
Thomas: To be soft?
Ted: Yeah.
Akeem: Not takin’ advantage…
Thomas: Like, you don’t play hard. Some people can be like weak, you know.

Akeem: I’m bigger den him [speaking about Joe], today, an’ I took advantage. Dat’s how you’re supposed to do it.

Ted: Did he take advantage of you Joe?

Joe: No…who?

Ted: This guy?

Joe: Yeah.

[Group giggles]

Ted: Does he take advantage of you? [Asking Akeem about Thomas—Thomas is very tall and skinny]

Akeem: Yeah, he’s big.

Josh: He doesn’t take advantage of me.

[Group giggles]

Josh: No he doesn’t!

Ted: To be soft on the basketball court is to not use your size, to be…

Akeem: Like, to not use your abilities.

Thomas: No, like yeah, like you don’t necessarily need to be big, it’s jus’, it depends how hard you wanna play. Like, you might not be de strongest person on de court, but if you’re playin’ hard, like you’ll get bigger den everyone. Like, you’ll push people, you’ll play rough. (FG#5_2, Apr. 12, pp. 22-23)

To be “hard” on the basketball court infers aggressively using your body to take advantage of other, smaller opponents. However, “hardness” was not inscribed in the big body alone, rather it was a style of aggressive, dominating play. To be “soft” on the other hand, was to not use your body and your abilities to your advantage. Although “hardness” was not necessarily rooted in material body size, it was not independent of it either.

Ted: When you say, when you guys say “hard” were you talking about, like, um, a “hard” look or were you actually saying a physically hard body?

Syed: Yeah, physically hard body.

John: Both.

Phil: Both.

Kareem: Hard look and a physically hard body.

Phil: But I think mostly a physically hard body.

John: Yeah, exactly, physical. (FG#3_2, Feb. 8, 2006, p. 16)

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Joe was Tibetan and only attended one of the focus group sessions. I worked very hard to get Tibetan youth involved in the research, but they were reluctant to take part in both my research as well as the programming at the Pinevale Community Centre more generally. The Tibetan youth experienced racism and discrimination at the Pinevale Community Centre that made it a difficult environment for them to occupy.
Here, “hardness” seems to be located more in the physical body, but a little further on in the same focus group discussion the importance of mental toughness and attitude occupies a more prominent position. Moreover, the following discussion reveals that “hardness” is contextually performed and there were occasions when hardness was an inappropriate manner of being.

Ted: What about attitude? I mean I think we’ve probably gone over this a bit, ‘cause last week you said it’s all about attitude…in relation to girls, we were talking about muscles an’ you said girls find abs attractive, girls find muscles attractive…and den you said it’s attitude that girls really find attractive.

John: Sometimes like dey can find like a gangsta like rude boys ahh a gansta or rude boys attractive like I duno it gets them horny an’ shit…but, but, like dey can find like a smart intelligent sweet guy attractive…I dunno.

Ted: So what’s attitude, then? What do you mean when you say attitude?

Phil: Like “Yo, what are you doing” and if somebody comes to them and says something…

John: Toughness.

Phil: …yeah, it’s just toughness.

John: It’s your reaction, it’s jus’ your reaction.

Phil: …like “bang” an’ fighting…or, or, I don’t think some, I don’t think a lot of girls think attitude is what it is, I think boys think girls like attitude…a lot of boys around girls like to show off sometimes. Try to like…

John: See if they’re fake or not, like okay you could be muscular, right, an’ act like all tough, when de girls are around, but you could be really, really soft. I know I do dat sometimes.

Ted: Do girls like that?

John: Huh?

Ted: Do girls like that?

John: I dunno, sometimes when it’s funny, like you have to be funny and be tough at the same time.

Phil: Yeah. (FG#3_2, Feb. 8, 2006, p. 21)

The participants suggest that attitude and toughness or, in short, “hardness”, was not a constant way of being male, but a situationally specific performance. In the presence of “girls”, for example, “hardness” was not necessarily the correct manner of performing maleness. Given that heterosexual relations are a central component of dominant masculinity (Mac An Ghaill, 1994, 2000), demonstrating competence at engaging in
heterosexual relations was an identity constituting performance. Thus, the young men were very tactical about when “hardness” was a correct performance. The men had to walk a fine line between being appropriately hard and soft, tough yet funny, strong but intelligent. Finding the correct balance for the specific situation was crucial to the performance of masculinity, and failure to do so could result in de-subjectification.

Interestingly, however, John goes on to suggest that sometimes he “acts soft”, implying that “hardness” was his “true” embodiment.

John: That’s what I do sometimes but not all de time. Like I am not always tough. When I like a girl, I act soft. I have to.

Ted: Are you soft?

John: No, I’m not soft, I’m not soft, I’m mentally strong and physically, because I am determined not to give up anytime…like if I wanna achieve a goal, I have to do it…I have to accomplish it, I don’t give up. When I…there is a point when I think “Oh my God!” an’ I can’t do it, my mom always says ‘Okay, don’t worry, jus’ keep on pushin’ yourself”

Ted: Your mind says that or your mom?

John: My mind and my mom. My mom keeps on remindin’ me, okay I have to do it. Yeah. (FG#3_2, Feb. 8, 2006, p. 22)

John reacts quite emphatically to the suggestion that he might be “soft”. I anticipated this reaction on the basis of an experience I witnessed in the gym during a March Break basketball tournament held at the Pinevale Community Centre. During this tournament, a young black man, Carl, stood on the sidelines taunting John by repeatedly calling him “soft”. John’s frustration was apparent, as he became increasingly distracted and showed visible signs of frustration at Carl’s name-calling. Eventually John’s level of aggression began to increase in response to the taunting, and he began driving hard to the net, hurting smaller, younger opponents with his aggressive play. Again, appropriate performances of “softness” and “hardness” are contextually specific, where “acting soft” around young women might be appropriate, but being “soft” on the basketball court was
an undesirable way of being male. In this way, gender is constructed through relations of power, specifically normative constraints that both produce certain embodied subjects at the same time that they regulate the performances of the embodied subjects they produce (Butler, 1993). Notions of “hardness” and “softness” interpellate a repeated “stylization of the body” that “congeal over time to produce the appearance of…a natural sort of being” (Butler, 1999, 33). Thus, aggressive, space-occupying masculinity gains the appearance of a natural masculine trait that is a culturally recognizable and expected aspect of masculinity, when in fact it is a locally constructed and discursively compelled regulatory ideal. However, the performative work that goes into the production of particular embodied ways of being are dependent on body size, shape, and appearance.

“Toughness”, “attitude”, or “hardness” cannot be entirely divorced from the body.

The conversation continues, and I probe the group again about heterosexual relations.

Ted: You think girls like sweetness?
Kareem: Yeah.
Phil: Yeah.
John: All the time. If you’re sweet dey jus’ fall for it, but if you’re ugly an’ sweet, sorry. Probably be jus’ friends, but you have to have like ya know de, you have to have de, de attributes, I dunno know what to call it, but…You have to have de looks, let’s jus’ say looks, yeah.
Ted: What do you think attitude is?
Syed: I would say pretty much de same thing. But then some girls will go for muscles too.
John: Yeah! Dis one girl, she jus’ goes for muscles. I’m workin’ out an’ she jus’ comes right next to me an’ is like “Wow, how much can you weigh, I mean lift”. (FG#4_1, Feb. 22, 2006, pp. 21-22)

According to this group of young men, there appeared to be an irrevocable bond between “attitude” and the body. In this sense, “hardness” should be understood as a highly regulated gender performance of a particular body type. In this way, the body was crucial to the performance of masculine identity, and body shape, size, and appearance were
linked to an individual’s ability to perform “hardness” and “softness”. According to the young men at the Pinevale Community Centre, this was particularly true in heterosexual relations. Whereas on the basketball court physical appearance may be irrelevant, in the context of heterosexual relations, looks are important. The young men repeatedly defined fatness as “ugly” and an undesirable state of embodiment. For example, one participant explained that “fat is like basically how like how ugly and like big an’ overweight you are” (FG#3_2 Feb.8, 2006, p.12). Bringing together these narratives which suggest that attractiveness (and by this, the group means a number of things including not being fat) was crucial to the performance of a heterosexual masculinity, it was possible to see that a large male body may be consistent with aggressive, space-occupying ways of being male on the basketball court, but in other contexts largeness may render the fat man’s body as an impediment that blocks his ability to successfully perform a heterosexual masculinity. While “large [male] bodies can be powerful bodies, and appropriately masculine” (Gard and Wright, 2005, p. 161), this was only within highly specific contexts, such as the sport settings where size and physical dominance are advantageous, but in other contexts the largeness of the fat man’s body renders his grip on phallic masculinity tenuous at best. In the following section, I demonstrate the importance “self-control” and discipline play in the constitution of “hardness” or a phallic masculine identity.

**Self-Control and the Performance of Phallic Masculinity**

The theme of self-control also proved to be central to the performance of “hardness” or a phallic masculinity. Speaking about the difference between mental and physical toughness, John explains that,

John: …so I think dat’s like, not mentally, but physically, you have to be able to
like ya know get banged around a little bit. ‘Cause my coach was sayin’
dat today, not my…my gym teacher, right, he said you have to be able to
bang into…like say if we’re playin’ basketball an’ Syed were like to hack
me in my face, you know, like jus’ hit me in my face by accident. I could
get angry, right, but I could be able to take dat ‘cause I know it’s
basketball. But if it’s a certain sport dat doesn’t involve dat I probably get
angry an’ like fight ‘em back.

Syed: Yeah, I saw some people do dat, like, for your, for example, we were
playin’ basketball and you fall on someone, but you didn’t mean too de
guy can get mad an’ start fightin’ you…

John: I get angry, I know that, Paul knows that. Like if you hack me, if I know,
I’m playin’ serious and you hack me, I am gonna get angry…but, I might
not say anything…

Phil: Depending though…sometimes it depends like, let’s say you are playin’
de game an’ you’re winning by 100, you will be like (makes a sucking
noise with his teeth) suck it in ‘cause you are winning anyways an’ you
don’t wanna start losin’, ya know. (FG#3_2, Feb. 8, 2006, p. 17)

Different situations call for different embodied reactions. Phallic masculine subjecthood
was contingent upon the correct reading of the situation and the correct embodied
response. While it is true that “physicality and physical strength, the ability to play sport,
win fights and ‘stand up for yourself’ is an intrinsic part” (Frost, 2003, p.65) of phallic
masculinity, each of these situations require different emotional, intellectual, and physical
responses. Self-control and self-discipline in the sporting context were regarded as central
characteristics to performing “hardness”, even if this meant putting up with humiliating
comments and physical abuse. This was evident during a basketball practice when Phil
(one of the participants in the basketball program) came into the gym and taunted Paul
(his basketball coach) about Shaquille O’Neill’s undisciplined performance in the NBA
playoff game from the previous night. Phil taunts,

What happened to your Shaq Daddy? He’s soft! I told you he was soft! Four
personal fouls in the first quarter!” (FN May 1, 2006, p. 7)

Although narrative constructions of Shaq’s body within the focus groups at Pinevale
oscillated between “fat” and “muscular” (FG#3_2, Feb. 8, 2006; FG#4_2, Mar. 1, 2006),
Shaq was generally well-respected by the participants for his tough, physically dominating, space occupying style of play on the basketball court. Thus, when Phil suggested that Shaq was “soft” he was referring to his lack of self-control in getting four personal fouls. Being “hard” sometimes necessitates turning the other cheek, so to speak. An undisciplined occupation of space, even if it may be aggressive and dominating, as in Shaq’s case, was considered to be a sign of “softness” by the participants.

Deborah Lupton (1999) argues that self-control is essential to the constitution of what she calls the “civilized body”. She writes,

the ideal notion of the human body in contemporary western societies is that which is tight, contained, exercising full control over its boundaries and what comes in and goes outside. At its most extreme, this ideal seeks to disallow the very existence of the material body, seeking the perfection and purity of rational thought over the impurities of fleshy desires and needs. The white, able-bodied, bourgeois, heterosexual masculine body is valued as most closely conforming to this idea of the contained, ‘civilized’ body, while the bodies of women, the working class, non-whites, the disabled and gay men are set apart as the Other, for they are represented as incapable of fully achieving the mastery of the body. Such bodies are culturally represented as subject to the will of the flesh rather than that of reason, prone to emotionality, excessive desire, violence or disarray. (Lupton, 1999, p. 130)

Exercising control over the desires and impassioned urges of the body is essential to the constitution of a phallic masculinity, according to Lupton. Similarly, the mostly black participants at Pinevale spoke about self-control as necessary to the performance of hardness. Thus, not any space occupation will do, but rather a particular space occupation, one that was controlled, disciplined, instrumental was necessary to the production of a “hard” attitude. In other words, just being big was not sufficient; rather, one must perform bigness in a controlled and disciplined way. To be out of control, undisciplined, and excessive was to be embodied in a socio-cultural context where
embodyment is devalued as subordinate and inferior. As I demonstrate later in this dissertation, at points the participants construct the fat body as out of control and undisciplined. Thus, the fat male body harbors the potential to disrupt the cultural imperative to produce the male body as a tight, contained, sealed up, disembodied vessel (Grosz, 1994; Lupton, 1999; Shogan, 1999)

Given that on other occasions the young men narratively constructed the fat male subject as lacking self-discipline and self-control, a construction that is consistent with dominant sizeist health and body discourses (Gard and Wright, 2001, 2005), the fat male body’s hold on phallic masculinity was tenuous at best. While “large [male] bodies can be powerful bodies, and appropriately masculine” (Gard and Wright, 2005, p.161), this representation of the fat masculine subject is contextually situated and discursively constrained. In the following sections, I demonstrate how different socio-culturally located communities interpret the fat body.

**Racialized Readings of the Fat Male Body**

Narrative constructions of the fat male body were embedded at the cross-roads of racial discourses and localized material conditions. In other words, differently situated social and cultural “interpretative communities” (Fish, 1980) had distinctive readings of the fat black body. Joan Gross (2005) notes that within the cultural diversity of North America the notion of “fat is itself a contested arena” where there are different “visions of what constitutes fatness, as well as the desirability of fat on bodies” (p. 67-8). This diversity of perspectives could be seen in the narratives of the differently racialized and classed youth involved in the present research. For example, the mostly white participants

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73 See Chapter #6 Obesity Discourse, Healthism, and the (Neo)Liberal Governmental Subject and the section “Fatness as an “uninhabitable subjectivity” in this chapter.
at Lawson were somewhat ambivalent about Fat Joe’s body. When shown an image of Fat Joe, the groups’ reactions are mixed.

Carl: He’s a gimmick, he’s Fat Joe because he’s fat, so he just wants everyone to be like “Hey, I’m fat…”
Alex: You don’t get made fun of if you’re like “I’m so fat”. ‘Cause no one wants to make fun of ye if you’ve already said you’re fat.
Ted: And you think that’s what he does?
Alex: Sure, yeah.
Robert: And he has a big ego too.
Alex: Like no one calls you dumb if you’re like “I’m the stupidest person here”.
No one’s gonna be like “You’re so dumb”. You’ve already said you’re stupid. You’ve already admitted it. So if you make that your name, Fat Joe.
Ted: Fat Joe, is he…like a lot of gangster rap portray themselves as this tough image, does he portray a tough image?
Abe: A little bit.
Alex: Well, like if you see this big guy walkin’ down the hallway and he’s big and buff kinda of…
Carl: He’s not buff, he’s fat.
Ted: Now is Fat Joe buff?
Carl: No! He’s a pile of flab.
Robert: No.
Michael: He could be big boned, right, but he’s also fat.
Abe: He’s mixed.
Ted: So, would he be strong?
Abe: Maybe. He could be.
Carl: I don’t think so.
Alex: He probably could afford to be.
Carl: He could pose himself up to be.
Ted: Ah, what makes you say that he’s not strong?
Carl: He just doesn’t…like he’s a poser, he just sits there and says ‘I’m a rapper so I’m tough, I could beat you up, I could do anything ’cause I have money and I have people in skimpy clothing dancing around me”…just sittin’ there because he has money. (FG#7_2, May 29, 2006, pp. 16-18)

Although some members of the group acknowledge that Fat Joe could be strong and that he certainly is rich, two important traits of dominant (black) masculinity (hooks, 2004), they generally disregarded his masculinity as a façade. Carl in particular was critical of Fat Joe’s body, suggesting that any sign of dominant masculinity—for example, strength, 74

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74 Fat Joe is a popular black rapper who—as his name insinuates—is quite large.
heterosexual appeal, or toughness—were all the products of a carefully constructed media image, not an authentic “real” self. Generally speaking, the mostly white focus groups at Lawson spoke of the fat male body derisively. Comparatively, the youth at the Pinevale Community Centre had a wider range of appropriately masculine body types. They spoke with far more reverence about Fat Joe, his body, and his talent as an entertainer.

Akeem: Dis guy is fat, but he’s not…I think he could run around.
Thomas: He’s fat.
Ted: Why do you think that?
Akeem: He’s not obese. An’ I see him walk around in videos an’ stuff. I seen him run too.
Thomas: I think he could run pretty fast, but he can’t run for a long time.
Josh: I give him five minutes.
Akeem: He was running from de police in de video.
Thomas: I am jus’ sayin’, for de amount of time he could probably run like two to five minutes.
Ted: Do you think he could ahh do you think he could ball?
Thomas: He could ball? Yeah, not really, though.
Akeem: Yeah.
Thomas: I don’t think so.
Ted: Why not?
Akeem: Look at Martin he could ball. Our coach from Wilson, he was fat like him, but he could still play basketball.
Thomas: Like could play but he wouldn’t really…(FG#5_1, Apr. 5, 2006, p. 25)

While the young men at Lawson—particularly Carl—saw Fat Joe as a “gimmick” and a “pile of flab”, who performed a black masculine façade that was read as offensive, the youth from Pinevale employed different narratives to talk about Fat Joe. While they recognized his fatness, they were not singularly pathologizing of it, instead pointing to his strength and ability to perform some, albeit limited, aspects of phallic masculinity. Some members of the group suggested that he could “run around” and might even be able to play basketball. This characterization of Fat Joe is in keeping with the earlier observation that the young men from Pinevale tended to articulate a broader range of
socially acceptable body sizes. A different group from Pinevale noted Fat Joe’s heterosexual appeal, an important component of phallic masculinity.

Sean: Look at Fat Joe, he’s gettin’ a lot of girls around him. Fat Joe, he’s gettin’ a lot of girls around him and so is Biggie Smalls.

Ajay: Ye know why?

Omar: ‘Cause dey’re rich!

Ajay: Exactly! (FG#4_1, Feb. 22, 2006, p. 34)

While a different focus group from Pinevale showed reverence for Bone Crusher, another fat black hip-hop artist.

Thomas: Bone Crusher.

Ted: Okay, what do you think of Bone Crusher?

Josh: He’s fat.

Akeem: He’s big and strong. I seen all of his videos too.

Josh: He goes crazy, dis guy holds you it’s over.

[Laughter]

Thomas: In one of his videos dis guy takes off his shirt, dis guy’s fat!

Ted: What do you think of that?

Akeem: He can walk.

Josh: He can run.

Joe: He can beat up people.

Ted: He can beat up people? An’ he gets girls, though, doesn’t he?

Thomas: Yeah!

Josh: But he got game.

Ted: He’s got game? What’s his game?

Josh: If he was like dat, an’ he was like a normal person like us…

Thomas: If you’re famous…oh my God, girls come to you like nothing.

Josh: Yeah.

Ted: So is that what makes him…

Thomas: That’s how he gets girls, ‘cause he’s famous. An’ money, money is a big part of it too. (FG#5_2, Apr. 12, 2006, pp. 28-29)

According to this particular interpretive community, which is situated in a racialized and lower social class neighbourhood in Toronto, the large bodies of black hip-hop artists

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75 This image is a close-up of Bone Crusher biting aggressively and hungrily into a leg of chicken. His hair is unkempt and wild, his eyes are partially shut as his teeth rip into the meat.

76 I use the term “interpretive community” here to refer to diverse groups of young people that coalesce into collectives, not on the basis of foundational categories of social positioning (such as class or race), but on shared affective sensibilities around, for example, sport practices and sport consumption. The participants in the present research were careful to refuse to be categorized into one solitary “community”, but rather
were worthy of “respect” for their ability to perform central characteristics of phallic masculinity, such as “getting girls”, being strong, tough, rich, and famous. As the discussion continues, it becomes evident that the participants respected Bone Crusher’s huge, powerful, and fat body.

Ted: What do you think of him in general, though? Like his body size an’ stuff?
Josh: I wouldn’t mess with him.
Thomas: Yeah, he’s pretty big. He looks like he would overpower me.
Akeem: What do you mean by his body, like?
Ted: Jus’ his size an’ stuff?
Akeem: Size?
Ted: Yeah, do you respect it?
Akeem: Yeah, probably.
Josh: You have to.
Ted: Why do you have to?
Josh: You see dat chicken dat he’s eatin’?
Ted: Yeah.
Josh: Imagine if dat was you? [Laughs at his own joke—said to Akeem]
Akeem: You’re skinnier den me so dat would be you. (FG#5_2, Apr. 12, 2006, pp. 28-29)

At the Pinevale Community Centre it was evident that fatness was not necessarily inconsistent with the performance of a phallic masculinity. Both Bone Crusher’s and Fat Joe’s bodies were respected and were not derided the same way fat male bodies were in the mostly white, middle-class research setting at Lawson. Whereas the participants at Lawson had nothing positive to say about the fat male body, the young men at Pinevale did find many redeeming—even admirable qualities—about the fat black rappers.

insisted that they were positioned in multiple and shifting “communities”. This is best illustrated when I ask Phil in an interview about his “best friend”:

[…] like to tell you de truth, I don’t consider nobody my best friend, I jus’ consider dem a friend […] I hang out with everybody, like whenever I see people […] Like, after school I jus’ come here [Pinevale], ye know, an’ play basketball wit whoever, ya know. (Int. #2, May 16, 2006, p. 13)

Phil narrates a community that is not founded on race or subcultural affiliation, but on common interests of playing basketball and getting along. That said, group boundaries did form at Pinevale along racial and gender lines, as I demonstrate in other parts of this dissertation. Nevertheless, diffuse and fluid “interpretive communities” formed, dissipated, and re-formed in the social spaces of both Pinevale and Lawson.
Within hip-hop culture, fatness does not necessarily represent a “spoiled identity” (Hartley, 2001) or a health pathology, as it does in the dominant white, middle-class western culture (Bell and Valentine, 1997; Kent, 2001), but in many ways symbolizes the embodiment of masculine power through the phallic “imperative to take up space and yield less of it, be it physical, cultural, emotional, fiscal, or hierarchical” (Pronger, 1999, p. 380). Joan Gross (2005) argues that in the hip-hop scene the fat male body is positively represented. Hip-hop, she suggests, offers a different perspective on fat…[where] fat bodies and phat music translate into fame and financial success. The celebration of corpulence in rap music contests mainstream American ideals and messages that tell us that fat is sad, repellent, and shameful. Rather than being a source of shame, in hip-hop, fatness is celebrated as a positive sign of power and attraction. (Gross, 2005, p. 76)

While the participants from the Pinevale Community Centre narrated the fat bodies of popular hip-hop artists in positive ways, talking about them as though they were strong, rich, famous, and had successful “game”, all important aspects of a phallic masculinity, their readings of fatness were not nearly as decisive as Gross suggests. The young men debate at length about whether Fat Joe could run up and down the court, and whether he could use his large body to his success, and point out that if Fat Joe were a “normal person like us” his fatness would not be read as a positive embodiment. Moreover, different ethno-racial communities living in different geographic and material conditions came to different conclusions about the fat male bodies of hip-hop artists, with the participants in mostly white, middle-class settings speaking in derisive terms of the fat male body, while participants in lower income, mostly black communities were ambivalent but often positive about fat male bodies. Again, we can see that the meanings
discursively inscribed in the fat body were not fixed, but shift depending on social and cultural location of both the reader of the body, as well as that of the body being read.

There are two additional points that need to be made in relation to the racialized readings of fat male bodies. First, the notion that the stigma of fatness is precisely the “stigma of visibility” (Moon and Sedgewick, 2001, p. 305) is a racially specific construction of fatness. With hip hop masculinity it is precisely the visibility of space occupying, hyper(hetero)sexual, excessive consumer black masculine self that is commodified and celebrated. To claim that the offence of the fat body lies in his inability to take part in the economic and symbolic order of late capitalism (Moon and Sedgewick, 2001) may well be applicable to the white, middle-class body, but is differently inscribed and experienced in the black masculinity of hip hop culture. The fat body of the black rapper was invested with cultural meanings of masculinity that make it a valuable cultural commodity. All of the focus group participants recognized the material power of Fat Joe’s and Bone Crusher’s “money”. The second point, however, is to temper the first by suggesting that constructions of the fat black rappers body may not be as subversive as Gross suggests above. In a white supremacist culture, black masculinity is only accorded visibility when black men meet certain racial stereotypes (hooks, 2004). These stereotypes represent the black male as “brute—untamed, uncivilized, unthinking, and unfeeling” (p. xii). Images of fat black hip hop artists, like Bone Crusher, chomping hungrily into a leg of chicken, do not deconstruct representations of blackness as brute, but as Josh’s comments demonstrate when he says “Imagine if dat chicken was you!”, perpetuate a notion of an uncivilized, untamed, out of control black masculinity. In other words, representations of fat black hip hop artists trade in the same racist discourse that
constructs black masculinity as more body than mind, desire than discipline, and money than refinement. So, yes, it is possible for black hip hop artists to be fat, successful, powerful, and hyper(hetero)sexual, but according to what racializing logic, and with what consequences for broader constructions of black masculinity. In the following section, I examine how there are limits to positive constructions of fatness as an appropriate space occupying phallic masculinity.

**Taking Up Too Much Space**

Throughout this chapter I have argued that there is not a universally agreed upon construction of the fat male body, but rather male fatness is constructed through multiple and shifting discourses. Readings of fatness depend on ethnic, racial, and social class positioning of both the fat body being read as well as the reader of that body. Other factors such as personal experiences with fatness also shape whether fatness is looked upon positively or negatively. The ability of the fat man to use his body according to the principles of a phallic imperative—to aggressively take-up space in the domination of other, weaker bodies—also influenced readings of fatness. However, there were limits to these diverse readings of the fat body. Namely, all of the focus group participants at Pinevale suggested that it was possible for a male body to be “too fat”, which resulted in a “spoiled [masculine] identity”\(^77\) (Hartley, 2001). The participants constructed the excessively fat male body as an abject body.

With a group of young men from the Pinevale Community Centre I asked about the fat man’s ability to perform masculinity.

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\(^77\) By “spoiled (masculine) identity” I am referring to the circumstances where excessive fatness results in the inability of the male body to perform dominant masculinity (i.e. physical activity and sport), inhabit a body that is read as masculine (i.e. contained, controlled, an appropriately masculine body), and thus forego the material and symbolic patriarchal dividends associated with masculinity.
Ted: What about heavy? What if you’re heavier...like fat, if you’re a fat guy?
Akeem: Den you’re strong, yeah. It doesn’t really matter about body size, dough, I don’t really know.
Ted: So can you be fat and be masculine? Like a really, really heavy guy?
Akeem: If he starts workin’ out or jus’ like...
Josh: Uses steroids...I can give him probably like three years to be like Arnold.
Ted: Okay, three years to be like Arnold, but as he is, as he is, can he be masculine?
Akeem: No.
Josh: I don’t think so.
Thomas: I don’t think he could run a block. [Group giggles]
Ted: Why not?
Akeem: ‘Cause he’s too big.
Thomas: Look at de slide 78, if you’re body’s dat big I don’t know if you’re legs can carry you.
Josh: Your legs can’t carry allllll of dat [fat]. (FG#5_2, Apr.12, 2006, pp. 28-29)

The fat male body is subject to health and fitness discourses, where the young men suggest that the fat man in the photo needs to “start workin’ out” in order to attain a proper masculine identity. His body was unable to carry out the performative tasks necessary to phallic masculinity, such as running. According to these young men, the phallic potential of the fat male body was limited by being “too big”. Indeed, the young men resort to discourses of disability to characterize the fat body by suggesting that they do not know if the man’s legs can carry “all dat” fat. Thus, while being large can be consistent with the performance of a dominant masculinity, bigger does not necessarily equal better.

As mentioned earlier in this chapter, the fat male body can elicit reactions of abjection. For example, the image that appears on the cover of The Bloodhound Gang’s album “Hefty” is shocking, horrifying even, to the young men. This reaction—which was a common reaction across the focus groups to this particular image—is one of abjection.

Julia Kristeva (1982) defines the abject as the not quite subject (self) nor object (other),

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78 Image from the album cover of The Bloodhound Gang of a fat man tucked into a box.
but the liminal. It is the matter which disrupts the properly contained, (b)ordered self. The abject thus provokes fear, fascination, and disgust because it reveals the porosity of the border between self and Other, thereby collapsing the façade of the fully contained, autonomous subject. Abjection, then, is the self-preserving embodied revulsion that violently casts out the abject, thereby re-establishing a border between self and other. The fat male body in the image was horrifying, disgusting and fascinating because it exceeded the culturally constructed limits of the biological body. It revealed the “stretchability” (Grosz, 1994) of the human body. It exposed the body not as a fixed and static mass, but a fluctuating cultural entity that, under proper environmental, social, and cultural conditions can grow beyond the discursively constructed boundaries of the “humanly possible”79. The young men thus re-established the borders of their own embodied existence by warding off the threat posed by the culturally and physically unbounded body of the excessively fat man. Their abjection, in other words, constructed a symbolic border between their culturally bounded—and thus intelligible—bodies and the unbounded, borderless body of the fat man in the image.

While the seeming boundlessness of the corpulent male body is revolting, threatening and horrifying to the young men, it simultaneously elicits fascination. The young men were familiar with excessive corpulent bodies like the fat man in the photo, having seen similar bodies on day time television programs such as The Maury Povich Show. Indeed, in several focus group discussions this particular image conjured stories of similarly fat bodies. For instance, a participant from the Pinevale Community Centre shared this story in response to the image of the “fat guy in a box”.

79 Interestingly, the participants had nearly identical reactions of disgust, fascination, and horror to images of male body-builders, including the pop culture icon and current governor of California, Arnold Schwarzenegger.
Omar: You know what, dis guy, he weighed a thousand pounds...I’m not even jokin’…ahhh, Michael Jackson went to visit him…and den, he was so fat, dis guy was walkin’ and he got stuck to his door, like through de door…ummm, he used to force himself through, but dis time he got stuck and den he jus died, and when de guy who delivered his groceries, found him dead and dey had to break de whole house apart jus to take him out…

Ted: Ohh, geeze.

Omar: I know, dat’s sad. (FG#2_1, p. 28)

And in another focus group at Pinevale,

John: Yeah, I’ve seen it on Maury like “I’m overweight” Dere’s people dat can’t get out a dere bed…[...] like deres people dat can’t get outta dere beds en stuff…[...]I was watchin’ Jerry Springer…[...] dere was dis lady, I don’t know how much she weighted, it something like 800 and something pounds and…she couldn’t get out of her bed and her daughter had to put her table under her back and...

Kareem: Oh yeah, I saw that…

John: …and just like get three of her friends to like step on it so she could slide over and I started laughing, but the more I thought about it, I am like “Whoa, dis is serious”. Like this is actually happening, ya know.

Kareem: I saw one lady, she was in, I don’t know what show, but umm…and she was like really fat, I dunno, and umm the only way they could take her out was to get a helicopter and damage de roof and…[someone interrupts Kareem] (FG#3_1, Feb. 1, 2006, p. 16)

The excessively fat body—regardless of gender—was mediated as spectacle of disability in daytime talk shows. Some scholars have used critical disability studies to account for the experiences of fatness (see Cooper, 1997; Herndon, 2002). The young men pick up and emphasize particular storylines of disability, focusing on how these fat individuals were in need of outside assistance to do the most mundane of everyday activities including moving around, eating, and leaving the house. Moreover, the out-of-placeness of the fat body was reflected in the stories the young men share about how the

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Critical examinations of fatness have revealed that at a certain body size the fat body becomes de-classed (Campos, 2004; Moon and Sedgewick, 2001). Similarly, I would argue that extreme corpulence, similar to those bodies depicted in the images and stories above, also become de-gendered in important ways. Embodied markers of gender become blurred, if not erased, in fat bodies. For example, fat men often develop “female-like” breasts (Longhurst, 2005) and genitalia are buried beneath layers of fat thus problematizing sexual identity (Kulick, 2005). This is not to say that fat men and women do not perform gendered identities, but that these gender performances are often superseded by pathologizing cultural constructions of fatness.
fat body does not fit into purpose-built spatial environments of the home. These daytime television programs represent the fat body in ways akin to Mikhail Bakhtin’s (1984) grotesque body. For Bakhtin the grotesque body is open, bulging, never finished. It is a more ancient form of embodiment that is contrasted with the properly bounded, fixed, sealed body of the “modern bodily canon” (Bakhtin, 1984) or, what Deborah Lupton (1999) refers to as the “civilized body”. She writes that with an intense focus on the social importance of maintaining and presenting a ‘civilized’ body, there is evidence of a high level of concern and anxiety around manifold issues to do with body boundaries, including the fluids that flow in and out of the body, the ways in which other’s touch one’s body and the deportment and appearance of the body. (p. 130)

Although Lupton does not directly cite the fat body as the grotesque Other of the civilized body, it is not too much of a stretch to imagine how her characterization could easily be applied to the huge, corpulent bodies that the young men refer to above. The excessively fat body—whether male or female—is culturally constructed as a body that is out of place (Longhurst, 2005a, 2005b; Moon and Sedgewick, 2001) and out of date (Moon and Sedgewick, 2001). The participants took up and relayed the narrative construction of the fat body as a body that does not belong, that literally exceeds the boundaries of the “natural” body as well as the spaces of its existence. In its excessive corpulence, the fat body was undeniably embodied as fleshiness, as more body than mind, as emotion and desire as opposed to reason and control. In this way, the excessive fatness of the huge bodies represented on daytime television were grotesque bodies or, quite literally, “bodies out of bounds” (Braziel and LeBesco, 2001). They were, in other words, the abject bodies that haunt the borders of the fully contained, civilized body with the memory that the embodied margins of the slender body are a “matter of vigilance,
never guaranteed” (Grosz, 1994, p.194). Or, in more colloquial terms, the abject fat body reminds us that trapped inside every slim body is a fat body waiting to get out.

It is important to note that popular media constructions of fatness, such as the representations from *The Maury Povich Show* as well as shows like *The Simpsons* and *The Family Guy*, were repeatedly drawn upon by multiple focus groups as resources for making sense of fat bodies. Not once did the participants critically challenge these representations by suggesting an alternative way of looking at fatness. These representations were accepted as truthful and accurate depictions of extremely large bodies and were drawn upon to make sense of embodied subjects. The manner in which the young men took up these televised representations of the fat body, with their emphasis on the fat body as disabled, out of place, and simply too much body, indicates that there is an upper limit on the notion that the large male body is consistent with the performance of a particular version of masculinity. As I have demonstrated throughout this chapter, the fat male body, in certain social and cultural contexts, is positively constructed as an empowered masculine embodiment. However, there were limitations to the connections between dominant masculinity and fatness. The young men who participated in the present research made sense of both their own bodies and the bodies of others using multiple local and global body discourses. Thus, there was not one reading of the fat male body, rather it was always interpelled through a multiplicity of shifting discourses. On the one hand, the fat male body was positively read as an aggressive, space occupying mode of embodiment consistent with a phallic masculinity, while on the other hand, the excessively fat body was constructed as an abject body, a grotesque body, a disabled body, and a body out-of-place. Thus, while the fat body can perform a
culturally privileged form of phallic masculinity, and while a slender, tight, muscular male body does not necessarily guarantee the performance of normative masculinity, I would argue that body size and shape cannot be divorced from the performance of masculinity. The fat male body may perform a dominant, space occupying masculinity, but always runs the risk of de-subjectification by the same health and body discourses that produced it as dominant in the first place. In other words, the mammoth bodies of football players may be able to effectively dominate opponents on the football field or the fat bodies of black rappers may have the money and fame to successfully engage in heterosexual conquest and excessive consumption, but they are at the same time always vulnerable to the de-subjectifying health and body discourses that construct their embodied identities as health pathology or out of control.

Conclusion

In this chapter I have demonstrated that the intersections of fatness, race, and masculinity are more complex, shifting, fluid, and identity-constituting than the existent scholarly work—or the lack thereof—on men and body size reflects. This chapter shows that the “lived experience of fatness is just as complicated and contradictory for men as it is for women” and that “male fat is similarly crosscut by multiple factors such as class, ethnicity and sexuality” (Bell and McNaughton, 2007, p. 126). And while individuals experience fatness along gender lines (Bordo, 1993; Gard and Wright, 2005; Hartley, 2001; Wright, et al., 2006), this should not be confused with the assumption that boys and men do not experience fatness at all. Nor should the gendered experience of fatness be used as a justification for not researching the complexities of male fatness (Bell and McNaughton, 2007; Gilman, 2004). Fatness did matter to the boys and young who
participated in the present research. However, the manner in which they talked about, understood, and experienced body size and shape was always mediated through gender, race, social class, sexuality, and age.

The narratives of the young men who participated in my research indicated that fatness was a problem for masculinity. It limits the ways in which boys and men interpret their own bodies as well as how their bodies are interpreted by others. There was not one “hegemonic masculinity” (Connell, 2005) that was defined by a universal set of attributes and characteristic performances, rather differently situated groups of boys and men used available global and local resources to construct masculine identities that were meaningful within their specific contexts (Archer and Yamashita, 2003; Petersen, 1998; Wetherell and Edley, 1998). The fat male body was thus situated at the cross roads of multiple discourses, thereby giving rise to multiple and shifting subject positions. For example, the fat male body was not universally pathologized as unathletic, but at points fulfilled the cultural imperative that compels a forceful, space-occupying (Pronger, 1999; Shogan, 1999; Whitson, 1992) performance of masculinity. In the following chapter I explore how obesity discourse compels a particular self-governing subjectivity that is consistent with the dominant neoliberal socio-political climate of the present-day Canadian context.
CHAPTER SIX

OBESITY DISCOURSE, HEALTHISM, AND THE (NEO)LIBERAL GOVERNMENTAL SUBJECT

Introduction

The notion that the individual is responsible for their health, specifically in relation to body size and shape, was a prevalent theme running throughout my research project. Robert Crawford (1980, 2006) defined the moral imperative that located health as something that the individual has control over and is obligated to manage as “healthism”. Healthism is a “system of beliefs that defines health-promoting activities such as involvement in some form of physical fitness program, as a moral obligation…Whether it is through exercise, diet, or stress management, the avoidance of disease through personal effort has become a dominant cultural motif” (White, Young, and Gillet, 1995, p. 160).

With healthism, it is assumed that through self-control, self-denial, and delay of gratification the individual is able to secure their own health fortunes (Crawford, 1980; White, Young, and Gillet, 1995). Locating health as an individual responsibility as opposed to a matter for the welfare state is consistent with a neoliberal ethic of entrepreneurialism where the prudential, self-regulating subject is privileged (Kelly, 2000, 2001; Lutpon, 2005; McDermott, 2007; Rose, 1999).

Significantly, within the neoliberal context, the socio-cultural environment in which the individual lives is erased from the equation and health status becomes a matter of individual choice or lifestyle (Ingham, 1985), as it is popularly referred to in “obesity epidemic” narratives. When the complexity of body weight and shape is reduced to a matter of individual self-discipline or lifestyle choice, the fat body comes to be
biomedically represented and popularly understood as morally degenerate, irresponsible, and out-of-control (Evans, 2003; Gard and Wright, 2001, 2005). Within the context of the healthist ideology that informs the “obesity epidemic”, the fat body is culturally constructed as not only “abject” (Butler, 1993; Kent, 2001), “unhealthy,” “lazy,” and “gluttonous” (Gard and Wright, 2005), but also as a freely chosen embodiment. In the following paragraphs I argue that relationships of power are more important to the discursive construction of “obesity” than reductive assumptions of a biologically predictable body and a “free” and rational subject by exploring how the young men in the present research took up and deployed healthism informed obesity discourse as cultural resources for understanding their own bodies as well as the bodies of others. Moreover, I argue that the reiterative manner in which the participants drew upon notions of the humanist subject, which is a founding component of healthism, was constitutive of their subjectivities as healthy, (neo)liberal governmental subjects.

The Discursive Construction of the “Couch Potato”

Michael Gard and Jan Wright (2005) argue that “obesity epidemic” discourse not only targets the overweight and obese, but works to situate “everyone, everywhere” as at risk of unhealthy body weights. The effectiveness of the “obesity epidemic” message lies in its ability to cast its discursive net broad enough to entangle even the seemingly healthy body within its grid of intelligibility. Thus, none of us are safe from the ill-effects of too much body weight, no matter how young, old, fit, or health-conscious, we are constantly reminded that we must remain ever-vigilant against dreaded weight gain. I agree with Gard and Wright (2005) on this point and would push their argument one step further and suggest that the sweeping comprehensiveness of “obesity epidemic” discourse
makes it available as a culturally meaningful resource in making sense of bodies. In other words, if “everyone, everywhere” is at risk of obesity, than so too is “everyone, everywhere” able to take up obesity discourse as significant cultural resources in constructing a meaningful sense of self.

Lisette Burrows and Jan Wright (2004) argue that the notion of “childhood is currently being constructed and reconstructed in relation to corporeal discourses that define the healthy child” (83). More specifically, the “obesity epidemic” has generated a moral panic around childhood which “constructs particular ways of looking at and acting upon children” (p.83). Obesity discourse positions children and youth as sedentary and gluttonous beings who are at risk of ill-health and are thus in need of expert adult intervention. (Burrows and Wright, 2004; Gard and Wright, 2005; McDermott, 2007). A dominant theme throughout the focus groups, interviews, and participant observations was the notion that because of a lack of physical activity and poor eating practices children are less healthy today than they once were. The predominance of this theme suggests that obesity discourse has constructed a cultural lens of “childhood” and children as either a state of ill-health currently or at-risk of becoming so in the future that requires the corrective attention of expert interventions. These constructions of “childhood” were epitomized in the comments of Phil during a focus group at the Pinevale Recreation Centre.

Phil: Nowadays, dey should start opening up more like, I dunno how to explain it…um, like dose things like for like children, ‘cause dere is some children dat don’t like take care of demselves. Dey’re still, like dey look fit an’ stuff, but deir bodies, dey’re stamina, right, if you checked dey’re stamina, dey get tired an’ like dey start drinkin’ too much pop or like too much sugar, an’ dat’s when diabetes when dey grow up, ya know. I think dey should like open some [indiscernible] for kids, you know. Dey could tell dem what to eat, what’s healthy, so de kids start tryin’ to go…after a
month, dey like it, if deir used to it, dey jus’ go to them, an’ dey keep goin’, ya know. (FG# 3_2, Feb. 8, 2006, p. 26)

Despite the fact that Phil was only fifteen years of age, by taking up and rearticulating obesity discourse he was able to reflect on kids “nowadays” and their lazy and gluttonous ways. Gard and Wright (2005) suggest that the mediated construction of children and young people as “couch potatoes” within the context of the “obesity epidemic” has become synonymous with how we think about children today. This was evident in Phil’s narrative—and was a common construction of children across the focus groups—as he described “kids nowadays” as out of shape, unhealthy, and fat.

His use of obesity discourse in this narrative initiates three important constitutive functions. First, Phil was able to secure his non-childhood identity or, in other words, articulate his adult status by commenting on the abysmal state of childhood today. In the same gesture, Phil was able to differentiate his “health” status by distancing himself from the out-of-control, lazy, gluttonous practices of kids “nowadays”. Discourse situates both those who are spoken about, as well as the speaker (Harding, 1998), and by speaking about the unhealthy child-other Phil discursively positions himself as both “healthy” and “adult”. Second, his narrative legitimates and normalizes expert intervention into the lives of children in the name of their own well-being. His suggestion that kids need a place to go and learn what to eat and what is healthy borrows from and stabilizes a broader discursive construction that situates children as dependent, vulnerable and thus in need of adult control and protection (Burrows and Wright, 2004; Lesko, 2001). Obesity discourse not only constructs normative practices of “health,” but at the same time, obesity discourse is constitutive of “childhood” itself. In other words, obesity discourse provides a set of culturally constructed ways of looking at and understanding children,
and these cultural resources are actually productive of the category “childhood” of which they speak, producing it as a less-than-adult state of embodiment. The child, then, is not the self-governing subject that is privileged in a neoliberal context, but is a dependent, vulnerable, incomplete subject that must be subjected to disciplinary and regulating technologies as part of his or her normalization into a healthy, governmental subject. Phil drew upon risk discourse to make his case, suggesting that the current practices of children were jeopardizing their future health and wellbeing. Thus, health and body discourses interlock with other identity discourses, such as “childhood”, in the production of various subjectivities. Third and finally, when Phil made the comment that “children don’t like to take care of demselves” he reiterates the individualism that is at the core of health discourse, where it is assumed that the individual, as opposed to the social collective, is responsible for self-care (Crawford, 1980; White, Young, and Gillet, 1995). The notion of individual responsibility for the self—specifically body size, shape, and weight—was a common theme in the present research. From Phil’s narrative we can see how health discourse overlaps with and borrows from other discourses in the construction of culturally meaningful statements and how these statements operate in the construction of particular subjectivities. Later in the same focus group, Phil goes on to connect notions of individualism to an embodied masculine rationality, as I demonstrate in the following section.

The “Mentally Tough” Self-Governing Subject

Rationality is embodied in and through a normatively sized and shaped body (Bordo, 1993; Shilling, 1995). Within a neoliberal rationality, body size and shape are culturally coded as reflections of the core psychological self, with a normatively sized
humanist discourse constructs the individual as a free and agentic subject who makes choices and takes responsibility for those choices, including how one takes up and deploys health and body practices in the production of embodied identities. Thus, a normatively sized and shaped body is read as the marker of an autonomous, self-disciplining governmental subject (Lupton, 1995). In the following narrative, Phil draws upon humanist discourse to explain how achieving a normative and supposedly “healthy” body size is essentially a matter of “mental toughness”.

Like I was sayin’ um, before, um, ahh frig, what was I gonna say…yeah, I was mentioning before like a whole toughness…um…I basically tink dat it’s all about toughness an’ mental, ‘cause whenever you put something to your mind you could do it no matter…like let’s say if you weight 500 pounds and you’re so big, if you put your mind to it and you try hard enough, you could do anything you want…accomplish anything you want in your life…dat’s what I tink…it’s all about de mental and de heart. (FG#3_2, Feb. 8, 2006, p. 14)

In this narrative, Phil recites the deep-rooted ontological western binary that places the mind as superior to and in control of the body (Bordo, 1993; Grosz, 1994). The mind-body split is a central technology of governmentality because it allows for the mindful or “mentally tough” self-governing subject to treat the body as an object to be manipulated, controlled, and disciplined. Through technologies of the self, the “mentally tough” subject is able to “effect by their own means, or with the help of others, a certain number of operations on their own bodies…so as to transform themselves to attain a state of happiness, purity, wisdom” (Foucault, 1997, p. 225) not to mention healthfulness. Within the context of neoliberalism the healthy individual is constructed as a mindful individual
who aggressively takes control of their body through self-discipline or, as Phil would have it, “mental toughness”. In contrast to the disciplined, “mentally tough”, normative subject, the fat subject is constructed as undisciplined, “mentally weak”, and non-normative. Phil thus implicitly counter-poses his normative body size and shape against the fat, non-normative body and, in so doing, entrenches his neoliberal self-governmental subjectivity. The appearance, shape, and size of the body is thus central to the construction of the neoliberal subject.

The relationship between the external and the internal, between the body and the self, is pivotal to processes of governmental subjectification. The surface body is culturally coded as giving insight into the internal self, where the “surface is to be interrogated to see how it expresses, is shaped by or disguises an inner personal truth” (Rose, 1999, p. 263). Thus, the fat body is read as not only out-of-control (Bell and Valentine, 1997), but irrational and lacking in “mental toughness”. Socio-cultural factors laying outside of the individual’s control, such as their socio-economic status, their social class background, their spatial environment, and so on, are completely excluded from Phil’s consideration, and the responsibility for a proper body size rests in the “toughness” of the psychically individuated subject. It is through a ruse of power that the individual comes to see him-or herself as the isolated agent (Butler, 1993; Davies, 2000) in control of their own health status as opposed to seeing and living health as a complex phenomenon that is susceptible to real barriers to, for example, financial security, education, food supplies, and adequate recreational time and facilities (Donnelly and Harvey, 1999). By holding the individual accountable, individuals most “discriminated against are then blamed for their own subordinate position, diverting attention away from
structural inequalities, and towards the perceived moral inadequacies of the individuals themselves” (Carrington and McDonald, 2001, p. 11). Thus, dominant health discourse, and obesity discourse more specifically, does not shed light onto the complex social, cultural, biological, and historical factors that influence body size, but rather provides a set of cultural resources that “blames the victim” for their circumstances and holds them accountable for body size and shape. Once again, the notion of the individual as responsible for health generally, and body weight more specifically, was a reoccurring theme throughout the focus groups.

The body—its size, shape, appearance, and health—has become a key marker of identity in late modernity (Shilling, 2005). For Michael Foucault (1977) the aesthetics of the body—its shape, size, dress, and hygiene, for example—are crucial to the ascendency of the middle-class. If supremacy was no longer to be found in the blood lines of the aristocracy, Foucault argues, than in modernity it came to be rooted in the embodied aesthetics of the bourgeoisie. Thus, a slender, lean, fit body has come to symbolically represent more than just an effective exercise regime and a healthy diet, it represents the embodiment of a middle-class ethos of self-control, self-denial, and self-motivation (Crawford, 1980; White, Young, and Gillet, 1995) marked literally onto and into the flesh of the individual. The ideal body is, as it were, the spirit of the middle-class made manifest in the flesh of the tight, fully contained body. In the above narrative, Phil makes reference to the bourgeois spirit of individualism when he talks about “mental toughness” and “de heart,” neither of which have a materiality of their own, but gain their substantive essence through their materialization in an idealized corporeality—in this case, in the normatively slender body. By drawing upon the individualist notion of the “mentally
tough” subject in control of their destiny as manifested through the margins of an ideal body shape and size, Phil was able to symbolically mark his own slender body as an outcome of a core psychological self that was governed by discipline, rationality, and “mental toughness”. In short, Phil produced himself as neoliberal governmental subject. By focusing on health as the product of an autonomous and self-governing subjectivity as opposed to social structural factors, Phil both drew upon and entrenched an ethos of neoliberal rationality. Given that Phil himself does not come from a middle-class background, his up-take of a middle-class subjectivity is even more interesting.

All of the participants at the Pinevale Recreation Centre identified, in one way or another, as coming from working class backgrounds. Phil was no exception. On one occasion he explained that his father worked in a factory as a “glasser,” while in an interview with Ajay I learned that his mother had died when he was twelve years of age. Neither Phil’s father, nor his 33 year brother, with whom he was quite close, had received post-secondary education, nor did Phil seem particularly interested in attending university or college. Phil was a first generation Serbian-Canadian who moved to Canada when he was six. Research shows that all of these factors affect health status (Raphael, 2002, 2004), but rarely does health discourse pay attention to the “social, economic or political contexts of people’s lives, nor to the complexities that lie behind notions” of health (Wright and Burrows, 2004, p. 226). Given that there are few public discussions about broader health influences, it is hardly surprising that Phil would see body weight as a matter of individual will-power and self-resolution without considering the powerful

82 I did not think it ethically responsible to either ask about Phil’s—or any of the other participants for that matter—“social class status” or about his mother’s death. This information was pieced together through multiple focus group interviews, non-participant observation sessions, and one-on-one interviews. This is one of the advantages of using multiple methods research design.
socio-structural influences that shape his own relationship with his body and its health.

Discursive truth-regimes, which I am arguing the biomedically-informed obesity discourse is, “essentially involves forms of social constraint” through the “valorization of some statement forms and the concomitant devaluation of others” (Fraser, 1989, 20). A discursive truth-regime thus outlines in advance what can be said, thought, experienced, and conversely, what cannot. Thus, broader social, cultural, and historic complexities are devalued in healthism discourse, while notions of individual agency are valorized. There is little discursive space, as it were, within dominant health discourses for Phil to articulate a broader context to individual health status, and obesity discourse plays a key role in constraining what can and cannot be said about bodies, their size, shape, and health.

Phil’s masculinist and stable sense of self was dependent on him taking up a humanist subject position in relation to health discourse. If, for example, during the focus group setting Phil were to try and introduce and actively reflect on those factors beyond his control that impede his ability to secure a neoliberal subjectivity (i.e., his working-class background, his single-parent childhood, his neighbourhood conditions and so on) he would call into question his status as an agentic subject in control of his body and its health, and thus potentially risk de-subjectification. The discourse of healthism shifts the responsibility for the health of populations from the collectivity of the state to the individual (Crawford, 1980) and thus healthism plays an important role in broader neoliberal agendas (Crawford, 2006).

Healthism also has other less apparent implications for the individual in that health discourses stabilize and further entrench notions of the humanist subject.
Therefore, our contemporary western healthist context requires that the individual not only come to understand their health as an individual responsibility, but taking up this moral obligation to health is a necessary condition of possibility for the emergence of the subject in the first place. That Phil has to continually submit and re-submit to a healthist discourse as part of achieving his agency is, as Judith Butler (1995) notes, one of the central paradoxes of subjectification. Put differently, the founding condition of the “free” and “autonomous” subject requires that he or she submit to dominant conditions of normativity. Thus, mastery and submission are not opposite forces, but operate simultaneously in the constitution of the subject, where greater mastery is articulated as more complete subjection. For Phil to constitute himself as a healthy subject indicates a double-movement of mastery and submission, where Phil simultaneous gains an agency as a healthy subject through the submission to dominant health discourse (i.e. healthy lifestyles leading to normative body shape and size). Health discourse, in other words, is a key technique of the self by which the subject comes into being as a subject. As the responsibility for health is downloaded onto the individual subject, the subject takes up this responsibility as a condition of his or her existence. Therefore, neoliberal governmentality provides the constitutive matrix or the conditions of possibility for the emergence of the intelligible subject and, in this way, the middle-class ethos of individualism is not only stabilized, but embodied in the way we speak, think, and experience our own bodies and the bodies of others. Hence, while it may seem contradictory for Phil to “willingly” position himself within a neoliberalist individualism, a subject position that will almost certainly disappoint his aspirations for a corporeal manifest destiny given the various social constraints that structure his life, his willful
uptake of such a position is understandable when we recognize that his very existence as an autonomous subject is dependent on his performativity\(^3\) of a “free”, autonomous, self-governing, individualism.

Nikolas Rose (1999) argues that no matter what circumstances confront the individual, no matter how poor or how discriminated against he or she may be, the individual has no choice but to use available resources to respond to these dilemmas of existence in the process of making something of themselves. He writes,

> however apparently external and implacable may be the constraints, obstacles and limitations that are encountered, each individual must render his or her life meaningful as if it were the outcome of individual choices made in furtherance of a biographical project of self-realization. (p. ix)

In their personal narratives, the participants situated themselves and their lifestyle choices at the centre of their health biographies. Like properly subjected governmental subjects, they talked about themselves as “free” and autonomous individuals making particular health choices in response to various ethical dilemmas of existence. While on several occasions the participants did point to social and genetic structures as constraining their health destinies, these occurrences were seldom, and usually were in relation to people other than themselves, such as family members or friends\(^4\). Neoliberal governmentality, therefore, compels an autonomous, “free,” and self-responsible subjectivity (Rose, 1999) and the properly subjectified subject takes up and experiences these qualities as though they emanated from some psychological core self. Thus, the participants understood and narrated their health practices and embodied health identities not as power relations that

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\(^3\) ‘Performativity’ is Judith Butler’s definition of the materializing effect of discourse. She argues that performativity is the “reiterative and citational act by which discourse produces the effects it names” (1993, p. 3). In this context, I use the concept of performativity to describe how Phil reiteratively draws on dominant health discourse as a cultural resource for materializing a particular embodiment—a masculine, rational, agentic one.

\(^4\) See Chapter #7 and Chapter #8 for further discussion of resistance against obesity discourse.
were imposed on them from outside, but as material manifestations of their own desires, their own freely chosen ways of being, in short, as the outcome of the very essence of who they were. Governmentality does not operate through a singular and universal code of self-conduct, rather “a plurality of forms of selfhood are represented as solutions to the dilemmas of existence, shaped by age, gender, class, race, and much more” (Rose, 1999, p. 265). In the following section, I will explore how health discourse interlocks with other identity categories, specifically gender, in the construction of situated subjectivities.

Healthism, Class, and Gender

Phil’s articulation of healthism as “mental toughness” has a masculinist specificity. Healthism is rooted in a middle-class ideology (Crawford, 2006; White, Young, and Gillet, 1995), but the “healthy” subject is always at the same time a gendered subject. Any analysis of middle class ascendancy would be remiss without simultaneously exploring how bourgeois domination becomes intelligible and secure through an “inter-locking set of oppressions”85 (Razack, 1999) including, for example, colonial, imperial, and gender relations of domination (McClintock, 1995). While Robert Crawford (1980, 2006) focused on healthism as a classist ideology, other scholars have noted that it is also raced and gendered. For example, critics of the “obesity epidemic” and other discriminatory forms of health messaging argue that the health discourse and the ideal “healthy” body are as much normatively white, middle-class, masculine constructions, as they are objective “health” ideals (Campos, 2004; Wright and Gard, 2004). The notion of the fully individuated subject in control of their own destiny is the

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85 Sherene Razack (1999) argues that categories of oppression—‘race’, gender, and social class, for example—do not operate as distinct systems. Rather, these systems interlock such that they we cannot understand racial oppression outside gender oppression, for example. Together these systems “secure one another” in the production of “symbiotically but hierarchically” (p. 13) situated positions.
cornerstone of the (neo)liberal humanist subject in general (Davies, 2000; Grosz, 1994). The (neo)liberal humanist subject comes into being through processes of symbiotically and hierarchically distinguishing itself from the abject Other, including the racialized- (Razack, 1999), feminized- (Butler, 1993), and infantilized- (Lesko, 2001) Other, to name a few. Similarly, the terms “healthy” and “unhealthy” have become key cultural markers of distinction between “normal” and “abnormal” identities (Crawford, 1994). Therefore, the rational, autonomous (neo)liberal subject is constructed and stabilized through marking and remarking the boundary between the healthy-self and the unhealthy-Other. The putatively neutral language of “health”, therefore, is often deployed as a more subtle, less socially offensive language of discrimination against socially marginalized groups (i.e. the poor, the racialized, gender minorities, etc.) (Campos, 2004; Lupton, 1995).

When Phil reduces body size to “mental toughness” without considering the complex social, cultural, and genetic factors that influence body size and shape, he constructs himself as rational, in-control, and disciplined as compared to the out-of-control fat-Other. By drawing upon the masculinist associations that are historically sedimented (Butler, 1997) in the term “toughness”, Phil implicitly constructs his own normatively sized body as reflective of a certain masculine disposition—one that is in-control, both mentally and physically, of his corporeal boundaries, and hence, his embodied subjectivity. The performance of a healthy governmental subjectivity thus inter-locks with gender discourse in the construction of the masculine, healthy subject. Given that on other occasions the participants at Pinevale spoke about the discrimination

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86 “Toughness” within the context of this particular focus group at Pinevale was also used in relation to physical domination on the basketball court and in fist-fighting. To be “tough”, according to this group of young men, was to be in-control of your own body as well as the bodies of others.
and exclusion that fat male bodies experienced in sporting spaces (FG#3_2, Feb. 8, 2006), it stands to reason that not all male bodies have equal access to the technologies of self constitution necessary to produce a normatively sized body that reflects the “mental toughness” that is consistent with dominant masculine embodiment. In other words, physical activity, sport, and exercise, all of which are crucial performances of normative, youthful masculinity, are important body transformation practices that enable the subject to produce oneself as normatively sized and shaped. However, sport, physical activity, healthy eating, and other technologies of health are disproportionately available depending on factors such as gender, race, social class, sexuality, and body size (Donnelly and Coakley, 2004; Sykes and McPhail, 2008). As a result of stigmatization and discrimination, some bodies are excluded from physical activity and sporting practices and thus are denied the symbolic and embodied meanings associated with such practices (Mac An Ghaill, 1994; Rice, 2007; Wilson et al., 2001b). If social structural factors are removed from the equation, the fat male body is thus understood as lacking “mental toughness” and therefore is constructed as mentally weak, at the mercy of desire, and ultimately, less-than-masculine. Obesity discourse, then, provides crucial cultural resources in the construction of subjectivities in the contemporary neoliberal context. However, health discourse does not operate in isolation, but is always mediated through the socio-cultural location of the individual in question. In recognition of this complexity, Deborah Lupton (1995) writes that “‘Health’ has become a way of defining boundaries between Self and Other, constructing moral and social categories and binary oppositions around gender, social class, sexuality, race and ethnicity” (p. 69). Inscribed, even if
implicitly, in the categories “healthy” and “unhealthy” are a variety of other binary identity oppositions, including the gender division between the more and less masculine.

Later in the same focus group discussion, Phil again returns to the theme of body size and mental toughness. This time, his narrative is in relation to the critically acclaimed and commercially successful documentary *SuperSize Me*. Although the film ostensibly gives the viewer a humourous perspective into the corporatization of the American diet, Phil’s narrative demonstrates that there are multiple layers of meaning running throughout the film, not the least of which is a moralistic reading of fat people. This film proved to be an important cultural reference to the young men who participated in my research, as it repeatedly came up in the focus group discussions at both research locations. The young men’s readings of the film were all the more relevant given that at least three participants announced that they saw the film in their Health Education classes, thus giving insight into the sort of moralistic health messages that are emerging from the school curriculum. During this particular focus group, Phil introduced the film to help him describe the lack of discipline he sees in the general population.

**Phil:** …yeah, *SuperSize Me*… [Indiscernible]…how fat America is, an’ how dey are gonna be de fattest country in de world, I tink the reason for dat is because you know how dey have all dat Jenny Craig for women an’ dey also have guy programs an’ stuff, right. I tink all the like um dose chubby, like so say fat people or whatever um dey’re like de reason dey’re so fat an’ big is because dey’re not mentally tough. ‘Cause when dey try to go on de like um frigin’ workout or whatever to fix deir bodies, de go, go an’ den dey jus’ give up, you know, forget it, an’ den dey put demselves down, dey’re like “I’m never gonna get through dis an’ stuff.”

**John:** Deir jus’ lazy.

**Phil:** Yeah, an’ dey can’t do it, dat’s de part of de reason dey’re so big, because dey’re not mentally tough an’ dey’re lazy an’ jus’ won’t do it. (FG#3 #2, Feb. 8, 2006, p. 24)

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87 Several of the participants referred to *SuperSize Me* during the focus groups. Most were familiar with the movie through classes at school.
Although the film is about many things—the corporatization of America’s food industry, the health consequences of a fast food dependent diet, and a pending law-suit against McDonald’s restaurants—Phil sees this movie as focusing specifically on the American “obesity epidemic”. I would argue that *SuperSize Me* not only draws upon the moral panic surrounding the “obesity epidemic,” but that it is incomprehensible outside of this discursive construct, and this is precisely the aspect of the movie that Phil picks up on. Phil uses *SuperSize Me* to provide legitimacy to his arguments about the fat body being a mentally weak body. John joins Phil in his characterization of the fat body by suggesting that fat people are “jus’ lazy”. Despite the fact that *SuperSize Me* attempts to draw connections between corporate greed, the fast food industry, and the “obesity epidemic”, connections which at least partially point to the broader social complexities of body size, Phil, John, and the other young men who participated in the focus groups saw this movie as sending predominantly moralizing messages about the fat body. This is understandable given the cultural construction of moral panic around body weight that locates body size as an individual lifestyle choice rather than a complex socio-cultural phenomenon (Gard and Wright, 2005).

According to Phil’s narrative, *SuperSize Me* tacitly supports the notion that there is something wrong with the fat body that needs to be fixed. Phil comments that when the fat person works out they are not “mentally tough” enough to maintain the workout regime and ultimately fail in their quest to attain the normatively slender body. Such a reductive, but culturally dominant understanding of the fat body does not take into account the genetic, class, environmental, psychological, or cultural background of the individual, but rather simplistically suggests that controlling the body is merely a matter
of “mental toughness”. Phil’s reflections upon the fat body are, of course, consistent with an “obesity epidemic” regime of truth that, for the most part, situates body weight as a matter of individual lifestyle (Gard and Wright, 2005). What is not considered in Phil’s narrative, however, is how a culture of healthism that misrepresents body size as a matter of individual control rather than an unfathomably complex socio-genetic phenomenon can contribute to feelings of despair and depression and thus perpetuates the very unhealthy practices that biomedically informed health promotion campaigns (see Active, Healthy Kids Canada, 2008) are supposedly designed to curtail (Aphramor, 2005; Rice, 2007).

Within our contemporary “somatic society” (Turner, 1992), it is assumed that the outer body is a marker of the individual (Shilling, 2005). Thus, one’s body is thought to reveal intimate information about who one really is. The shape, size, dress, smell, colour of the body, for example, supposedly provide insider information about one’s financial situation, love life, moral standing, mental well-being, and everyday health practices. It is through reading the fat body that Phil comes to the conclusion that fat people are “mentally weak,” “depressive,” and “lazy”. His representation of the body acts as a corporeal map, providing an in-depth account of the psychologically individuated self, or the “real” person. However, this corporeal map only works to the degree that individual bodies can be seen. Modern disciplinary and regulatory power operates through mechanisms of visibility (Foucault, 1978, 1980). Technologies of surveillance (i.e. the gaze of the gym teacher or medical doctor) render bodies visible and the more visible bodies are the more susceptible they are to technologies of normalization (Smart, 2002). Technologies of normalization function by creating a web of power-knowledge relations
around bodies, where certain bodily markers—fatness, disability, non-whiteness, for example—come to represent deficiencies, or deviations from the norm, that require constant cultural work in the production of the normative, slender, able-bodied, white ideal. Phil’s reading of the fat body is embedded in the corporeal symbolic economy that marks fatness as a mental deficiency, as in the opposite of “mental toughness” and thus an uninhabitable subject position, one that is mentally weak, depressed, and lazy. Obesity discourse constructs a way of looking at bodies thereby inserting them into an economy of visibility that renders bodies available to technologies of normalization. In drawing upon the discursive construction of the fat body as a deficient subject position, Phil’s comments further substantiate a broader discursive fabric that culturally compels fat people to normalize their bodies through various technologies of the self, including diet, exercise, expert intervention and, on the more extreme end of the continuum, aggressive surgery. In this sense, Phil’s deployment of obesity discourse positions him and his surveilling gaze as an agent of normalization while simultaneously positioning the fat-Other as an object of pathology. In the following section, I explore in more depth how obesity discourse is a technology of governmentality that compels “free” and rational subjects to take up health knowledges and health practices of the self in the production of neoliberal subjectives.

Care of the Self

“Care of the self” was a prominent and re-occurring theme throughout the present research. The participants talked about bodies in terms of “care”, where the slender, normatively sized body was understood as “caring”, while the fat, abnormal body was constructed as “not caring”. To “care” about oneself was broadly understood by the
participants to refer to caring about all aspects of one’s existence, including one’s health, employment, friendships, body, and appearance. Thus, to “care” was to produce oneself through various technologies of the self as a particular type of subject—a subject “who cares” about their self. Notions of caring for the self, however, do not emerge from the psychologically individuated self, as the participants suggested, but were rather always constructed in relation to normative standards of health, wellbeing, beauty, wealth, success, for example. In other words, “caring” is a discursively constituted concept that exists at the nexus of multiple systems of knowledge that outlines in advance how a proper governmental subject produces themselves as a “caring” subject. Therefore, when the participants make reference to caring for the self they were in fact articulating a governmental power relationship between the self and the self.

Lisa McDermott (2007) argues that obesity discourse operates as a web of knowledge by which the individual comes to understand their own practices of self as constitutive of a particular type of subjectivity (i.e. the obese, unhealthy self or the slender, healthy self). The subject under governmentality, in other words, is constructed as the agent of their own self-constitution. Thus, governmentality promotes an ethic of “care of the self” where the individual through various techniques of self-production produces a self that “carries certain aesthetic values and meets certain stylistic criteria” (Foucault, 1985, p. 10-11). In the focus group discussions, the body, its shape, size, and stylization were central locations for the articulation of obesity discourses related to “care of the self”. The participants spoke about bodies as though they provided “inside information” (Moon and Sedgewick, 2001) about who the subject really was. In the following paragraphs, I will reflect upon how the participants spoke about how the fat
(usually male) body reflected an internal self who was “out of control”, “depressed”, “unmotivated”, and “unreliable”, among other qualities.

The fat male body was constructed as “depressed”. According to the participants at Pinevale Recreation Centre, the fat body represented a particular set of practices and a specific relation to the self. The fat body, the participants argued, gives insight into one’s practices of the self (i.e. consumption of media and overeating) and these practices were assumed to be constitutive of the self (i.e. lazy, gluttonous, and morally lacking). In response to an image of a “beer gut” the young men had the following to say:

Ted: Let’s take a look at the next…what do you think about this guy?
Phil: He’s jus’ sittin’ at home watchin’ cartoons, right.
John: Exactly! Watchin’ de football.
Phil: Brewskies, pizza…
John: Drinkin’ Budweiser and everything on his couch.
Kareem: He’s not takin’ care of his body, ye know.
John: He’s probably depressed or something, ye know. (FG#3_1, Feb. 1, 2006, p. 5)

For these young men, the male “beer belly” represented a negative relationship between the self and the body. It was associated with “unhealthy” practices such as drinking alcohol, eating high-fat foods, and engaging in sedentary activities, such as watching sports on television. From this simple photograph the participants concluded that this man “doesn’t care for his body” and that such lack of care likely emanates from a deeper psychological problem of depression. Feminist scholars of the body argue that the non-normative female body is culturally constructed as a reflection of some deeper psychological lack (Braziel and LeBesco, 2001; Moon and Sedgwick, 2001). John’s

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88 The image is a torso shot of a man with his shirt off. His belly is relatively hairy and protrudes over his pants. It is not a professional image. Rather, it is an image of an “average man”. In fact, during one of the focus groups one of the participants asked “Sir, is that you?” (FG#5_1, Apr. 5, 2006). This was an interesting comment because my body—its size, shape, race, and gender—seldom entered the narratives of the participants in an explicit way, although it inevitably would have shaped the research encounter.
comment that the fat man in the photo was “probably depressed or something” indicates that the link between body size and mental wellbeing also exists for men. His statement points to a particular “aesthetic value” that equates fatness with a “spoiled identity”\(^{89}\) (LeBesco, 2001); in other words, fatness as a physical manifestation of a psychical pathology. The assumption of a core individuated, agentic subject was pivotal in John’s narrative.

In extending the claims of Davies (2000, 2006a) and Rose (1999), I would argue that John’s articulation of a core-self is a consequence of broader discursive constructs that perpetuate the myth of the agentic subject who is, or at least should be, in control of their body. Within such a context, a fat body is understood as reflective of a core self that freely and willfully *chooses* to be fat and thus fatness comes to be one of the most—if not the most—salient identifications of the individual. The fat body is thus seen as the consequence of a set of practices (i.e. poor eating habits and lack of exercise) that are carried out by a free-willed and self-knowing individual. Once again, the broader social context in which the individual is immersed is erased from consideration, as are the more general discursive relations that construct the fat body as pathology. Thus, the fat body is reductively read as a consequence of individual choice. The body—in this case, its size and shape—is central to the production of a culturally meaningful self (Bordo, 1993; Shilling, 2005). The young participants literally read the body for what it had to say about the relationship that the self has with the self and, on the basis of this reading, produced discursively informed narratives about who the fat person “really is”.

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\(^{89}\) Similar to the notion of “uninhabitable” identity, LeBesco uses the term “spoiled” to refer to those bodies that fail to live up to normative codes of subjectivity. She argues that the fat body is one form of failed embodiment in that it violates biomedical and aesthetic norms of health and beauty, respectively. In this regard, fatness is a stain that marks the body and the embodied subject as both “spoiled” and “s(p)oiled”.

The connection between “care of the self,” the body, and subjectivity was clearly illustrated in the narratives of Kyle, a student-athlete at Lawson. The fat body was constructed as “uninspired”, “unmotivated”, and “unattractive” by Kyle. Kyle could be classified as coming from a relatively privileged social class background. Both of his parents were employed as tenured professors at a prestigious Canadian university and Kyle was enrolled as a student at Lawson, a Toronto-area private school that was widely renowned for its academic excellence. During the interview, Kyle talked a lot about the role healthy living played in his daily life, so I asked him to expand on how he understood his health practices in relation to those of others.

Ted: Um, now, this is sort of a speculative question, but it sounds like you’re somebody that really looks after themselves, like makes a conscious effort to look after themselves. What do you think when you see people who don’t? What do you think of that?

Kyle: I mean, like, physically it’s not like attractive, but I don’t tend to judge people on it […] But, you know, like guys in our grade that are slightly overweight, you know, I don’t think of them as, you know, pathetic because they didn’t put in the effort that I did. I mean, it’s something that you want and if they would rather kind of eat well and they’re okay with not being as healthy as I am, than that’s fine. I mean, it’s unfortunate because in the long run it might hurt them a little bit. But if they feel like, you know, for one they can’t motivate themselves to do it or they, I mean, not a lot of people like being overweight, maybe they can’t motivate themselves too. Maybe there’s just kind of, maybe they’re not as inspired by athletics as I am. It’s not something that bothers me. I mean, obviously if someone puts in a lot of work that they usually don’t and loses a lot of weight, than I’ll feel proud of them. (Kyle Int. #3, June 2, 2006, pp. 13-14)

Obesity discourse is a technology of governmentality deployed to govern the bodies of young people through normalization (McDermott, 2007). The knowledges emerging from the “obesity epidemic” provide a discursive lens by which one can see and make sense of bodies and embodied practices. In this section I have been arguing that obesity discourse acts as a form of governmentality that functions to construct the agentic subject as one
who chooses their own embodied identities and health-outcomes. These themes can be detected in Kyle’s narrative as he variously uses terms such as “motivation” and “inspired,” which are associated with a psychically core-self, to describe his relationship with his body, its size, and its health. From his narrative, we can deduce that Kyle is an “inspired” and highly “motivated” person, while others, especially those who are “slightly overweight,” are less motivated. Therefore, healthist discourses are productive of certain types of subjectivities (i.e. the more or less motivated) and thus the identity of the individual is bound to the shape and size of their body. From a Foucaultian perspective, Kyle’s “motivation” and “inspiration” are consistent with a self-governmentality where the individual produces themselves as a particular type of subject through submission to various disciplinary technologies, including practices of healthy eating and regular exercise. Robert Crawford (2006) observes that “health and qualities of personhood associated with its achievement are key metaphors traversing the moral terrain of contemporary societies” (p. 402). Thus, through health talk Kyle demonstrates his competence as a moral, rational, and autonomous subject, all key qualities of the neoliberal subject.

The subjectivity of the fat-Other, on the other hand, is assumed to stem from their reluctance or inability to submit to self-disciplining health practices. It would seem from Kyle’s narrative that the “overweight” individual lacks the will-power, as it were, to take control of his or her body and its health. Once again, however, Kyle’s deployment of dominant healthist discourses situates the self as in-control of one’s own health destiny while concealing the broader socio-cultural forces that shape bodies. He commented that the overweight person might be “okay with not being as healthy as I am” thereby
suggesting that health is a freely chosen embodiment. Although Kyle acknowledges that the fat subject position is not an easy position to occupy—an acknowledgement that could potentially lead to a questioning of the broader discursive relations that construct embodied experiences—he nonetheless falls back on a healthist discourse that understands the fat subject as lacking motivation and as presenting a health-risk to themselves. The manner in which Kyle takes up health discourse in understanding and constructing both his body as well as—and in relation to—other bodies is an example of how neoliberal rationale becomes further entrenched and stabilized.

Kyle uses health discourse as a means of distinguishing his “healthy” normatively sized body from the unhealthy-Other. Although he suggests that he is not going to “judge” or think of those who are “slightly overweight” as “pathetic”, he refers to those bodies as unattractive, unmotivated, uninspired, and ultimately, unhealthy. Health is a putatively neutral assessment of bodies, however, listening to Kyle’s narratives it is clear that health discourse operates as a technology for understanding bodies and the subjects that inhabit them. Thus, notions of health are powerful techniques by which the subject constitutes the healthy-self by distinguishing him-or herself from the unhealthy-Other. In Kyle’s narrative, the healthy, normatively sized body is constructed as rational, attractive, motivated, and inspired, while the unhealthy-Other is constructed as its polar opposite.

In a focus group at Lawson the fat individual was assumed to be a poor friend. The theme of “care of the self” came up again in response to the image on the cover of
the Bloodhound Gang’s album *Hefty*. Initially the group broke out in raucous laughter, but after some time settled down and the following discussion ensued.

Alex: Like if you worked out to hard for ah working out, maybe that guy should work out a bit harder.

Michael: Someone that doesn’t care for themselves.

Alex: You can tell based on that that they don’t care for their body.

Ted: What does that mean when they don’t care about their body?

Alex: Well, if they like, well if they can’t even take care of themselves than like could they take care of being a good friend or that, like where does all their time go if they don’t even have time to look after themselves?

Ted: What do others think of that?

Carl: Crazy! [Referring to the fat man in the picture]

Abe: Probably don’t respect themselves. He’s probably grown up that way, seriously, his parents probably…(FG#7_2, May 29, 2006, p. 22)

Practices of the self are constitutive of the self or, in other words, productive of a particular subjectivity. Thus, practices of slothfulness and gluttony, practices which were read onto the fat body, were deemed to be constitutive of a particular subject, one who is lazy, undependable, and ultimately disrespectful of both the self and others. Foucault writes that “one of the prime effects of power [is] that certain bodies, certain gestures, certain discourses, certain desires come to be identified and constituted as individuals” (cited in Hepburn, 1997, 30). In the above extract, the participants assumed that the visibility of the body—its shape and size, in this case—provided some profound insight into who the individual “really was”. The external appearance of the body was culturally constructed as providing information about the individual, about their will, their practices, their mental wellbeing, their inter-personal relationships, and so on.

Importantly, the relationship one has with themselves as measured through the shape and size of their body was, according to this group of young men, reflective of how

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90 The image comes from the *Bloodhound Gang’s* 2005 album *Hefty*. It is of an extremely fat, hairy, and seemingly naked man folded into a box that is too small for his large body. I selected this image because it reflected some of the popular music iconography of that time.
that person would interact with others. Research with younger children (9 years of age) has revealed that fat kids are stereotyped as lazy, stupid, unfit, dirty, unpopular, and dishonest (Hill and Silver, 1995). The present research revealed that older male youth also stereotyped fat people in similar ways, particularly as unworthy friends, a notion that can be witnessed in the preceding narrative. In a subsequent focus group, I returned to the theme of the fat person being an unworthy friends.

Ted: Alex, you raised this idea that if a person doesn’t take care of their body than how are they going to take care of other things in their lives, particularly their friends?
Alex: Well, kinda like...I don’t know, jus’ kinda gives you an idea...that tells you about someone who is overweight.
Abe: Yeah, people have that little saying thing that “People respect you when you respect yourself”. The Golden Rule, or whatever.
Alex: So, “Do onto others...” [Struggles to recall]
Ted: “Do onto other as you would do onto yourself”
Alex: Yeah.
Luke: If you don’t have the will-power to take care of yourself than how are you going to take care of your friends? (FG#7_2, May 29, 2006, p. 3)

In this exchange, the fat body is narrated through a moral lens. Health discourse, and obesity discourse in particular, preaches “right” and “wrong” lifestyle choices and thus can be considered as a “moral technology” (McDermott, 2007). As I argued above, the participants took up a neoliberal governmental discourse in their suggestion that body size and shape reflect certain lifestyle “choices”, and therefore one’s body is indicative of the self who occupies it, and the “choices” that self has made in their embodied production. Embodiment is thus a moral production, with the fat, uncared for body being reflective of a bad person, one who is unable to garner the willpower to take care of the self. According to the logic of the participants, if the self is unable to care for the self, it is unlikely that they will be able to care for others, specifically in the form of friendship either. The participants draw upon moral clichés and religious catechisms (i.e. “Do onto
yourself…) in order to build their arguments. Healthfulness, Lupton (1995) argues, “has replaced ‘Godliness’” (p. 4) as the standard for moral living. Nowhere was this more apparent than in the statements of this group of mostly white young men as they argued that it was the moral responsibility of the individual to look after themselves as a condition of being a good, moral, and thus “healthy” person. Within a neoliberal context, where the individual is constructed as rational, free, and responsible for their own self and wellbeing, that the fat body could be understood as reflective of morally lacking selfhood.

Within the contemporary context, where moral and ideological constructions of fatness have secured legitimacy through their biomedicalization in “obesity epidemic” discourse (Gard and Wright, 2005), the fat person is culturally represented as a particular type of person, one who is greedy, inconsiderate, unreliable, and lazy. Obesity discourse entrench moralistic evaluations of the fat body as reflective of a negative relationship with the self by perpetuating the notion of the fat body as a risk to both him- or herself as well as to the social body (Campos, 2004; Gard and Wright, 2005; McDermott, 2007). Peter Kelly (2000) comments that youth-at-risk discourses—which others have argued obesity discourse is an example of (see Burrows and Wright, 2004; Gard and Wright, 2005; McDermott, 2007)—“situate youth as at-risk of jeopardizing, through present behaviours and dispositions, desired futures” (p. 468) of both the individual as well as the population more generally. The argument against obesity, on the one hand, suggests that fat kids are going to grow up to be fat adults with all sorts of health complications. On the other hand, however, fat people are not just a health risk to themselves but also to the welfare state more generally because their obesity will lead to ongoing health
complications that will cost the health care system (see Critser, 2004 for an illustration of this argument).

Discourses of this sort are blaming discourses that operate on the assumption that the individual has the material, cultural, and symbolic means available to act on their bodies to produce the self in a particular way. For example, research has demonstrated that socio-economic background (Campos, 2004), geographic location (Longhurst, 2005a), and ethno-cultural and racialized groups (Massara, 1997; Wright and Burrows, 2004) all influence body weight. These mitigating factors, however, are excluded from the equation in “obesity epidemic” discourse, and body size assumes the status of a lifestyle choice (Campos, 2004, 2006; Gard and Wright, 2001, 2005). Such a discursive construction of the fat body operationalizes a narrative of the fat man as lazy and gluttonous—as engaging in unhealthy practices of the self—as opposed to one that takes into account the socio-historic specificities in which the individual is immersed. Moreover, there is little consideration within healthist informed obesity discourse of how the biomedicalization of fatness itself is constructed as a biomedical problem and social pathology and the effects this has on how people experience and live out their fat identities (Braziel and LeBesco, 2001; Rice, 2007; Rich and Evans, 2005).

“Care of the self” is a technology of self-production where the individual voluntarily internalizes the “norms governing appropriate behaviour in the interests of achieving the best possible self” (Lupton and Tulloch, 1998, p. 19). In other words, “care of the self” involves simultaneously submitting to prevailing codes of self-conduct as a means of gaining mastery as an agentic subject. The process whereby the subject simultaneously submits to healthist discourses as the condition of their possibility as an
agentic self, a paradox which Michael Foucault labels subjectification, can be witnessed in the narratives of the young men as they talked about their production of a healthy-self in individualist terms of “will-power”, “motivation”, and “heart”. All of these terms connote an agentic subject, but this subject, Foucault argues, only comes into being through the wilfull submission to prevailing healthist discourses. Bronwyn Davies (2006) suggests that the disavowal of dependency on external power relations is a constitutive condition of the agentic subject. For her,

the agentic subject disavows this dependency, not out of a flawed capacity for reflexivity, but because the achievement of autonomy, however illusory it might be, is necessary for the accomplishment of oneself as a recognisable and viable subject. (p. 427)

The “motivation” to produce oneself as a healthy-subject, the young men argued, emanates from a core psychological self, not external pressures to meet normative bodily ideals.

The repudiation of external forces in the production of a healthy self was evident in the comments of Alex from Lawson. The focus group discussion was winding down and I asked the group if they had anything else to contribute.

Ted: Okay, it’s almost one o’clock so I think I’m gonna leave it there. Does anybody else have anything they want to add?
Alex: Um, just that how my body looks doesn’t really matter that much to me ‘cause ah I don’t really care what other people think of me. The only reason I would want to change my body is what I thought of myself.
Abe: Yeah, take care of yourself [In response to my question]. (FG#7_1, May 26, 2006, p. 23)

These comments were telling in that they come at the end of an hour-long focus group session where we looked at and discussed various mediated images of bodies. The conversation focused on themes of normalcy, average, disgusting, and beauty, to name a few. Foucaultian analysis recognizes that the categorization of bodies into “normal” and
“disgusting,” for example, are not neutral designations, but rather are power relations that compel particular performativities (Butler, 1993), and thus are productive of certain subjectivities. In other words, the narrative categorization of bodies is embedded in a set of power relations that have effects on material bodies. Alex, however, renounced these constitutive power relations as a means of reiteratively performing his status as a free-willed and self-knowing agent by suggesting that it was only his self-knowledge and desires that would motivate him to change his body. In so doing, Alex disavows the complex power relations—including normative constructions of gender, beauty, race, and health—that are constitutive forces in his self formation. In short, Alex’s comments serve to forcibly materialize the myth of the humanist subject as preceding and standing at the centre of discourse.

Alex’s repudiation of the constitutive grid of power relations that lay outside of the self was not only formative of his agentic subjectivity, but was also productive of his masculine subjectivity. Feminist scholars suggest that western ontology is structured around a mind/body dualism, where the mind is associated with the masculine and constructed as rational, reasoned, and in control, while the body is understood as the feminine and characterized as irrational, chaotic, and in need of control (Bordo, 1993; Grosz, 1994; Pronger, 2002). The masculine subject, therefore, comes into being through a disavowal and transcendence of its embodied existence, which is accomplished through projecting embodiment onto the feminine-Other (Thomas, 1996). Alex’s comments follow shortly after Michael had characterized “girls” as being easily influenced by mediated images of normatively slender beauty ideals. Thus, Alex argues that “how his body looks doesn’t really matter that much,” which serves to distance himself from the
“girls” that were characterized as mindlessly desiring after socially constructed beauty ideals.\(^{91}\) If gender identities are relationally constructed (Butler, 1990; Connell, 2005), than Alex’s disembodied rationality is stabilized through the projection of an embodied irrationality onto the feminine-Other (Grosz, 1994). Thus, the dominant cultural construction of girls and women as vulnerable to media ideals serves as a relational point of reference by which boys and men can differentiate themselves as more individualistic, autonomous, and free-willed as compared to their female peers\(^{92}\).

“Care of the self” was also conceptualized in terms of a contest with the self. During a focus group discussion at Lawson, Misha explained that “taking care of the self” had little to do with the opinions of others and everything to do with competing with the self to make the self the “best you can”.

\(^{91}\) Evans et al. (2002) provide an excellent critique of reductive accounts of eating disorders that situate the problem almost exclusively in mediated images of ultra-thin bodies. They suggest that an exclusive focus on the media not only presents young women as mindless cultural dupes, but also deflects attention from more subtle but pervasive cultural contributors to disordered eating, such as an over-emphasis on excellence, control of the body, and unequal gender relations. What is interesting to me is that several of the focus groups spoke about how they had learned in their Health Education classes at school that young women were susceptible to images of unrealistically thin bodies in the media. Indeed, while such lessons may be intended to “educate” young men on the dangers of femininity, it potentially has the unintended effect of teaching them that their female peers are naïve, easily influenced, and media illiterate. Ironically, this may end up perpetuating the very gender imbalances that contribute to eating disorders (Bordo, 1993) by naturalizing the notion of “women” as irrational, out-of-control, and irreducibly embodied (Grosz, 1994).

\(^{92}\) I think there is a significant pedagogical point to be made here. By chronically focusing on how girls and women are disempowered by “disciplinary technologies of femininity” (Bartky, 1988), while paying comparably less attention to the disciplinary technologies that boys and men are subjected to (Shogan, 1999), scholars run the risk of perpetuating the notion that girls and women are weak, vulnerable, and at-risk, whereas boys are constructed as free, rational, and independent—cultural constructions that do not serve our general understanding of gender relations particularly well. Instead, I am more interested in nuanced studies that examine how males and females are subjected to different disciplinary technologies that insert them into hierarchies of privilege and oppression (see Shogan, 1999; Wright, O’Flynn, and MacDonald, 2006). In terms of pedagogy, it is important that our health education classes start teaching how masculinity is also forcibly compelled through power knowledge relations, albeit in the production of different subject positions, so that boys and men are not by default constructed as autonomous and free subjects as compared to their oppressed and vulnerable female counterparts. I want to be careful that my argument is not confused with one of “competing marginalities” (Fellows and Razack, 1998) where the oppression of boys and men are pit against the oppressions of girls and women but, again, is to argue that we need to gain a better understanding of how both genders are performatively materialized through complex and interwoven power relations and the implications these materializations have for gender dynamics in schools, health discourse, athletics, etc.
Ted: Do you buy that body image is that important?
Collin: No.
Misha: Well, um, not really, like, um, there are things that you can’t really change [about your body and health], but um like in terms of fitness and taking care of yourself, than yeah, I guess it is important for yourself. But it’s not important what other people think of you. It’s more fun to sort of compete with yourself and try and make yourself look the best you can in terms of physical shape, make you feel the best you can. (FG#2_2, Nov. 9, 2006, p. 2)

Michel Foucault (1988) argues that the “truth” of the self is increasingly found in all manners of measuring, testing, and evaluating the self against the self. He writes that “the task of testing oneself, monitoring oneself in a series of clearly defined exercises, makes the question of the truth—the truth concerning what one is, what one does, and what one is capable of doing—central to the formation of the ethical subject” (p. 68). Here, it is not that the subject is being forcibly subjected to technologies of domination, as Foucault articulated in his disciplinary writings (see Foucault, 1977), but that the subject actually takes up the self as a project to be worked at, monitored, measured, and thus produced. The “true” self, that core-psychically individuated self that humanist discourses maintain is the cornerstone of the rational, civilized subject, is presumably to be found through self-competition.

Misha disavows the importance of a broader social context to the emergent self, suggesting instead that the self is rooted in the games of truth with the self in the formation of oneself as a subject. One of the prime games of truth of the self, particularly for the masculine subject (Wright, O’Flynn, and MacDonald, 2006), is to be found in exercise, fitness, sport and, more generally, health. Here, the subject comes to know and produce the self through a series of fitness and health-related practices. However, not every individual has equal access to cultural or material resources (Davies, 2000;
Donnelly and Coakley, 2004) and thus neither do they have an equal opportunity to produce themselves as a particular and culturally privileged type of self. Thus, discourses of healthism are constitutive of particular types of subjectivities—the more or less healthy, the more or less fit, for example—and these subjectivities are likewise associated with presumed “truths” about the subject, “truths” that do not take into account the discursive relations or socio-historic specificities that forcibly materialize these subjectivities.

In this section, I have shown how narratives of “care of the self” were used by the participants in the construction of neoliberal governmental health subjectivities. The participants narratively presented an autonomous, rational, self-governing subject at the centre of health discourse. They argued that the subject was responsible for constructing a healthy self which consisted of producing oneself as normatively sized and shaped. Individuals that failed to take up the project of producing a normative body were constructed as depressive, unmotivated, uninspired, and unworthy of friendship. From the narratives of the participants it is possible to see how obesity discourse does not merely characterize a “real” health crisis, but at the same time provides a set of discursive resources by which young men see, think about, and experience their own bodies as well as the bodies of others. I highlighted how health discourse generally, and obesity discourse more specifically, are neither neutral nor necessarily beneficial, but operated as a set of normalized and normalizing cultural representations that powerfully shaped the

93 There are a growing number of scholars who challenge the “truth” claims of the “obesity epidemic” (see Aphramor, 2005; Campos, 2004, 2006; Gard and Wright, 2005; Oliver, 2005). While I think these critiques raise compelling questions about the “reality” of the “obesity epidemic,” my objective in this section is not to come down on one side or the other of the “obesity” debate, but rather to investigate the discursive meanings that the “obesity epidemic” puts into circulation and the effects these have on the way individuals see and understand their own bodies and the bodies of others.
embodied subjectivities of the young men involved in the present research. Finally, the present research supports the conclusions of McDermott (2007) and Petersen (1997) that risk discourse—which obesity discourse is—serves as a governmental technology where individuals are compelled to take responsibility for their own health biographies. This was evident in the present research in that seldom did the participants acknowledge broader social structural forces that might impact the individual’s ability to take up and practice health technologies of the self. The lack of critical insight into the complex socio-cultural and structural factors that influence body size and shape in the narratives together with the manner in which the participants took up narratives of self-control, empowerment, and responsibility, demonstrates that obesity discourse and the ways of being it makes possible are indeed neoliberal governmental technologies of the self. In the following section I explore how the participants took up health and body discourses in their articulation of parents, particularly mothers, as key agents in the construction of neoliberal governmental subjects.

**Parental Responsibility for the Self**

While the discourse of “care of the self” both autonomizes and responsibilizes individuals, the participants were clear that children and to a lesser extent adolescents were not fully responsible for the health and wellbeing of their bodies. Children and youth are, after all, “adults in becoming” (Lesko, 2001; Kelly, 2000; 2001) and thus can not be expected to be fully responsible for themselves. Thus, the participants narratively constructed parents as playing a central role in both guiding children and youth towards adulthood as well as acting as “keepers” of their children’s bodies until they reached maturity. Lisette Burrows and Jan Wright (2004) suggest that the moral panic initiated by
the “obesity epidemic” has simultaneously constructed children as innocent victims of, for example, media technologies and neglectful parents, at the same time that it constructs them as a risk to both themselves and publicly funded health care systems as a result of high health-care costs of obesity-related illnesses. Obesity discourse therefore has situated the family on the frontline in the war against obesity. The family is targeted with the responsibility of the health and well-being of children, and this is particularly pronounced in relation to overweight and obesity where health experts inform us that early role-modeling and surveillance are factors that mitigate against overweight and obesity in later life (Burrows and Wright, 2004). Hence, the “proliferation of health risks associated with childhood has contributed to a burgeoning attachment of discourses of blame and responsibility to families” (Burrows and Wright, 2004, 90). The family is thus transformed into a “pedagogic family” (Burrows and Wright, 2004) where parents are increasingly incited to reinvent themselves as experts engaged in the surveillance, correction, control, and regulation of their children’s bodies. However, there is a distinct gendered division of labour when it comes to locating the “blame” for overweight and obesity of children, as the responsibility for child-rearing within a patriarchal culture falls disproportionately on the shoulders of mothers (Bell and Valentine, 1997; Burrows and Wright, 2004). The theme of parental responsibility for the body weight of their children consistently came up throughout the focus groups.

94 The notion of young people’s health being the responsibility of parents reached its pinnacle in the popular reality television show Honey We’re Killing the Kids (2006). In this series, expert dieticians and fitness trainers would assess the lifestyles of individual families and prescribe new parenting techniques, usually involving more discipline, healthier foods, less sedentary activities, such as video games and television, and more physical activity. According to the premise of this show, parents occupied the frontline on the “war on obesity”.
During a focus group discussion at Lawson it was evident that the young men did not feel that they were entirely responsible for their health, but that their parents also had a stake in their health practices, particularly those related to eating. The notion that children and youth are not solely responsible for the size, shape, and overall health of their bodies seems to go against a healthist discourse that compels individuals to “care for the self”. However, given that children and youth are culturally constructed as not yet fully individuated (Lesko, 2001), as less-than-adult, the notion of parents governing over the health and wellbeing of their children seems to make sense. The notion of parents as “keepers” of their children’s wellbeing was a prominent one throughout the focus groups. This is reflected in the following exchange where the participants discuss one of the photos they had taken with their disposable cameras (see Appendix C5). The image is of Noah’s, a health food store on Bloor Street.

Edward: And then Noah’s, vitamins, supplements, and health food, um, well it’s a health food store.
Ted: Have you ever been to Noah’s?
Edward: No.
Ronald: I’ve heard of people going there. [Group laughs]
Marty: That’s up to the parents to do. They do places like that.
Ted: Do your parents shop in health food places like that?
Ronald: Um, not really, just normal grocery stores like Loblaws.
Marty: Well, yeah and they usually have all the vitamins and stuff in those stores.
(FG #1_3, Jan. 19, 2006, p. 2)

Running through this narrative is the construction of youth as a state of “adults in becoming” (Lesko, 2001) where young people need the rational, health-oriented guidance of their parents to ensure their health, proper maturation and growth. In several focus groups, the participants referred to health food stores as feminine spaces (FG#1_3, Jan. 19, 2006; FG#7_2, May 29, 2006). Boys and men, the participants argued, did not worry about what they ate. In fact, they went so far as to suggest that worrying about what one
ate was both a feminine and feminizing practice. Moreover, on different occasions they argued that worrying about healthy eating was the responsibility of adults (FG#6_2, May 10, 2006). Boys and young men, they put forward, eat with “reckless abandon” (Bordo, 1993), and that this is a constitutive condition of being both male and young. However, parents, particularly mothers, are responsible for worrying about their children’s bodies.

The notion of a mother’s responsibility for looking after their children’s body was particularly apparent during a focus group at Lawson. I asked the group about the notion of “care of the self” and the participants articulated the role that mothers occupy in helping them look after themselves.

Ted: You guys talked about “taking care of himself”. You said this guy, the guy in the box, doesn’t take care of himself. What do you mean by “taking care of himself”?96
Luke: He doesn’t watch his weight.
Ted: So do you guys take care of yourselves?
Robert: Yeah, I do.
Alex: My mom takes care of me. [Group breaks into laughter]
Ted: So your mom takes care of you?
Alex: I’m jus’ kidding.
Abe: It helps.
Michael: Um-hm, they do.
Carl: Mine does.
Luke: They make your supper, so they kinda have some control on your diet.
Abe: His mom helps him.
Alex: Yeah, my mom doesn’t make me chocolate for dinner, although that would be nice. [Group laughs]
Carl: That’s breakfast. [Group laughs again]
Abe: Yeah.
Alex: They make sure you’re eating the right stuff and all that.
Ted: Does your mom make you do exercise?

95 It is important to note that the notion of men not worrying about what they eat was fluid and shifting across the various within and across the various focus group sessions. I argue elsewhere (see Ch. #7 Masculinity and Health and Body Discourses) that young men face a double bind when it comes to worrying about and working on their bodies. While it is evident from the preceding narratives that the young men do think and worry about the size and shape of their bodies, this concern must always be balanced against the dominant masculine imperative to present the self as disembodied unconcerned about one’s body.
96 Image from the album cover of the Bloodhound Gang’s “Hefty Fine”.
Alex: Well, we’re not allowed to play video games for more than like an hour a day. Well, we’re not supposed to play video games for more than an hour. [Alex’s intonation is ironic which is suggestive that he plays more than an hour a day]

Abe: She likes us, she likes us to go outside. She doesn’t like it when we stay inside for a really long time. [Long Pause] She’s a clean freak.

Ted: She’s a clean freak?  

Abe: Yeah. (FG#7_2, May 29, 2006, p. 2)

Although Alex, Abe, Carl, and Michael acknowledged the role their mothers play in looking after their health and wellbeing, their laughter indicates a discomfort at their articulation of this positioning. Nancy Lesko (2001) argues that adolescents occupy what she refers to as a state of liminality or in-betweeness, where they are not quite adults but neither children. To be dependent on one’s mother, to be fed, told what to do, in short, to be disciplined and regulated by “mom”, are all characteristics of childhood. The participants sought to distance themselves from this positioning with laughter. Nevertheless, it was apparent that the labour of their mother’s was crucial to their sense of themselves as healthy subjects.

Within the above exchange it might be more appropriate to look at “childhood” not as a chronological age, psychical or physiological state of development, but as a technology or a set of power/knowledge relations that inscribes, conditions, and disciplines the body. The participants drew upon a technology of childhood in their articulations of children as not fully matured, dependent, and in need of adult surveillance and discipline. The technology of childhood inter-locks with the “technology of motherhood,” where a mother’s ethical self is reflected in her family or, in this case, the body size and shape of her children. The narratives of the young men would seem to indicate that the imperative to “care for the self” is a gendered and aged imperative.

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Abe later explains that his mother likes them to play outside so they do not mess up the house. Thus, it is not solely for physical activity that Abe’s mom sends him outside to play.
Unlike the fat adult man who was expected to take care of himself\textsuperscript{98}, the young men acknowledged that their mothers also have control over their dietary and physical activity practices. This is significant because it exposes important limitations to the fully individuated neoliberal subject that is at the centre of health discourse. In this case, these limitations were played out in relation to chronological age where, because of the discursive construction of childhood and adolescence as a less than adult state (Lesko, 2001), the young men suggested that they were not to be held solely responsible for their health practices. Instead, in important ways their mothers were also to be held accountable for ensuring the proper eating and exercise habits of the young men. In this way, mothers are doubly bound by normative body size ideals where, they are simultaneously compelled to achieve the feminine slender ideal of a “body that is absolutely tight, contained, and ‘bolted down’” (Bordo, 1993, p. 90; Dworkin and Wachs, 2009) for themselves, while also regulating, disciplining, and surveilling their children’s practices so as to ensure that their bodies maintain normative “healthy” weights. Thus, mothers not only have to meet normative feminine beauty standards\textsuperscript{99}, but at the same time they have to meet their obligations as responsible child-rearing agents.

The association between parental responsibility (i.e. mother’s responsibility) and children’s health was even more powerfully stated during a different focus group with the young men at Lawson.

\textsuperscript{98} Several authors have noted how the fat male body is often represented in infantilizing ways (Gilman, 2004; Mosher, 2001). The inability of the adult fat male subject to take control of his body, to literally contain himself, indicates for the participants a self that has not fully matured.

\textsuperscript{99} Interestingly, the participants seldom spoke about their father’s in relation to healthy eating practices. Several participants, however, did speak about the role their father’s played in their physical activity practices. In this way, the participants articulated gendered roles when it came to guidance and direction in embodied health practices. However, there may also be a social class and ethno-racial distinction at play here. For instance, several of the participants from Pinevale came from single-mother homes. One participant, John, often spoke about his mother’s role in encouraging his athletics as well as his healthy eating practices.
Ted: Who’s responsible for taking care of your body?
Carl: You.
Luke: You are.
Michael: At this age?
Ted: Okay.
Michael: Well, I dunno, like when you’re a young kid your parents are kinda the one’s that get you doin’ stuff and keepin’ you busy. If I had a choice, sure I would watch two hours of TV, but I didn’t always have a choice. You’re not lazy and outta shape because you have to run around outside.
Abe: Exactly.
Michael: So, yeah, it’s kind of our parents mostly.
Abe: They also decide when you eat and what you eat.
Ted: And does that change as you get older do you think?
Abe: Well, yeah, your mom’s not going to call you and tell what to eat when you move out.
Carl: That would be funny. (FG#7_2, May 29, 2006, pp. 3-4)

In this extract, the adolescent body was constructed as less-than the neoliberal subject or, perhaps more appropriately, the self-governing neoliberal subject in becoming. In their narratives, the mother played a crucial role in guiding her children in this direction. Unlike the neoliberal subject, who has a range of possibilities available to him or her and the “freedom” to select between these options (Foucault, 1982; Smart, 2002), Alex presented a situation where his choices were truncated by his mother. As others have argued, obesity discourse serves to legitimize a context where children’s bodies are monitored, assessed, surveilled, disciplined, and regulated (Gard and Wright, 2005; McDermott, 2007), and mothers are increasingly charged with the responsibility of such tasks (Burrows and Wright, 2004). It is, therefore, the responsible mother who takes up the position of regulating and ensuring that her children achieve and maintain a normative body size and shape. By constructing children as at-risk and in need of expert and pseudo-expert (i.e. parental) intervention, obesity discourse serves to further entrench the cultural construction of children as dependent, vulnerable, and out of control. Similarly, parents and mothers in particular, are constructed as more than just
“caregivers”, but “caretakers” of their children’s bodies. The young men in the present research used available cultural resources to simultaneously construct their selfhood as out of control and in need of discipline, while constructing their mothers as controlling, disciplining “caretakers” of their wellbeing. From the narratives of the participants it is possible to see how adolescence and motherhood are mutually constitutive identity categories.

The identity categories “motherhood” and “adolescence” were discursively compelled practices that were constitutive of particular subjectivities. Parents, for example, who practice “good” parenting skills by controlling and regulating the dietary and exercise regimes of their children were “good” parents while, on the other hand, those who do not aggressively intervene in their children’s lives were “bad” parents. Moral evaluations of parenting practices are actually constitutive of parental identity and, in this case, it is assumed that one can interpret “good” and “bad” parents from the body size and shape of their children. From this it clear how under the auspices of “health” technologies of power have infiltrated family life reconstructing not only notions of childhood and youth, but also parenting and parenthood (Burrows and Wright, 2004).

Indeed, this is a problematic association when you consider that not all parents/mothers have the same material and cultural resources to gain control and transform their children’s body into culturally normative and supposedly “healthy” shapes and sizes.

**Bringing the Social Back In**

The topic of money, food, and parental responsibility was prominent in the focus groups with the young men from the Pinevale Community Centre. Unlike the young men from Lawson, the youth from Pinevale were from lower socio-economic family
 backgrounds. All of the young men involved in the focus group discussion below were first generation Canadians, many from either single parent homes or in situations where the family was split between Canada and their birth country. Within this context, notions of eating, parental responsibility, and health were embedded in economic and ethno-cultural concerns and thus had very different meanings than those expressed within the middle-class focus groups found at Lawson. Below, I track the inter-related themes of eating, socio-economic status, ethno-cultural identity, and parenting across one focus group and two interviews to get at the rich social meanings that are inscribed in a seemingly innocuous activity such as eating.

Ted: Okay, and umm do you guys eat out often? Do you eat out often?
Ajay: Like what kind of food?
Ted: Like anything you’re not eating at home?
Jamie: Nah, look at his bones, look at his hands, do you think he eats out much?
[Jamie is speaking about Ajay who is widely considered by his peers to be too skinny.]
Ajay: I eat pizza.
Omar: He goes to a breakfast program every morning for free breakfast.
Jamal: [Giggles at this comment].
Ajay: Exactly! Okay, Omar you do that too, so chill!
Omar: No!
Ted: He goes where, sorry?
Ajay: My parents don’t make me food and I don’t want to make food so I jus’ go there to eat.
Omar: Relax [Laughing hard at Ajay’s reaction to this comment. From Omar’s perspective, this comment clearly had the desired affect.]
Ajay: So Omar, why are you laughin’, you go there too!
Omar: I know, but not as often as you. [Still laughing]

Given that I did not directly ask the participants questions related to their class status, it was difficult to determine with precision their social class background. However, several of the participants from Lawson shared that their parents occupied white collar professional jobs (i.e. lawyers, doctors, university professors etc.). Furthermore, during a focus that followed March Break, several of the participants shared stories about traveling to Europe, Florida, and British Columbia for family vacations during the break. These factors, coupled with the high tuition costs at Lawson led me to categorize them as “middle class”. In contrast, the participants from Pinevale were explicitly concerned about money. Many of them were from single-parent families and several of them were already working multiple jobs to help pay for their athletic participation. Moreover, the Pinevale Community Centre is located in Pennington, a Toronto neighbourhood that is commonly referred to as a low income neighbourhood. Once again, based on these factors I deduced that the young men from the Pinevale were from a lower social class background.
Ajay: Are you stupid?
Omar: You go every day! [Omar is screaming].
Ajay: Are you on marijuana? This kid’s on marijuana!
Ted: What’s wrong with going to the breakfast program?
Ajay: I don’t know, it’s healthy.
Jamie: It’s poor, yo.
Ajay: Yeah, I’m poor, okay I’m poor, end of story, okay I’m poor! [Ajay is quite agitated by this comment and the discussion more generally]
Omar: No you’re not, dis frickin’ guy’s rich.
Ajay: Sure, I’m poor!
Sean: An’ dat’s why you said you have eighty-nine dollars.
Ajay: I don’t have eighty-nine dollars, I have three dollars. [Ajay is now Laughing]
Ted: Do you guys go to the breakfast program? [Directed at Sean and Jamie]
Jamie: No! Our breakfast program is to buy breakfast, we don’t get it for free. (FG#4_3, Mar.8, 2006, pp. 29-30)

The breakfast program was associated with poverty and was clearly stigmatized by these young men. Although the breakfast program offered healthy options, as Ajay notes, it was labeled as “poor” by Omar, and thus was constructed as an undesirable program to be associated with. There are complex social and cultural factors that contribute to eating patterns, as can witnessed in this exchange. The socio-cultural factors influencing eating practices were even more pronounced as the conversion progressed. Omar led the group in criticizing Ajay for not taking the initiative to prepare breakfast for himself.

Collectively the group started to give Ajay life-lessons in how to take of oneself.

Sean: Like help yourself, get up, get yourself something to eat without your mom helping you.
Ajay: Like what, like what then? […] In de mornin’, no, I can’t do dat, yo.
Sean: Why?
Ajay: I’m just tired, yo.
Omar: You don’t have independence. (FG#4_3, Mar. 8, 2006, p. 29)

In this exchange, Ajay was infantilized for not being able to “care for the self”. His inability to prepare breakfast for himself demonstrates his lack of “independence”. Thus, the participants constructed Ajay as less than a fully individuated neoliberal subject.
Taking care of the self was constructed as a central component in the process of constituting oneself as a proper self-governing neoliberal subject.

In an interview with Omar, I approached the topic of the breakfast program again.

Ted: One of the other things I wanted to ask you about was, um, you and Ajay got into this heated discussion about the breakfast program. You were buggin’ Ajay about going to the breakfast program and he got pretty upset about it.

Omar: Well, I don’t know, dis guy lies. He’s like he goes to de…like if you go to my school…he’s like he goes because his mom don’t cook ‘em food. So I’m like “Why would you say dat?” and he’s jus’ like “It’s true though”. So I said dat ‘cause I was jus’ makin’ a joke out of it an’ he starts to get angry. So I’m like okay, it’s true, I been dere, like I go ‘cause like when I wake up I wake up like seven, by eight o’clock I’m ready to leave an’ by de time I try to make my breakfast it’s too late so I go dere ‘cause it’s already made an’ it’s jus’ waitin’. Plus, like, when I’m eatin’ I don’t concentrate at de time an’ when I go dere, dey tell you de time, how much time you have left [until school starts].

Ted: Why wouldn’t you, why, what’s wrong with Baki sayin’ his mom doesn’t make him breakfast?

Omar: [Long pause] I dunno, it’s like sayin’ she doesn’t love him.

Ted: Is that right?

Omar: Yeah, it’s right that your mom cooks for yea’.

Ted: Why’s that?


During the research process at Pinevale it was evident that life circumstances impacted a mother’s ability to fulfill dominant cultural expectations that compel her to feed and nurture her children as a constitutive performative of her being a good and “loving” mother. For instance, Ajay explained that his mother worked at six o’clock in the morning and therefore her work schedule prevented her from making breakfast.

Similarly, Omar’s parents were separated and his “real” mom was living in Los Angeles. His “step mom” refused to make breakfast for him anymore because, according to her, he was “too old”. Omar went on to explain that he, like Ajay, does not make breakfast for himself and uses the breakfast program. However, unlike Ajay, Omar would never
suggest that his mom did not make him breakfast because this would give the wrong
impression about home life. He explains,

Ted: So, you go to the breakfast program, but you wouldn’t say that out
loud?
Omar: No, ’cause I’m not, like, I don’t, like I said de way you carry
yourself. Like, I don’t…people don’t…dey don’t tell you de real things dat
happen in deir homes. Like my mom would make me breakfast, but she
lives in Los Angeles and my step mom makes her son breakfast and I’m
too old so I have to make it.
Ted: How old’s your step brother?
Omar? He’s three. (Omar Int. #4, June 8, 2006, pp. 18-19)

There are two broad points that are worth highlighting from these exchanges. The first is
the degree to which factors outside of individual choice and lifestyle, factors such as
poverty, single parent families, ethno-cultural diversity, and stigmatization of eating
practices and spaces converge to structure health practices, including how we eat, what
we eat, and where we eat. Secondly, not only is the discursive construction of “mother as
caregiver” prominent in the preceding excerpts, but so too is it evident how the
performance of this subject position is not universally available to all mothers, but rather
is contingent on a variety of factors such as social class, marital status, and geopolitical
patterns of migration, for example.

Michael Gard and Jan Wright (2005) suggest that “obesity science has given very
little consideration to the reasons why people might organize their lives differently
around priorities other than exercise and diet” (p. 124). These priorities need to be taken
into consideration before using universal and supposedly objective health measures, such
as those embedded in “obesity epidemic” discourse, to moralistically judge the health
practices of differently situated individuals. From the preceding narratives, it is evident
that health considerations are not always top priority in the food decisions that
individuals make on a daily basis. Factors such as age, single-parenthood, access to money, and social stigma shaped the eating habits of the young men. The individualism that lies at the heart of obesity informed health discourses more often than not fail to take into account the various social, cultural, and material complexities that shape individuals relationships with food and exercise, but rather repeat reductive directives for individuals to eat less and/or healthier and engage in more exercise. From the preceding narratives, however, it would seem more productive for health campaigns to target those barriers that impede some individuals from sharing in “freely” chosen healthy lifestyles. Indeed, such a campaign would not only target poverty itself, but the social stigma that accompanies it that marginalizes those people that use social assistance programs, such as the “breakfast program”. At the same time, the campaign would have to challenge patriarchal constructions of “mothers as caregivers” by actively and sincerely considering the social class, ethno-cultural background, and diverse family positions that women find themselves.

Not all women have the cultural and material resources to normatively fulfill the “mother as caregiver/taker” subject position. Nor for that matter, should the ethno-cultural specificity of the white, middle-class ideal of motherhood be overlooked. There is, indeed, a culturally privileged way of rearing children in our western context, but these practices must not be understood as the only way, nor the best way, of raising children. Regardless, however, these health practices are normatively constructed as privileged, and as we can see from Omar’s comments, mothers who diverge from these practices are considered somehow deficient and run the risk of being characterized as not caring for their children. Thus, child-rearing practices are not merely associated with
“right” and “wrong” techniques, but rather mothering practices are embedded in moral assumptions about a mother’s love, duty, and care, moral assumptions which compel particular performances and, at the same time, are constitutive of particular subjectivities (i.e., good versus bad mothers). Omar draws upon the discursive construction of motherhood to make sense of both his own family situation as well as that of Ajay’s. In this way, broader discourses of “mother as caregiver” are taken up and deployed in the young men’s narratives as a way of understanding, thinking about, and experiencing their own family situations and, as we can see from the exchange between Omar and Ajay, these discursive articulations can be quite painful. In this regard, my research supports Michael Gard and Jan Wright’s (2005) conclusion that “in the name of ‘protecting’ children from obesity, policies and practices are emerging that seem to be completely counter to the emotional well-being of children and damaging to the relationship between parents and children” (p. 185).

Obesity discourse must consider the different circumstances that families find themselves in as a way of challenging the homogenizing cultural imperatives that forcibly structure “motherhood”. Ajay, for example, is the eldest of three children. Ten years ago, when Ajay was six, Ajay, his mother, and two sisters immigrated to Canada from Sri Lanka while his father continued to work in Sri Lanka. Shortly before his fifteenth birthday Ajay’s family was reunited. For ten years Ajay’s mom worked a job and looked after her three children without the presence of her husband. Although it was not entirely clear whether Ajay’s family was “poor,” what was clear was that his mother was a very busy woman with many responsibilities. Thus, it was hardly surprising that she might not have time to make Ajay breakfast in the morning, and a “breakfast program” may help to
alleviate some of her burden as a relatively recently immigrated single-mother looking after three children.

It was also clear that Ajay’s mother placed a great deal of value on work, whether out of necessity or in the interests of cultivating a rigorous work ethic in Ajay. Regardless, at fifteen years of age Ajay was expected to work two jobs, which Ajay suggested interfered with his ability to play basketball. His sport was further disrupted by his mother’s commitment to the family’s Tamil ethnicity as she enrolled Ajay in “Tamil school” on Saturdays, something that Ajay quite resented. Furthermore, Ajay complained that his mother did not support his basketball and worried about him staying out late at the recreation centre and hanging out with black kids who, in her popular news media-informed opinion, caused most of the violence in the area (Int. #1, May 2, 2006). An outsider could easily say that Ajay’s mother neglects her “motherly” duties by not preparing meals for Ajay, as Omar suggested, and by not forcing him to play sports as opposed to other, more sedentary activities, as Michael in an earlier narrative argued. However, this was not an irresponsible mother that does not care for her child just because she does not rigorously adhere to white, middle-class health discourses that compel her to control her children’s eating and regulate their exercise. Rather, her care was expressed through different priorities, such as Ajay’s safety, the preservation of his Tamil ethnicity, and the cultivation of a strong work ethic. While her priorities may not align with a middle-class, white Canadian ideal of “motherhood”, they were nonetheless priorities that were at their core caring, responsible, and nurturing, even if they went unrecognized as such by parochial and discriminatory health discourse.
Racialized and non-dominant ethno-cultural groups bear an unreasonable burden of responsibility for factors that are either beyond their control or go against their core values and beliefs, including their ethno-cultural identity. In this way, discourses of “obesity epidemic” do not distribute the blame evenly across populations, but rather converge with existing constructions of adolescence, gender, whiteness, motherhood, and social class to further marginalize members of society who are already marginalized (Wright and Burrows, 2004). If health messages were serious about influencing the daily health practices of individuals they would challenge the very discriminations and stigmatizations that they in fact build on and perpetuate. This is particularly evident in the case of the “obesity epidemic” where body weight and shape are thought to be completely under the control of the individual. By removing attention from broader socio-cultural influences that shape one’s ability and/or willingness to comply with reductive health messages that instruct individuals to eat less and exercise more, “obesity epidemic” discourses perpetuate the myth of the individual as the problem as opposed to the various discriminations, inequalities, and stigmatizations that serve to oppress some bodies while simultaneously privileging others.

Health promotion agendas should not adhere to neoliberal principles of individualism, but rather challenge them, demonstrate the complexities that are at stake in “healthy” living, multiply reductive health messages, and ultimately encourage individuals to see “health” as a rich and complex situated engagement that is negotiated across different socially located positions. Until health discourses take a more nuanced account of the various power relations that shape the everyday realities of individuals, as well as the power relations that are subtle but pervasive in their own constructions, health
discourses generally, and obesity discourses more specifically, should not be thought of as objective accounts of “health”. Instead, they should be understood as discursive constructions that provide a way of looking at and talking about bodies that have very serious and painful consequences for some people and empowering and affirming consequences for others.

**Conclusion**

Lisa McDermott (2007) concludes her “governmental analysis” of power within the context of the “obesity epidemic” by suggesting that “what remains to be understood is how these governmental efforts are actually taken up by children in all of their diversity” (p. 318). The present dissertation generally, and this chapter more specifically, has gone some way to addressing this research lacunae. In this chapter, I have taken up Michel Foucault’s concept of governmentality and demonstrated how obesity discourse provides a set of resources by which young men are able to construct themselves as neoliberal governmental subjects. Central to the constitution of self within the current neoliberal context is the production of the self as autonomous, rational, and fully individuated. I argued that body size and shape were two culturally significant sites where the young men were able to articulate their sense of neoliberal governmental subjectivity. The participants used narratives of “‘care of the self’ to articulate the significance the body and its shape, size, and appearance occupy in revealing “inside information” (Moon and Sedgwick, 2001) about the “real” self. However, differently situated subjects took up health and body discourses in different ways. In particular, I demonstrated how social class structures one’s ability to “freely” constitute oneself as a healthy governmental subject. Finally, I explored how parents—particularly mothers—
were constructed as “caregivers/takers” responsible for the health and wellbeing of their children as they matured towards adult status. “Parenting”, I argued, is a technology that compels particular preferred ways of rearing children. However, not all parents have the same material resources to meet culturally specific standards of “parenting”. I argue that to understand dominant notions of child-rearing practices as “natural” as opposed to culturally constructed places an unfair burden on families from different social and cultural backgrounds who are unable and/or unwilling to comply with normative parenting practices
CHAPTER SEVEN

MASCULINITY AND HEALTH AND BODY DISCOURSES

Research in the social sciences continues to treat health and embodiment as women’s issues (Robertson, 2006; Rosenfeld and Faircloth, 2006; Watson, 2000, 1998), leaving the experiences of boys and men relatively unexamined. In this chapter I attempt to narrow the research gap by exploring how young men (13-15 years) narratively construct socially intelligible masculine identities using available cultural resources. I argue that young men living in non-normative bodies (i.e. fat, short, skinny etc.) must carefully neogotiate various discriminations in forming a stable masculine identity. I also demonstrate that some men (i.e. racialized and poorer) are discursively and institutionally blocked from engaging in the performances necessary to the constitution of normative masculinity.

Men, Masculinity, and Appearance

Research has shown that men and women consume health and body discourses along gender lines (see Saltonstall, 1992; Watson, 1998, 2000; Wright, O’Flynn, and Macdonald, 2006). Men and boys take up and practice health discourse as a means of achieving a utilitarian, or physically competent, masculine body (Watson, 1998; 2000) that is able to successfully play sport, do manual labour, and negotiate the various physical tasks of everyday life. In short, health is constructed as a performative attribute. In contrast, women and girls are more likely to use health discourse as a means of achieving normative feminine beauty ideals, particularly those related to achieving the cultural imperative for the slender female body (Bartky, 1988; Bordo, 1993). My research, however, reveals that the gender landscape is far messier than the “boys act”,
“girls appear” dichotomy\textsuperscript{101} that existent evidence suggests (see Davis, 2003; Wright, O’Flynn, and MacDonald, 2006). I found that gender discourses were not the only important systems of ideas governing boys relationships with health and body discourses, but that health was also experienced through social class and ethno-racial discourses.

For example, a group of predominantly white young men from Lawson had the following to say about the relationship between health, their bodies, and appearance.

Ted: What do you think you guys will be like in 20 years? Do you think you will be this or do you think you will be…?
Kyle: It’s really important for me to stay in shape, like I don’t want to have like high cholesterol…I don’t want to be overweight because I want to keep up, you know, with playing hockey…I want to be healthy, I don’t want to live the lifestyle that he lives [Homer]. I think that’s mainly because we live in a society where you’re tryin’ stop from being obese, because to be overweight is looked down on, much more encouraged to be ahh in good shape.
Ted: Is health something that you think of let’s say when you’re playin’ hockey an’ stuff?
Kyle: Like are you comparing health to the way you look?
Ted: Yeah.
Kyle: Yeah, I think about both, like, obviously I care about the way I look, and so one of the biggest things is to stay in shape, you know. But I also think in terms of the value of health. I play hockey cause it’s fun, but I also play it to, you know, to maintain a healthy lifestyle, to get exercise.
Bobby: Playing hockey is fun, but so is watching football, but you play hockey to stay in shape because you don’t want to be…like we joke about that guy, Homer…I know personally, all three of us don’t want to be like that guy and that’s kinda why we do the things that we do. That’s not what I want to be when I get older.
Sidney: Like when I am workin’ out, I usually start off with exercises where I am tryin’ to stay healthy, but when it comes down to it, like my motivation, is to try and look better. (FG#6-1, May 3, 2006, p. 6)

The masculine embodiment of health as a physically “enabling” capacity that allowed the young men to be “more responsive to ‘life’” (Wright, et al, 2006, p. 710) was clearly balanced against the moral imperative to not be obese. Unlike Wright et al. (2006) who

\textsuperscript{101} The “men act and women appear” (Berger cited in Bordo, 1999) dichotomy has largely shaped research in the social sciences for the past three and a half decades.
found that for young men “appearance in itself is not the goal of the bodily practices of eating and exercise” (p. 715), my research showed that appearance was inseparable from notions of health and masculinity. The young men engage in physical activity for multiple reasons, including health, athletic competence and fitness, and to “look better”. The size and shape of the body—its appearance—proved to be a crucial marker of self for this group of men, as the obese body was talked about as not only an unhealthy body, but a body that was “looked down on”. In these narratives the appearance of the male body plays a central role in self-presentation of the masculine self. However, discussions of how the body “looks” usually occurred within the context of sport and competition, two decidedly masculine arenas. Sport appeared to be an acceptable context for the young men to talk about their bodies.

In a one on one interview, Kyle explained how he felt when an injury resulted in weight gain.

Ted: Why are you here? Why are you so interested in this [research topic]?
Kyle: I don’t know. For one, I’ve played sports my whole life and so I’ve always just kind of been in really good shape just because of sports. And then, I guess this year I had back injury for hockey and so I missed a lot of time and usually hockey kind of year round, because I play a lot of three on three in the summer, is what kept me in really good shape. So I guess in gym class I would get some working out time. But mainly that would, you know, I eat pretty well at home, and so that would really keep me from becoming overweight or something like that. And then this year in hockey I got injured, so there was a lot of time where I was unable to exercise as much as I usually do and I started putting on a little bit of weight. And so, at the end of the school year I played on the rugby team which got me back into really good shape. And so I was just kind of interested in, you know, how eating a lot could put on that much weight, or how you know, being out of shape had never really been a problem for me until this year. So that just kind of made me interested in learning how other people think about that and how other people get in shape and stuff like that.

Ted: How did you feel when you started putting on the weight?
Kyle: I don’t know, it was like I, part of me was kinda like, “You know this is just because I’m not getting the exercise as usual” but part of me felt…it
wasn’t too self-conscious, because I really wasn’t putting on that much weight. I probably, like I grew like an inch, or maybe half an inch, and I maybe gained like five or ten pounds or something like that, and, um, basically it was just kinda like “Oh, you know, I’m not feeling as good when I run or I’m not looking as good as I usually do”. It wasn’t really a big self-conscious thing, it was more just kind of frustration because I’m really, really competitive and I want to be able to perform well when I play sports an’ stuff. It’s something where when I didn’t feel like I could perform perfectly I got frustrated so that’s why I joined the rugby team and I wanted ta get back into really good shape once hockey season was over. [Kyle, Int. #3, June 2, 2006, p. 1]

Sport and exercise proved to be an appropriate context for Kyle to speak openly about the relationship between his body, health, fitness, and appearance. Indeed, Kyle’s articulation of his relationship with his body was still firmly embedded in a performative narrative, but nonetheless he introduced elements of appearance and embodied feelings into his comments. This highlights the degree to which young men’s embodied relationships are more complex than a simple “the body as a means to an end” type narrative. Kyle’s narrative reflects a common reluctance for the young men to openly discuss concerns about bodily appearance for the sake of “looking good”. This pattern is consistent with the findings of other researchers (see Gill, McLean, and Henwood, 2005; Grogan and Richards, 2002; Robertson, 2006). For example, Grogan and Richards (2002) found that the men involved in their study would only talk about bodily aesthetics in relation to physical functioning or athletic competence. In the narratives emerging from the present research it was clear that the male body and its appearance were significant factors in the performativity of masculinity.

At the Pinevale Community Recreation Centre the mostly black participants also made reference to the importance of appearance to their masculine performances, this time in terms of the role body appearance played in heterosexual relationships.
Ted: Is there an advantage to being cut like that? Is it good to be cut like that?
Thomas: I don’t know, you get girls easy like dat.
   [Giggles]
Josh: No you can get girls…
Thomas: You can get either or, but…
Josh: You need to have game.
   [Laughter]
Ted: Game in terms of basketball?
Thomas: No, like for like choppin’ girls. Like talking to them.
Ted: Chopping did you say?
Thomas: Yeah.
Ted: What’s that mean, “chopping”?
Thomas: Getting her number…
Josh: You know, you need to have game. If you’re cute like me, I got game.
   [Laughter]
Ted: So, can you describe game for me?
Akeem: Josh!
Thomas: When you talk to a girl [pause] it’s jus’ like de way you talk to a girl.
Josh: Not panic.
Ted: Can you be ugly and if you have game you’re still gonna get girls?
Josh: Yep.
Thomas: Not necessarily, not if you’re like deformed. Not if you’re like cock-eyed or something.
Josh: [Laughing]. Nah, nah, I know.
Ted: But does the body help game?
Thomas: In a way, yeah.
Josh: It does, yeah.
Ted: So, do you guys, do you ever think about that, that you would like to have like ahhh a more cut body or something like that?
Josh: Yeah.
Thomas: It would help, but it doesn’t really bug me. Like if a girl doesn’t like me for like the size of my body then what sense is there, right?
Akeem: I don’t really care.
Ted: You don’t care?
Akeem: No.
Thomas: If a girl doesn’t like me, a girl doesn’t like me, like there’s sooo many other girls in de world. Like my body size shouldn’t matter.
Ted: Okay. You agree, Jose?
Josh: If dey don’t like me I make fun of dem.
Thomas: If you’re big, you’re big, if you’re skinny, if you’re cut, dat’s jus’ how you are. (FG#5_1, April 5, 2006, p. 21)

And in a subsequent focus group Thomas again spoke about the muscular male body:

Thomas: I wouldn’t, I wouldn’t mind havin’ a body like dat [lean, muscular male body], but it doesn’t really bug me to not look like dat, jus’ to impress
anyone, ‘cause when you lose it, not a lot, not as much people are like you, you know.

Ted: How so?
Thomas: Like a lot of girls like guys dat are muscular, so, but sometimes dey get a little chubby an’ stuff. (FG#5_2, April 12, 2006, p. 4)

The appearance of the male body was important to some masculine tasks, such as “choppin’ girls”. And although Josh suggested that men only need “game” to “get girls”, it was clear that a muscular male body makes heterosexual relations easier. Scholars have noted how masculine concerns over the male body are directed at its functionality, its ability to perform with physical competence, as opposed to something as passive as physical appearance (Wright, et al., 2006). However, what is emerging from these narratives is that the “look”—size, shape, and muscularity—of the male body is necessary to the performance of other masculine activities, including heterosexual relations and social positioning within friendship groups. Thus, masculine identity cannot be reduced to physical competence alone.

For instance, at six foot four inches tall and fifteen years of age, Thomas’ height was a great advantage in athletics, but his skinny body was the target of considerable social ridicule. Thomas towered over the other young men in the basketball program at the Pinevale Recreation Centre and his impressive height was effectively used to his advantage in basketball and especially volleyball, where he played on a provincial youth team. Despite his sporting accomplishments, Thomas’ skinniness was legendary amongst his peers and was repeatedly referred to throughout the focus groups as an example of an undesirable male body. For example, in a different focus group, Jamie exclaims “I saw Thomas pull his shirt off! Oh my God his hip bones, wow!” This sort of shock and fascination with Thomas’ skinny frame was repeated several times during my research at
the Pinevale Community Centre. Indeed, Ajay—who, like Thomas, was considered an excellent athlete—was also known to be skinny amongst his peers.

Ajay: It’s true, dat’s true, I don’t drink milk. Ask Omar.
Jamie: Well, you better start drinkin’ milk ‘cause in de future [briefly interrupted] you’re a stick. You’re gonna be like Thomas in de future.

[...] Ajay: I don’t care if I’m skinny or not, like it doesn’t matter to me. People make fun of me…
Jamie: It will in de future.
Ajay: I don’t care, people can make fun of me, I’ll jus’ ignore what dey say.
Jamie: In de future he’s gonna be, “Ahhhh, I’m skinny!” (FG#4_3, Mar. 8, 2006, p. 20)

From these narratives it is possible to see that both Thomas and Ajay were keenly aware of the masculine ideal that interpellates a larger body frame. Despite their protestations to the contrary, the discursive construction of a proper masculine embodiment as “not skinny” was very much a part of their understandings of their own skinny bodies. Both Thomas and Ajay were careful to articulate a sense of individuality—itself an important attribute of the proper masculine subject (Connell, 2005; Gill, Henwood, and McLean, 2005)—through their refusal to concede to the culturally constructed ideals that constrain male bodies. However, their protestations were relatively weak in the broader conversational context, with neither Thomas nor Ajay disputing the undesirability of the skinny male body. Thomas even passingly acknowledged that his skinniness may be unattractive to “girls”. In defense of his skinny body, Thomas turns to a naturalistic argument about the body, suggesting that his skinniness is attributable to a genetic inevitability beyond his control. By turning to the “naturalistic body” Thomas contradicts the cultural assumption that conceives of the body as a “project” to be molded by the rational and autonomous subject through exercise, diet, and consumption into a culturally normative form (Shilling, 2005). In chapter five, I demonstrated how the participants
drew upon discourses of individualism in the construction of the body as an object to be manipulated and controlled by the mindful, masculine subject. Thus, the “naturalistic body”, on the one hand, and the plastic body or the body as a project, on the other, are two contradictory discursive constructions of the body that are strategically deployed by the subject in the construction—even if defensively—of a culturally meaningful embodied self.

Skinniness was not the only source of bodily anxiety, as participants across many of the focus groups expressed concern over their lack of height or shortness. Proper masculinity is, indeed, a space-occupying mode of embodiment, including size, shape, and manner of being (Bartky, 1990; Pronger, 1999; Shogan, 1999). However, this was not to say that men’s bodies were not constrained by embodied discourses. When Sandra Bartky (1990) writes that “women are far more restricted than men in their manner of movement and their lived spatiality” (p. 67) she makes it seem as though men are “free” from disciplinary constraints (Shogan, 1999). However, from the above narratives we can see that men are not free, but differently constrained. And while skinniness and a short, petite frame may be desirable physical attributes for the feminine body (Bartky, 1999; Bordo, 1993), a larger, taller, more muscular frame is the corresponding ideal for dominant masculinity. Despite the gendered differences between the two ideals, each shapes the way in which men and women experience their bodies, each giving rise to their own set of anxieties, concerns, and fears. Thus, it is not that men are more oppressed than women—that would be a futile argument to make—but that masculine embodied sense of self is differentially produced through gender constraints. For instance, while both Thomas and Ajay were positively regarded amongst their peers for their athleticism,
skills that are consistent with culturally privileged versions of masculinity (Martino, 2000; Messner, 2007), their skinny bodies proved less useful in other social contexts, such as in heterosexual relationships, or in “choppin’ girls”.

The relationship between appearance and the performance of a heterosexual masculinity came up again in a different focus group. This time, however, the young men spoke about the symbiotic relationship between appearance and personality. In the following narrative, Kareem, Phil, and John explain the relationship between the body, personality, and appearance or “game”.

Ted: Do you think girls like sweetness?
Kareem: Yeah.
Phil: Yeah.
John: All de time. If you’re sweet dey jus’ fall for it, but if you’re ugly an’ sweet, sorry. Probably be jus’ friends, but you have to have like ya know de, you have to have de, de attributes, I dunno know what to call it, but...You have to have de looks, let’s jus’ say looks, yeah. (FG#3_2, Feb. 8, 2006, p. 22)

Here, the young men express an ambivalent relationship with their bodily appearances. On the one hand, they recognize the importance of the lean, muscular male body to the performance of a heterosexual masculinity. They understand that heterosexuality is a “key cultural resource” in becoming a “proper boy” (Mac An Ghaill, 2000, p. 197) and, that having an attractive muscular body increases ones chances at successful heterosexual relations with girls and women. On the other hand, they work hard to resist positioning themselves as merely bodies, or embodied objects of female desire. Cultural constructions of masculinity hold that boys and men are more than just their bodies, and that worrying about embodiment is more properly the domain of girls and women (Bartky, 1988; Davis, 2002; Thomas, 1996). Thus, the young men carefully negotiated competing discourses that simultaneously constructed masculinity as heterosexual.
conquest, of which bodily appearance plays a central role, and masculinity as an aloof
distance towards the male body.

In a subsequent focus group at Pinevale, I pursued the relationship between
“game”, muscularity, and the heterosexual performance of masculinity. More
specifically, I wanted to know how important the body was to their masculine sense of
self as experienced through heterosexual relations and to what degree they were prepared
to work-out (i.e. weight lift) to get such a body.

Thomas: I’d rather play basketball an’ have fun with my friends, like run around an’
stuff, den work out.
Josh: Yeah, I think it’s boring.
Ted: Working out?
Thomas: I think it’s a waste of time, you know what I mean?
Thomas: Getting’ girls is sick, you know what I mean, but I don’t think…
Josh: I told you…jus’ because you’re deised an’ stuff you, you…getting girls
is…you have to have game.
[Laughing]
Josh: …dat is de most important thing.
Thomas: Like you could be muscular and have no game an’ (pause) no girls like
you.
Ted: So, actually I’m interested in this, this is something I picked up from your
last discussion, is this topic of “game”. How does the body relate to game,
like does it help game or does it…?
Thomas: Yeah, it helps it a lot. Like if you have a nice body and you have good
game towards de girls den you get her.
Josh: And your wheeties, every week…
Thomas: If you’re muscular and you don’t have game, an’ you jus’ talk to girls
“Well, yep my name is so and so, an’ [inaudible]” den whatever. But deir
still gonna end up liking you ‘cause de way your body is or something. If
you’re like skinny or jus’ like a little bit chubby or something…
Josh: An’ you got mad game…
Thomas: …if you have good game you could still get a girl. For de fact that [pause]
I don’t know, it’s jus’…if you’re muscular it brings up de chances.
Ted: What about the reverse, is the reverse true? Like what about a girl that
doesn’t have…has game but not, not the body.
Thomas: Ahhh, I don’t know, I don’t know about that.
Josh: I don’t know any girls dat have game an’ has no body. [giggle] (FG#3_2,
Feb. 8, 2006, p. 5)
The young men narrated a strong reluctance to locate the essence of masculinity in the male body, despite the fact that their narratives clearly situated the body as fundamental to the performance of a heterosexual masculine identity. This reluctance to objectify themselves through embodiment is apparent in the way the young men talk about weight-lifting as a vainglorious and boring body-centered athletic pursuit. Thus, while the lean, muscular male body is important to the status and power of masculine identity, it is not necessary, nor sufficient in and of itself. “Game” or personality remains important to the performance of masculine identity for the young men. While an ideal body facilitates “game”, none of the young men who engaged in the focus groups admitted to working-out specifically to transform their bodies in order to meet a cultural ideal, but were more likely to talk about physical activity and sport in terms of competition, fun, and as a means of skill acquisition. In contrast, femininity was articulated as an exclusively embodied appearance. In short, whereas dominant masculinity is a careful negotiation of skills, personality, and appearance, the young men narratively constructed dominant femininity as singularly appearance-oriented. Thus, the broader discursive construction of femininity as objectified, passive, and rooted in body appearance (Bordo, 1993; Davis, 2002; Bartky, 1998) was deployed as a technique of distinguishing the feminine concern with “looks” from dominant masculinity, where embodiment was discursively constructed as subjective, active, and body-as-function (Bordo, 1999; Wright, et al., 2006). In other words, the young men policed gender distinctions by suggesting that both men and women worry about appearance, but they argued that the concern is of a different order and ultimately such gendered concerns produced a different gender embodiment.
The participants carefully policed the manner in which they talked about their own bodies as well as the way in which other men narrated their body projects. For instance, to openly worry about body weight was coded as a feminine practice, and men who did so ran the risk of being labeled a “fag”, “wussy”, or “gay”. Thus, discourses of heterosexuality placed limits on what can and cannot be said about the male body. When they do talk about their bodies and their desires for a particular look, they must do so in such a way so as not “transgress the taboo against appearing vain” (Gill, Henwood, and McLean, 2005, p. 51). This tension between worrying about, and working on, the body at the same time as maintaining the masculine façade of disembodiment was clearly expressed in the focus groups.

The young men at Lawson explained that it was unmasculine for men to worry about looks, specifically their body shape and size.

Ted: Last time I asked if a guy would ever complain about their weight and somebody said—and I couldn’t pick up who—said they would if they were “gay”. What does this mean?
Alex: I don’t know who said that.
Luke: I think it was Alex.
Alex: It wasn’t me.
Michael: Well, I dunno, I’m guessing, but since they’re more feminine they might say that ‘cause that’s what females do.
Ted: So worrying about your weight is more feminine you think?
Group: Yeah.
Michael: Well, yeah ‘cause we worry about like I said before, not why we look good, but more competitive things whereas the girls it’s “Oh, I wanna look pretty”. But to look good there and it’s who can shot hoops here, ya know. So it’s kinda different meanings.
Ted: So for guys it’s about performance and for girls it’s about looks?
Group: Yep. (FG#7_2, May 29, 2006, p. 6)

Gender and sexuality are mutually constitutive categories where “sexuality is regulated through the policing and shaming of gender” (Butler cited in Mac An Ghaill, 2000, p. 200). Terms such as “gay”, “wussy”, and “pansy” were used throughout the focus groups...
to identify and censure inappropriate masculine performances. The correct identification
and ridicule of inappropriate gender behaviours in both oneself and others served an
important self-constituting function in three ways. First, properly identifying and
censuring deviant ways of being male was a public performance that demonstrated an
individual’s gender competence at correctly reading and applying the cultural codes
governing gender identity, and thus affirming one’s identity as a competent gender
subject (Davies, 2000; Martino, 2000). Second, identifying the gender-Other was part of
a reiterative processes of differentiation where the margins of the self, as a normative
gender subject, were produced through the identification and marking off of the gender-
Other (Butler, 1993; Mac An Ghaill, 1994, 2000). Third, the censuring of deviant Others
was also a form of what Bronwyn Davies (2006a) calls “category-maintenance work”
whereby agentic subjects actively defend the cultural integrity of the categories necessary
to their subjectivites by erecting boundaries between self and Other. Davies explains that
teasing, for example, is partly directed at “letting the deviants know they’ve got it wrong”
but more importantly it is “aimed at maintaining the category as a meaningful category in
the face of the individual deviation that is threatening it” (p. 72). Thus, labels such as
“pansy”, “wussy”, “fag”, and so forth serve important functions in identity constitution as
they mark the boundary between the proper masculine self and the deviant feminine-
Other. Heterosexual masculinity was performatively embodied in the way the young
men talked about, experienced, and understood their own bodily practices as well as in
the process by which they differentiated themselves from those Other, “less masculine”
men.
This section has demonstrated that “looks” do matter to the young men involved in the present research. However, their anxieties, concerns, and body projects were carefully coded within gender appropriate discourses of sport, health, and heterosexuality. I also demonstrated how the young men not only concerned themselves with their own bodily narratives, but also those of others and I argued that policing deviant body anxieties in both self and Other was an important part of the constitution of masculine subjectivities. In the next section, I turn to an examination of how the young men talk about and experience embodied health.

**Masculinity and Embodied Health**

Existent literature suggests that men and women experience and talk about health, health practices, and their relationship to the body in gendered ways (Robertson, 2006; Saltonstall, 1993; Watson, 2000, 1998; Wright, O’Flynn, and MacDonald, 2006). Wright et al. (2006), found that young men seem to be “less interested in talking about bodies, theirs and others” (p. 710). In contrast, the men in my study were quite comfortable talking about bodies, but only within a very constrained narrative framework. Throughout the focus groups we looked at mediated images of various bodies, both male and female, and the participants demonstrated considerable skill at articulating global and local knowledges about bodies. Discourses of health, particularly those related to body size and associated practices of eating and exercise, were prominent cultural resources the participants used in making sense of bodies. However, it is important for me to

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102 Wright, et al. conducted their research in same sex groups of men and women.
103 I was quite surprised at how comfortable the young men—in both research locations—were in talking about visual representations of different bodies, ranging from scantily clad, muscular male figures to seductively dressed “plus-sized” female models to hugely overweight models of both genders. I anticipated that the participants would express discomfort at the implicit sexuality of many of the images, particularly the homoeroticism that is increasingly coded into images of nearly nude male models (Nixon, 1997) as well as the homoeroticism of collectively examining and developing narrative communities around these images.
emphasize that health discourses never occurred in isolation. Rather, the young men were
multiply interpellated within localized contexts of particular social, cultural, and material
circumstances. Thus, health discourses were almost always accompanied and mediated
through body discourses such as popular cultural notions of beauty which, in turn, were
mediated through discourses of gender, sexuality, race, and age. Furthermore, the manner
in which the participants took up and experienced these multiple discourses was both
constrained and enabled by their localized context as well as material resources available
to them. In this section I aim to get at the complexity, fluidity, and hybridity that
accompanied the processes of subjectification as the young men struggled to produce
culturally specific and locally meaningful identities.

There were differences in how the young men narrated bodies across the focus
groups. In the following exchange, a group of young men from Lawson compare and
contrasted the relative health, fitness, and fatness of two of their friends’ stomachs they
had taken pictures of through the photovoice technique (see Appendix B3-4).

Kyle: And I had two stomachs in comparison. One is, with the red shirt, is the
ah, stomach of an athlete and the other one is the stomach of a, well I
guess you wouldn’t really call him an athlete. He’s just, he you know, eats
a lot and, you know, has not the greatest metabolism. So, I guess it’s kind
of comparing if you eat pretty well and play a lot of sports and work out
really responsibly, compared to when you eat a lot…and it’s not like this
guy kinda sits around all day, he doesn’t do that, he plays sports. He gets
really…he needs to keep a balanced diet compared to his balanced
workout.

Bobby: He works out, but he doesn’t run. He just does weights and stuff and he
doesn’t run.

Kyle: So, he doesn’t really get balanced exercise and stuff, which is why…

Ted: He’s not in the room right now…?

Kyle: No.

Ted: Okay, um would you consider him heavier?

Kyle: Oh yeah, yep, although he doesn’t he doesn’t look like it from there
because like um he has a pretty pudgy face and so like…he’s actually lost a
fair bit of weight in the last few years just because, you know, he plays
badminton and he works out a fair bit and he plays basketball sometimes. But um, you know, he’s certainly not as healthy as the guy in the red shirt, you know, he’s a big basketball player, he has a really balanced workout, he eats fairly well. He’s not the definition of unhealthy, he’s certainly not obese, he’s just overweight. (FG#6_3, May 17, 2006, pp. 2-3)

This group of participants meticulously scrutinized the two stomachs, comparing and analysing exercise and diet patterns, appearances, metabolism, and health status. Thus, it is possible to see how health discourses, particularly obesity discourse in this case, provide a knowledge framework for understanding the practices and appearance of the male body. Similar to the findings in other studies exploring the relationship between masculinity and health (see Burrows, Wright, and Jungersen-Smith, 2002; Wright, O’Flynn, and Mcdonald, 2006), the young men tended to equate the slender, muscular body—what other authors have identified as the ideal masculine physique (Alexander, 2003; Grogan, 2002, 2008; Pope, Phillips, and Olivardia, 2000)—with “health”. Health, according to these young men, is a physical embodiment or a “look”, which involves not being fat, as opposed to the more holistic definition of health that is endorsed by the World Health Organization which sees health and wellness as a social, emotional, intellectual, spiritual, environmental, and physical well-being. The way in which these young men talk about this body differ markedly from the language the young men from Pinevale use to speak about health and bodies.

The uptake of health discourses was always embedded in the specific racial and social class communities of which the young men were a part. In other words, health and body discourses were not taken up in a universal or homogenous way. Rather, the young men’s health talk was a hybrid of global health discourses refracted through the prism of their social class, socio-cultural, ethnic, and racial positioning. For instance, the young
men at the Pinevale Community Centre talked about fatness, appearance, and male body projects, but did so using a very different intonation than the young men from Lawson. Whereas the participants from Lawson were more likely to use biomedical terms such as “healthy”, “obese”, “overweight”, “metabolism”, and make detailed observations about energy balance, the participants at Pinevale used more colloquial or experiential language, variously using terms such as “fat”, “bigger”, “chubbier”, and “healthy” in their assessments of bodies of their friends and members of their families. Below I have included an extract that provides an excellent representation of how their body narratives relied on different language and frames of reference.

Ted: Do you think like…ummm…if your guy friends started to diet, what would you think of that?
John: I would think they’re stupid because…
Phil: Yeah [giggles].
John: …well it depends on who you are and what your weight is, like if you are like Fat Joe, right now as in our age, I mean, I’d be like I can understand dat ya know, but…My boy, Adrian, he’s like “I’m fat” an’ I’m like “You’re not fat” Ya know. He’s jus’ a little bigger den me, you know, but he’s okay, ya know. For a weight like dat, dats okay, but when you grow up you might lose dat, ya know, and turn dat into muscle.
Ted: So what does he do about it, does he worry about it?
John: No, he doesn’t worry about because I been tellin’ him, I convinced him dat’s like, ya know, forget about it...(FG#3_1, Feb. 1, 2006, p. 25)

In contrast to the mostly white, middle-class community at Lawson, the mostly black, lower-class youth from the Pinevale Community Centre articulated a broader range of acceptable body sizes and openly critiqued diet discourse, as it applied to both men and women. Studies have found that different ethnic and racial communities find different body sizes desirable (Bordo, 1993). Massara (1997), for instance, found that after marriage it was expected and deemed desirable that Puerto Rican women would gain weight, while Sobo (1997) established that in Jamaica skinniness in women was
culturally coded as undesirable and a sign of greed and “stinginess”. In an interview
Omar explained that in Ghana, his birth place, a shorter, stocker, “chubbier” build was a
privileged body type for the men (Interview #4, June 8, 2006). Given these findings, it is
hardly surprising that different ethnic, racial, and social class communities read bodies
differently. Differential readings were evident in the way the young men at Pinevale
talked about bodies and body practices, as can be witnessed in the narrative above. Rather
than subjecting his friend Adrian to narrow biomedical standards, John explains to his
friend that his body weight is “okay” and that he is just “a little bigger” then John is
himself. In so doing, John articulates a wider range of acceptable body sizes as compared
to the particularly harsh appraisals of the youth at Lawson. Throughout the focus groups
and interviews at Pinevale, the participants used a wider discursive repertoire to
characterize body size. In many instances, the participants would refer to “healthy fat”,
for example, to describe bodies that, biomedically speaking, would fall into categories of
“overweight” or “obese” but were still physically competent at dancing, sport, or work.
Moreover, the participants broadened definitions of “obesity” by using terms like
“chubby” or “bigger” to describe the bodies of their friends and family. In contrast to the
young men at Lawson, who all saw themselves as maintaining slender, healthy bodies
into adulthood, many of the participants from Lawson saw themselves as gaining weight
and becoming “chubby” or “fat” in their adulthood. I talk about these differential ways

\[104\] At risk discourse constructs youth as a period of transition, or becoming, where youth “mature” and
“develop” into responsible, appropriately disciplined adult citizens (Kelly, 2001, 2001). Thus, for some of
the participants to suggest that they were going to grow into fat, “unhealthy” adult bodies was a
transgression of (neo)liberal selfhood, where the conditions of the “free” and “entrepreneurial” self are
 premised on taking care of oneself, including one’s health in the form of a “healthy” body weight. Unlike
the responsible (neo)liberal subjects at Lawson who were committed to maintaining normative body
weights and, by verbalizing such commitments, stabilize their self-identities as responsible, rational
subjects, the “offending” subjects from Pinevale narrate a future where their bodies and thus self-identities
will be coded as deviant, undisciplined, and irrational.
of narrating and experiencing body size in other parts of the dissertation so I do not want to go into more depth here except to emphasize that health and body discourses are mediated through ethnic, racial, and social class circumstances. Health, in other words, inspires different desires, fantasies, practices, and modes of embodiment in differently situated communities. Ethno-cultural and social class factors, however, do not operate in isolation. Gender and (hetero)sexuality also play an important role in enabling and constraining particular health embodiments.

**Health, Gender, Sexuality, and Energy-In/Energy-Out**

Notions of “energy balance” were prominent in how the young men understood body weight and health identities. The fat body was assumed to be a product of an energy imbalance where more calories were consumed than expended. “Energy balance” narratives were evident in the way the young men at Lawson compared the stomachs of their friends. Here, the participants spoke about health as a set of performatives that included a “balanced” lifestyle, where one carefully monitors the amount of energy-in, in the form of food, with energy-out, through physical activity and exercise. Gard and Wright (2005) have identified the “energy-in/energy-out” model as a central, albeit highly reductive, discourse emerging from the “obesity epidemic”. In these narratives, we can see that the logic of “energy-in/energy-out” plays a prominent role in structuring how young men understand both their own bodies as well as the bodies of others, and its relationship to health. By focusing on the amount of energy in-take through food consumption balanced against the amount of energy expended through physical activity and exercise as a primary determinant of physiological health, biomedical discourses locate the onus of responsibility for healthy body weights in the individual’s ability to
control their desires and discipline their practices (Gard and Wright, 2005). Thus, body
weight and shape is discursively constructed as something that the individual can control
through balancing energy-in against energy-out. This overly mechanic model of healthy
body weights has led some critics of obesity discourse to suggest that the complex social,
historical, genetic, and cultural factors that influence body weight and shape are obscured
under body as a machine discourse thus leading to an overly individualistic and
potentially “victim-blaming” model of health promotion (Gard and Wright, 2001, 2005).

The discourse of “energy-in/energy-out” was a predominant theme across the
focus groups; however, it not only governed “health” identities, but at the same time was
a technology of gender and sexuality. Disciplinary technologies, you may recall, are
those operations or procedures that join together power and knowledge in the production
of particular types of bodies (i.e. raced, gendered, sexed, healthy) through the
organization of space, time, and modality of movement (Foucault, 1997; Rabinow, 1984;
Shogan, 1999). Discourses of health, I am arguing, compelled a specific organization of
the body that was productive of culturally intelligible forms of gendered and sexed
embodiment. Health discourses were not consumed as neutral biomedical instructions,
but rather were taken up as highly regulated technologies of the self that produced
gendered and sexed identities. As an illustration, during a focus group at Lawson, the
topic of dieting came up in relation to an image one of the young man had taken of a
health food store (see Appendix C5). In the following narrative, Marty explains that
younger people, particularly men, do not use health food stores.

Marty: Well, I mean, if you see people like, “Oh my God, I gotta diet,” the
automatic…well, I shouldn’t…well, it’s like Richard [a friend] told me,
it’s like “Oh, what’s wrong with you? Are you unfit or are you
unhealthy?” something that’s sorta bad. [Group laughs]
According to this group of young men, “healthy” eating, particularly dieting, is not something that young people—especially men—concern themselves with. Geographers have noted that everyday spaces are constructed along gender lines (Longhurst, 2001; Rose, 1995). As the above discussion progressed it became clear that the space of the health food store was coded as feminine as the participants suggested that women tended to use these spaces. The notion of health food as feminine was echoed in another focus group at Lawson where the participants agreed that mostly women consumed health food, often purchasing it for the children and men in their families. The health food store in these narratives is cross-cut by discourses of gender, age, and health in the production of specific identities.

From this narrative we can see that the reductive “energy-in/energy-out” model of “weight management”, which is a central component of obesity discourse, is gendered. Research indicates that girls and women are more likely to focus on “energy-in” in the form of diet and appetite-restraint as a technique of managing body weight, whereas boys and men are more likely to engage in increasing energy expenditures through sport and physical activity (Wright, O’Flynn, and MacDonald, 2006). The participants talked about

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105 I brought pizza and soft drinks to each of the focus group discussions.
106 The notion of women—mothers and wives, in particular—shopping for health food perpetuates the notion of women as care givers and responsible for the health and wellbeing of children and men. Women often bear a disproportionate burden of blame for the body weight of their children within “obesity epidemic” discourse (Burrows and Wright, 2004).
eating and physical activity in gendered ways. These gendered narratives were evident
during the focus group sessions at Pinevale Community Centre.

Ted: Do you guys think that some of your other male friends think about what
they eat and worry about what they eat?
Syed: Not really, not really.
John: Nah, we jus’ eat ‘cause we know, especially if you’re a baller\textsuperscript{107}, you jus’
eat, ya know, ‘cause you know you’re gonna waste it. Like, I know Phil
can eat! See em eatin’ pizza, like, Phil can eat. I know dat for sure. An’
look at em now, dat’s de key, if he wasn’t playin’ basketball he would
probably be big. I’m tellin’ ya...
John: Without basketball he would be big. I’m tellin’ you for sure.
Phil: Yeah, it’s true, it’s true. (FG\#3_3, Feb. 15, 2006, p. 22)

These narratives are consistent with other research projects where it was found that boys
and men were more likely to engage in physical activity and sports as a means of
controlling body weight and shape (Wright, et al., 2006). However, I want to push the
argument further and suggest that these gendered relationships with biomedical
discourses of “energy-in/energy-out” are not only reflective of gender patterns, but are in
fact constitutive of gender itself. Indeed, eating and exercise are highly regulated cultural
practices that are productive of gender subjectivities, as well as other identity categories,
such as “race”, sexuality, and age, to name a few.

At Lawson the topic of diet and eating and their relationship to gender and
sexuality came up when the participants playfully mocked Luke for asking for a “small
piece” of pizza.

Luke: Oh, could I have that small piece?
Alex: Small piece? What are you some sorta wussy?
Luke: I’m bigger than you and I still eat more than you.
Alex: You’re bigger than me? You wanna see my stomach?
Luke: No! [Group laughs]
Ted: Does not being able to eat a lot equate with…does a wussy\textsuperscript{108} not eat a lot?

\textsuperscript{107} “Baller” was commonly used as short form for “basketball player”.
\textsuperscript{108} “Wussy” was commonly used as short form for “wimp”.


Alex: No.
Robert: Yeah.
Alex: No, but like I don’t know if it’s like wussy, but between males, it’s always kinda of a competition, you know, who could eat more, who could spit farthest [group laughs]. Like the dumbest things always count because we are so competitive.

Michael: Because that’s basically our genetics, ‘cause whoever can catch the most food and gather the most and all that will get the best wife, so you know, guys nowadays are always so competitive.

Ted: You’re not worried about getting a wife you, are you? [Group Laughs]
Michael: No.
Ted: What about women, do they have a different relationship with food, like different idea about food?
Luke: Um, sometimes they try not to eat as much.
Abe: Yeah.
Alex: Yeah, they become anorexic. (FG#7_1, May 26, 2006, p. 8)

Eating is an embodied practice with “consequences for identity formation and stabilization” (Fox and Ward, 2008, p. 2585). Scholars have noted how eating is a gendered activity (Bordo, 1993; Lupton, 1996). Susan Bordo (1993), for example, writes that gender dualities are metaphorically coded onto food and eating. Men, Bordo argues, are culturally constructed as having “hearty, even voracious, appetites” where it is a mark of masculinity “to eat spontaneously and expansively” (1993, p. 108). Thus, a constitutive performative of masculinity is a reckless and abandoned relationship with food, and to violate such an interpellation is to risk one’s normative gender identity as can be seen in the way the young men mock Luke for asking for a small piece of pizza. If “the social control of female hunger operates as a practical ‘discipline’” that trains women in techniques of “feminine self-restraint and containment of impulse” (p. 130), the incitement and encouragement of male appetite produces masculine desire and

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108 In a subsequent focus group I returned to the theme of “wussy” and asked the group to define it. A “wussy” was defined as people who are “really worried about what other people think of them. Like you don’t want to try new things ’cause you’re afraid to embarrass yourself” (MSC 1_2, p. 7). Furthermore, the group collectively determined that the term was gendered in that it was targeted at men and was used as a technique to question a man’s masculinity.
impulse as expansive and all-encompassing. Once again, this is not to say that men are “free” from disciplinary technologies that constrain food and eating, but that they are produced differently, they are produced as “voracious appetites”. The failure to correctly perform masculine identity as a “voracious appetite” results in collective censure from the group, possibly even de-masculinization or de-subjectification in severe instances.

The preceding exchange between the participants is an example of what Bronwyn Davies (2006a) refers to as “category-maintenance work”. Category-maintenance work, according to Davies, is the process where individuals use available discursive resources as a means of self-decipherment and self-constitution. Davies explains that individuals can deviate from normative identity categories, such as gender,

but their deviation will give rise to category-maintenance work around gender boundaries. This category-maintenance work is aimed at letting the deviant know they’ve got it wrong—teasing is often enough to pull someone back into line—but primarily it is aimed at maintaining the category as a meaningful category in the face of the individual deviation that is threatening it. (2006a, p. 72 emphasis in original)

In the case of Luke, the participants drew on the discourse of masculinity as “voracious appetite” and, on the one hand, used this as a means of censuring Luke’s gender deviant eating practices but, on the other, preserved the gender category by marking his practices as deviant and feminine. In so doing, the other participants in the group secured their own subjectivities through their correct identification and labeling of deviant gender practices. Here, we can see that power is not simply a prohibitive force, one that simply says “no”, but rather it is productive, inciting, encouraging, and supporting particular, highly regulated, ways of being male. Indeed, gender discourses do not operate alone in the constitution of normative masculine embodiment. Dominant masculinity is almost always heterosexual masculinity (Mac An Ghaill, 2000), and thus we need to consider the inter-
locking relationship between sexuality, gender, body shape and size in the construction of particular identities.

Body shape and size, along with embodied practices of eating and exercise, were understood by the young men at Lawson to be constitutive of gendered and sexed identities. (Hetero)sexuality is forcibly materialized through the surveillance and censure of gender (Butler, 1993). (Hetero)normative gender performances, in other words, are compelled and policed through homophobic, heteronormative, and heterosexist comments, even if these comments are made between friends in jest. Discourses of sexuality were clearly used to compel particular eating practices at Lawson.

Ted: What about women, do they have a different relationship with food, like a different idea about food?
Luke: Sometimes they try not to eat as much.
Alex: Yeah, like they become anorexic.
Abe: I hate when skinny girls say they are fat, I hate that.
[..]
Ted: Would you ever hear a guy say that?
Alex: No.
Michael: Like if he’s gay maybe, like if he’s homosexual. (FG#7_1, May 26, 2006, p. 9)

These young men understood anxieties about thinness or body weight to be a predominantly feminine practice. Moreover, they articulated that eating disorders were exclusive to the domain of femininity. A little further on in the discussion, Alex explained that in his health education class he learned that it is “mostly young girls that are anorexic”, which is problematic because it both contradicts evidence which suggests that men are increasingly being diagnosed with eating disorders, as well as perpetuates the reductive myth that young women are more prone to “psychological” body image

109 I put “psychological” disorder in brackets to denote the commonsensical—and to some extent medical—reduction of eating disorders to a function of individual psychological pathology (Bordo, 1993). In line with critical feminist re-conceptualizations (see Hepworth, 1999), I understand eating disorders to be a
disorders brought on by media influences. However, what interests me in this narrative was the manner in which male concern for body weight and size, as manifested through restricted eating and dieting, were regarded as practices exclusive to feminine or gay men. In a subsequent focus group I pursued the discursive connection between gender, sexuality, eating, and body size.

Ted: Last time I asked if a guy would ever complain about their weight and somebody said—and I couldn’t pick up who—said they would if they were gay. What does that mean?

[...] Michael: Well, I dunno, I’m guessing, but since they’re more feminine they might say that ‘cause that’s what females do.

Ted: So worrying about your weight is more feminine you think?

Abe: Um-hm.


Michael: Well, yeah ‘cause we worry about like I said before, not why we look good, but more competitive things, whereas girls it’s “Oh, I wanna look pretty”. But to look good there and it’s who can shoot hoops here, ya know. So it’s kinda different meanings. (FG#7_2, May 29, 2006, p. 6)

In this narrative, Michael essentialized gay men as “more feminine” or more likely to perform practices associated with femininity, such as worrying about body weight, shape, and diet. Indeed, the link between gay men and femininity is a common discursive construction that serves to mark the limit of normative male practice (Mac An Ghaill, 2000; Martino, 2000). In this way, we can see that performing maleness through maintaining a coolness towards one’s body weight, appearance, and a manifest disregard for eating practices is consistent with performances of a normative heterosexual masculinity. Health discourses, then, are not received in a social and cultural vacuum, as health experts so often assume (McElroy, 2002; Lupton, 2003; Kelly, 1998), but rather multi-faceted and complex social, psychological, and biological phenomenon that cannot be easily reduced to individual pathology.
inter-lock with, and further entrench, pre-existing gender, sexuality and racial discourses, to name a few (Wright and Burrows, 2004).

As I demonstrated in the paragraphs above, normative masculinity interpellated the young men to eat with a masculine or “voracious appetite” or risk being labeled feminine or “gay”. What was also evident during the focus groups was the manner in which the participants discretely governed their eating practices in masculine appropriate ways. Thus, eating and dieting were practices of the self by which the participants formed an embodied masculine identity.

Bobby: I know I eat a ton, as you have seen here [referring to eating pizza], but I tend to restrict myself.
Ted: You do?
Bobby: Like I don’t drink a lot of pop, like this will be the only pop I will have today. I don’t have a lot of other snack foods or anything.
Sidney: Yeah, like when they go out for lunch they all go to the Pita Factory.
Kyle: Yeah, we get pitas with, you know, ah like lettuce, cucumbers, tomatoes all the veggies and things. We get some steak or chicken in there, but we also have a lot of vegetables. That’s when we go out for lunch.
Bobby: We don’t go to MacDonald’s.
Kyle: Yeah.
Ted: This is interesting because I’m really sure I asked this group if you thought about what you eat and you said no.
Kyle: Sometimes, not all the time. Like I’m clearly not on the Weight Watchers or anything. Like I’m not just completely impartial to what I eat. I’m not just going to spend a day where I just eat pizza and then go out for burgers after.
Bobby: It’s more of a habit by now. (FG#6_3, May 19, 2006, p. 7)

In this narrative, the participants drew the distinction between the feminine practice of dieting and a more masculine dis-concern towards food and diet. Thus, it was not that the participants were actively denying themselves particular foods, they argued, rather, they were simply eating out of “habit”. By referring to “habit” they construct their eating as something that they do not consciously think about. The distinction between outright
dieting and a more mild form of self-monitoring, or “watching what you eat”, was made in a different focus group at Lawson,

Ted: So do you guys anticipate that you will have to diet at some point?
Ronald: Um…
Edward: Probably not.
Marty: Not in the foreseeable future.
Edward: Probably when I’m like older and less active I would expect that I would have to…or at least be cautious about what I eat…
Marty: No, no I would have to watch what I eat, but the idea of dieting, um, not so much.
Ronald: Well, dieting can be sort of watching what you eat.
Marty: W-e-l-l, I don’t know. There’s sort of a difference because dieting is more of an active watching what you eat and watching what you in general is just not eating macaroni or potatoes or what not. Like having vegetables and the full required healthy type of meal. (FG#1_3, Oct. 19, 2005, p. 8)

Two things come through clearly in these exchanges. First, the participants did think about eating practices, with Bobby even going so far as to suggest that he “restrict[ed]” what he ate. Second, the young men were very uncomfortable when it was brought to their attention that they do care about food and eating practices. They were quick to draw a distinction between mild forms of self-monitoring practices and the more radical, presumably feminine practices of outright dieting. In so doing, the participants were negotiating between two contradicting discourses where, on the one hand, they were discursively compelled to approach food with reckless abandon and voracious appetites (Bordo, 1993), while on the other hand they were incited to assume individual responsibility for their health (which is increasingly determined through shape, size, and weight of the body (Gard and Wright, 2005)) and appearance (Gill, et al., 2005; Grogan, 2008; Pope, Phillips, and Olivardia, 2000) through self-control, self-restraint, and self-discipline110. These young men were confronted, once again, with a double-bind, where they were simultaneously incited to maintain an aloofness to their bodies and its

110 See Chapter #Six Obesity Discourse, Healthism, and the (Neo)Liberal Governmental Subject.
appearance, while at the same time engaging in a highly regulated set of reiterative health performances as a means of constituting a normative masculinity. What can be witnessed in the narratives of the young men, then, is the careful negotiation of the multiple and at times contradictory discourses that were constitutive of masculine subjectivities.

At points the participants admitted to watching what they ate, but never for the expressed purpose of losing weight for health or aesthetic reasons. Sport, however, was a central narrative the young men drew upon to justify their eating and exercise practices. This was particularly evident during a focus group at Lawson where the participants explained that they had engaged in dieting as a means of “cutting weight” for the wrestling team.

Ronald: Me and Edward had to do that [diet].
Marty: Why?
Ronald: Make weight.
Ted: You didn’t make weight?
Ronald: No, we did.
[…]
Ted: Did you sweat or anything or was it just no eating?
Ronald: I ate like five carrots before I weighed in.
Edward: I ate a little bit. (FG#1_3, Jan. 19, 2005, p. 8)

Similarly, participants at Pinevale often talked about the need to be “in shape” for basketball, which included practices of restrictive eating. Thus, within the context of sport, itself a masculine appropriate practice, weight loss was justified in the eyes of the young men. However, to diet for the sake of dieting or to diet for appearances, was deemed to be a feminine practice. Global health and body discourses were always mediated through gender discourses. But gender was not the only discourse that

111 Cutting weight refers to a practice where athletes engage in extreme weight loss techniques (i.e. no eating, induced sweating through exercise) in order to achieve a certain weight for sports such as wrestling, boxing, and rowing where competitions are governed by weight categories.
constrained the way in which the young men took up and engaged with health and body discourses as technologies of the self. As I demonstrated earlier, ethno-cultural and material circumstance also influenced the ways in which the men understood health discourses, particularly those emerging from the “obesity epidemic”.

Health discourses were taken up along gender lines, as scholars have already pointed out (Saltonstall, 1993; Watson, 1998; 2000; Wright et al, 2006), but were also interpreted through ethnic, racial, and social class positioning. Thus, reductive analyses of how health and body discourses are interpreted through, and compel, gendered subject positions serves to reify differences between gender categories without examining the complex and shifting differences that exist within gender categories. This section has demonstrated the value of exploring health practices and related health identities from the vantage point of multiple, interlocking identity categories, as opposed to through a gender lens alone. By limiting analysis to a single identity category, such as gender, the shifting, fluid, and complex expression of embodied health identities remains unexamined. Rather, we should see embodied health identities as multiply interpellated by gender, sexuality, race, ethno-cultural background, and material circumstances, all of which play out and are embedded in specific localized contexts. In the following section, I look more specifically at how obesity discourse provides a language for talking about and experiencing embodiment. I explore how obesity discourse specifically, and health and body discourses more generally, are productive knowledges that make some statements sayable and practices doable, while rendering others unintelligible.
Fat Oppression

Although none of the participants at the Pinevale Community Centre self-identified as “fat” or “obese”, on several occasions they spoke about “fat” friends who had experienced fat oppression. For the purposes of this research, fat oppression is defined as the hatred and discrimination against fat people…solely because of their body size. It is the stigmatization of being fat, the terror of fat…It is the equation of fat with being out-of-control, with laziness, with deeply-rooted pathology, with ugliness. (Brown, 1989, p. 1)

Carla Rice (2007) has written extensively on the oppression “fat girls” experience as a consequence of the moral panic surrounding the “obesity epidemic”, however the experiences of fat boys and men remains underexamined. She argues that the negative health messages girls receive about the size and shape of their bodies “do[es] very little to promote physical fitness in girls” (p. 170). By framing young girls whose bodies do not meet normative biomedical standards as “unfit, anti-fat discourses may produce fat girls’ presumed lack of physical ability, strength, and skill” (p. 170-1). The young men at Pinevale Community Centre suggested that some of their friends had experienced similar patterns of discrimination and oppression in sporting contexts. For example, John describes how body discourses shape assumptions about large or fat bodies.

John: …like I know, okay, I know dis guy, he like, he like dis guy’s size (points to the image of a fat man on the computer screen), he can sprint. Like when I was smaller, right, I was in probably in grade six, I thought I was faster den everyone ‘cause he’s fat, right, he can sprint faster den you, like he can jus’ go like soooo fast. I was like “Yo, why don’t you try track and field?” He’s like “Oh dey, dey…people be like ya know, yeah you’re too

112 At least one participant from Pinevale Community Centre identified as “chubby” and as “havin a belly”, but his designation of body size was fluid as on other occasions he self-identified as “skinny” and “average”. See chapter #4 Discourse of Fatness for an extended discussion of how “fatness” is a complex, fluid, and shifting concept.
fat to run”, ya know…he felt like, ya know, de whole time he was discriminated against…

Syed: Yeah, dat’s true.
John: He’s like 21 now, but he felt discriminated, like okay, people be like “Oh yeah, watch dis fat guy run in 100 meters”, ya know. People actually said dat to him. So, I’m like “Okay, don’t worry about it”, and he says, “I don’t wanna go anyways”. So he didn’t…(FG#3_2, Feb. 1, 2006, p. 13-14)

The theme of fat discrimination as a force that restricted fat boys and men from participating in sports and physical activity came up in another focus group at the Pinevale Community Centre,

Omar: Dis fat guy I know, you know Rick, right? [Asks Ajay]
Ajay: Yeah.
Omar: He, he is good in ‘cause of his size.
Ted: Soccer net?
Omar: Um, hockey. And if you talk to him to go in net, “Oh, he’ll be de best goalie because of his size”. He feels bad because he’s a good player outside, better den he is inside, an’ he jus’, jus’ doesn’t end up playin’ at all.
Ajay: Dere’s also dis one guy named Tiny, he’s fat, people think he should be the goalie, next thing you know he’s actually de top, de top level scoring most points per game. (FG#4_1, Feb. 22, 2006, p. 22)

Both of these narratives illustrate how obesity discourse and other discourses of normative embodiment reinforce and perpetuate stereotypes about the fat body that provide a framework for understanding what bodies can and can not do. These stereotyped representations of the fat body do not merely reflect a pre-existing reality of fat people (i.e. fat people as unathletic and lazy), but actually constituted that “reality” by creating sporting and physical activity spaces that were hostile to fat individuals thus effectively excluding them from these spaces (see also Rice, 2007). As such, health and body discourses literally constructed a way of seeing bodies, and this way of seeing fat bodies served to forcibly materialize stereotyped ways of embodying fatness—namely, the fat body as “lazy” was forcibly materialized through oppressive and discriminatory
constructions of fatness that effectively block active and full participation in sport and physical activity. Health and body discourses, therefore, are not objective biomedical facts, but are culturally meaningful frameworks that instruct individuals on how to think and experience health, bodies, and embodied practices of eating and physical activity (Burrows, Wright, and Jungersen-Smith, 2003; Rich and Evans, 2005).

These narratives illustrate how obesity discourse places fat bodies in a double-bind where they are simultaneously expected to engage in physical activity and exercise even though these activities and their associated spaces are evaluative, pre-judging, and discriminatory of the fat body. Dominant obesity discourse suggests that the fat body is the product of too much energy-in combined with too little energy-out (Gard and Wright, 2005). The “energy-in/energy-out” model of human body weights plays a prominent role in understanding the fat body and was commonly deployed throughout the focus group discussions. A dominant interpretation of this model suggests that fat people are fat because they simply do not exercise enough (read—“lazy”). Consequently, there has been an increased emphasis in physical education curriculum and health promotion strategies on fitness and physical activity as a means of fighting overweight and obesity (Gard and Wright, 2001; Rice, 2007). However, these health agendas ignore the fact that their reliance on obesity-informed health discourses is part of the problem because they create a situation where non-normatively sized and shaped individuals are stereotyped and discriminated against. This discrimination carries over into physical education classes, sporting environments, and exercise facilities (see Gard and Wright, 2001; Rice, 2007; Sykes and McPhail, 2008), creating spaces that are threatening and hostile to all bodies that do not meet discursively constituted bodily norms. Thus, the very discourses
that compel overweight and obese individuals to engage in sport and physical activity for the sake of their health are the same discourses that perpetuate a culture of normalization that serve to marginalize, pathologize, and discriminate against fat bodies which effectively excludes them from sport and physical activity spaces.

While there have been research projects that examine the discrimination or “body based harassment” (Larkin and Rice, 2005) non-normatively sized and shaped girls and young women experience in physical activity settings (see Larkin and Rice, 2005; Rice, 2007), there have been correspondingly few qualitative, sociological explorations of the experiences of boys and men (see Monaghan, 2007, 2008; Sykes and McPhail, 2008 for notable exceptions). Carla Rice (2007) found that young women who were identified as the “fat girl” experienced “continual framing according to the attribution of fat rather then by their actual and potential range of abilities [which served] to erode their physical agency” (p. 165). Similar patterns of stereotyping and framing were articulated by the young men at Pinevale, where they shared stories of their fat friends whose bodies were culturally constructed as unathletic and slow, stereotypes which eventually drove them away from sport and competition.

Whereas Larkin and Rice (2005) found that girls and young women experiencing such discrimination are likely to turn to “harmful solutions, such as starving, binging, purging, and other attempts at body alteration connected to food and eating” (p. 220), it remains unclear what practices young men turn to as a means of coping with pathologizing body stigmas. This is an area where greater research is needed. What we do know, however, is that women and “lesser men” (i.e. the disabled, the feminine, and smaller men, for example) end up bearing the burden of embodiment that larger, more masculine men cannot afford to acknowledge as part of their masculine subjectivity (Thomas, 1996). This means that masculine subjectivity can be recuperated by projecting embodiment onto others, which could take the form of
clear, however, is that fatness is not necessarily an embodiment that is compatible with normative masculinity, as is sometimes assumed (see Gard and Wright, 2005). Sport is a crucial cultural performance where boys and men learn and acquire the privileges of masculinity (Messner, 1992, 2007; Whitson, 1990), yet according to the young men from Pinevale, fat boys were systematically excluded from full and equal access to the institution of sport. Thus, masculinity is not an automatic extension of the male body and, indeed, depending on body size and shape, the male body may act as an impediment to the acquisition of a phallic masculine subjectivity.\textsuperscript{114}

Wright et al. (2006) found that the young men in their research did not articulate a “particularly reflective or resistant positioning…to the stigmatization of those who were not fit and/or were fat” (p. 715)\textsuperscript{115}. In contrast to this finding, the participants at the Pinevale Community Centre provided a critique of reductive body discourses that constructed the fat male body as unathletic and lazy. They did so by using life physical and verbal domination. Here, I’m thinking of the fat bully who has learned that his large body is his only access to phallic masculinity or the fat boyfriend who ridicules his girlfriend about her weight as a means of de-corporealizing his own body. Thus, I worry when Gard and Wright (2005) justify their exclusion of fat men from their research by arguing it is possible for “large [male] bodies” to be “powerful bodies, and appropriately masculine” (p. 161) that they are perpetuating the myth of maleness as disembodiment without exploring how maleness is differently gendered across a range of body shapes and sizes. Their assumption that fatness can be consistent with a space occupying masculinity without exploring the complex lived experiences of fat boys and men, actually entrenches and naturalizes the discursive construction of masculinity as an aggressive occupation of space, leaving few alternatives for fat boys and men to experiment with other, less dominating modes of embodiment. Put differently, the lack of nuanced research into the intersection of masculinity and fatness may result in the perpetuation of stereotypes about masculinity without the acknowledgement of how boys and men adopt “fat identities” and thus unhealthy relationships with their bodies and how these potentially play out in aggressive, dominating inter-personal relationships that serve to stabilize oppressive social hierarchies. I would suggest that the feminists should be keenly interested in masculinity and fatness because it may go some way in helping to understand how and who are the victims of male disembodiment.

\textsuperscript{114} Later in this chapter (see section ‘The Sporty Fat Guy’) I argue that fatness can be consistent with the masculine occupation of space.

\textsuperscript{115} It is interesting that none of the participants from Lawson—where the students are mostly from a middle-to upper-class background—provided a critique of obesity discourse characterizations that constructed fat bodies as lazy and unathletic. This is consistent with Wright et al.’s (2006) findings as well as the argument I made early in this chapter where I suggested that differently classed individuals take up health and body discourses in different ways. With the Pinevale Community Centre there was less emphasis on biomedical characterizations of body size as a indicator of health and there was a broader range of acceptable body sizes.
experiences to point to those fat bodies that were strong, athletic, and motivated. At the same time, however, they recognized the social pressures that work to exclude non-normative bodies from sport and physical activity spaces and practices. They described the processes by which their fat friends, despite their athletic competence, learned that fat bodies do not belong in sport settings. Thus, the “physical agency” (Rice, 2007) of their friends was eroded and they eventually dropped out of sport altogether. Findings such as these, along with those identified by scholars studying the experience of “fat girls” in education and physical educations contexts (see Larkin and Rice, 2005; Rice, 2007; Sykes and McPhail, 2008), point to the need for a re-evaluation of health promotion messages that construct young people (particularly non-normative sized youth) as unmotivated and lazy. More research needs to go into exploring how to make sporting and physical activity settings safe, supportive spaces where young people can experiment with exercise and physical activity as positive technologies of the self in forming the self into an embodied physical agent. While in this section I explored how the participants resisted and re-defined dominant constructions of the fat male body as unathletic and lazy, in the following section I examine how the young men used tactics of re-naming and deflection as a means of protecting those they cared for from the pathologizing stigma of dominant constructions of fatness.

**Proximity and Body and Health Discourses**

With the exception of the narratives in the preceding section, there was an absence of critique of the health and body discourses that stereotype the fat male body. Instead, the young men were more likely to talk about fat boys and men as lazy and unmotivated, with little recognition of the social and cultural barriers that constrain the
fat subject’s comfort and ability to fully participate in physical activity and sport. It may well be that the outrage the participants expressed at the fat discrimination in the narratives in the preceding section had more to do with the fact that the fat men experiencing the stigmatization were close friends. In other words, proximity to the fat person experiencing the discrimination seemed to play a role in how dominant health and body discourses were taken up, reworked, and/or resisted. This was particularly true when it was family members experiencing discrimination, as we can see in the way Alex, a participant at Lawson, challenged common sense obesity discourse in defense of his brother’s body size. In the following extract, the participants are discussing an image of a shirtless man with his gut protruding.

Luke: He doesn’t really take care of himself it looks like.
Alex: Unless he was born that way.
Carl: It could be genetics.
Luke: Could be, but you can still work out an’ that.
Alex: Not really. My brother’s a big kid and he doesn’t eat that much.
Luke: But if you’re lazy…
Alex: He’s not really, he’s just your average kid. He just weighs a lot more (FG#7_1, May 26, 2006, p. 25).

Alex resisted dominant constructions of the fat male body as lazy and irresponsible by turning to genetics. In this case, Alex fell back on “genetics” to explain his brother’s body size, effectively arguing that his fatness is beyond his control and therefore it would be unfair to hold him responsible for his body weight. Alex described his brother as a “big kid” who “doesn’t eat that much” and is “just your average kid”. Luke, however, drew upon dominant discourse to construct Alex’s brother as responsible for his body size when he suggested that he could work harder on controlling his weight. There was

116 Although referring to body weight as the outcome of genetic factors as opposed to individual responsibility would seem to remove body weight from moral assessments, Luke continues to assert that the individual can do something about genetics (i.e. work harder at losing weight through increased
thus a tension between Alex’s genetic explanation and dominant constructions that place
the body as a plastic entity that can be manipulated through discipline, hard work, and
self-denial (Shilling, 2005). By constructing the body as an object to be manipulated
through various technologies of the self, body shape and size come to be morally coded,
with a normatively sized and shaped body being the sign of a rational, well-disciplined
self (Lupton, 2003). To a large extent, obesity discourse is taken up by individuals as a
moral discourse that is less concerned with the “truth” about body weights than with
categorizing individuals on the basis of their body size and shape as more or less
responsible, dependent, and moral (Gard and Wright, 2005). Luke takes up and uses
obesity discourse to understand fat people as lazy and ultimately immoral, even in the
face of Alex’s narratives that contradict dominant constructions of fat people as lazy and
responsible for their body weights.

In a focus group at the Pinevale Community Centre Kareem also defended his
brother against discriminating health and body discourses,

Kareem: My brother worries about it [being fat], he’s not even dat fat…
John: Exactly.
Ted: How old is your brother?
Kareem: He’s one year younger den me.
Ted: Yeah, and does he worry about it?
Kareem: Well, kinda, he doesn’t really worry about it, but if you say anything…but
he’s not fat, he’s just a little chubby. (FG#3_1, Feb. 1, 2006, pp. 24-5)

And in a subsequent focus group,

Ted: What about ah, Kareem, last week you mentioned the difference between

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exercise). This is consistent with Novas and Rose (2000) who suggest that the identification of genetic risk
factors does not exonerate the individual, rather constructs a “genetically at risk” self, which “induces new
and active relations to oneself and one’s future” (p. 485). Thus, the individual identified as “genetically at
risk” must work that much harder to stave off illness and disorder, thereby intensifying the individual
responsibility for the self. See Chapter #6 Obesity Discourse, Healthism, and the (Neo)Liberal
Governmental Subject for an extended discussion of this phenomenon.
fat and chubby—talkin’ about your brother—you said he’s not fat but chubby.
Kareem: Yeah, he’s jus’ chubby.
Ted: What’s that mean?
Kareem: Like he’s a little bigger den him (points at Syed), he’s jus’ chubby, but he thinks he’s fat ‘cause he’s not like me, he’s not like skinny or a little bit fit, he’s…se when you see…if you look at another person dat’s ah skinnier den you, you’re gonna think you’re fat…an’ he’s not really fat, he’s jus’ chubby. Fat is really big, wider an’ also thicker.
John: Well, I tink…okay, chubby is like de maximum of medium. (FG#3_2, Feb. 8, 2006, p. 20)

Kareem re-defined his brother’s body using what he perceived to be the less pathologizing “chubby” as opposed to “fat”. Kareem re-named his brothers “pathology” by claiming that he is not “fat”, but “chubby”. John tried to help out by explaining that “chubby” is the “maximum of medium”, thus suggesting that Kareem’s brother was still within the “normal” category, just on the upper end of it.

Both Alex and Kareem recognized the pathologizing effects of health and body discourses and worked to shield those close to them from harms way by deflecting and resisting dominant representations of the fat or obese body. Neither of the strategies they used to protect their brothers directly challenged obesity discourse and its broader discursive effects, but rather leaves fully in tact the core assumption that the fat body is a health “problem” and an undesirable subject position. In both cases, Alex and Kareem deployed individualized strategies to defend the identities of their respective brothers. In other words, they explained why pathologizing health and body discourses were not applicable to their brothers without thinking about how these discourses were themselves problematic. It is not that obesity discourse identifies, medicalizes, and, ultimately sets out to eradicate the fat body that was troublesome for Alex and Kareem, nor was it popular cultural narratives that construct the fat body as undesirable, degenerate even.
These characterizations of the fatness seem to be self-evident and truthful, according to these young men. Rather, the predicament for them lies in the misapplication of those pathologizing discourses to the bodies of their brothers. In other words, both Alex and Kareem used existing body categories to re-define or re-categorize the bodies of their respective brother’s as a means of shielding them from pathologizing health and body discourses. This was a necessary move because of the constraining effects of discourse.

Discourse operates as a “social constraint” that incites and validates some statements while de-legitimizing and devaluing others (Fraser, 1989). Moreover, the speaking subject also factors into what can and cannot be said and, in this sense, not all subjects are equally positioned in relation to biomedical discourses (Harding, 1998). Alex and Kareem, for example, were just young men, barely out of elementary school. Who were they to speak against the paralyzing discursive weight of medical science? Michel Foucault understands the relationship between the power of the medical statement and the power of the subject to speak a statement. He writes,

> medical statements cannot come from anybody; their value, efficacy, even their therapeutic powers, and generally speaking, their existence as medical statements cannot be dissociated from the statutorily defined person who has the right to make them. (Foucault cited in Shogan, 1999, p. 12)

Health and body discourses empower some subject positions with the authority to speak while casting others as unqualified as well as making some statements culturally intelligible while rendering others as unspeakable. In so doing, dominant power/knowledge frameworks of health and its relationship to the body remain hermeneutically sealed, and provided the young men with limited cultural repertoires to re-think the relationship between health and bodies. The subjective integrity of both Alex and Kareem was partially constituted through the proper appropriation of health and body
discourses, and a misappropriation could potentially result in their de-subjectification (Davies, 2000). To occupy the position of the rational agentic subject one must appropriate discourse in a fashion that is consistent with dominant discursive regimes.

Debra Lupton (1995) notes that individuals who challenge the veracity of biomedical discourse are constructed as “irrational, self-deluding, and irresponsible” (p. 90). Health and body discourses do not just position the “unhealthy” silenced subject but, in the same move, position the “healthy” speaking subject. Thus, Alex and Kareem work within dominant health and body discursive frameworks—rather than outside and in opposition to them—for fear of jeopardizing their own identities as knowledgeable and properly subjected speaking subjects. Although the participants from the Pinevale Community Centre recognized the humiliating and oppressive effects of discriminatory representations, as was presented in the preceding section (see “Fat Oppression” in this chapter), this did not preclude them from taking part in and perpetuating fat discrimination themselves in other narrative exchanges.

**Body-Based Harassment**

Much of the literature on fatness and discrimination/oppression focuses on the experiences of girls and women. For example, Larkin and Rice (2005) have argued that we need to talk in terms of “body-based harassment” when dealing with body discrimination amongst young people, girls and women in particular. They advocate for this term over “teasing”, which they suggest conceals and infantilizes the more serious effects of body-based discriminations. Larkin and Rice define “body-based harassment” as all “derogatory or objectifying comments directed towards a girl’s [sic] body” (p.
Instances of body-based harassment could include racist, sexist, homophobic, and sizeist comments. The youth at the Pinevale Community Centre were not beyond teasing and discriminating against the fat male body. Although in a previous focus group (FG#4_1, Feb. 22, 2006, p. 22) the participants had identified and critiqued fat discrimination and how it had unfairly oppressed their friends, in the extract below, they take up dominant constructions of fatness as unathletic, funny, and out of control.

Ted: So do you think it’s hard being [fat and male]?
Jamie: Well yeah, ‘cause you have to keep running up and down de court…you’ll get tired.
Ajay: All de way up, plus if you’re fat, people will be laughing at you if you are not good at sport in gym class…
Jamie: Yeah!
Omar: Remember, last year, when we were in grade eight, dis guy, his name is Zeek, he made de basketball team, he was fat, and when he was runnin’ up and down de court he couldn’t like handle it and he would be sweatin’ so much dat, dat de pants dey have for him were so tight, and everyone just started laughin’ at him. An’ den he felt bad, he didn’t even want to play. Remember Zeek?
Ted: Who was laughin’ at him?
Omar: De fans and everyone, and even de players. Dey were like “Oh look at dat fat guy, look at his gut jiggle an’ stuff!”
Ted: Players on your team or players on the other team?
Ajay: Both.
Omar: Both, even our players.

Whereas this group of young men previously recognized the humiliating and destructive effects of body size discriminations, in the exchange above they become the purveyors of such discrimination. Once again, it is important to note how constructions of fatness are fluid and differentially experienced and articulated depending on variety of factors, including relationship between the fat person and self (see section “Proximity and Fatness” in this chapter), athletic competence of the fat person (see section “Sporty Fat

117 While Larkin and Rice limit their definition of body-based harassment to girl’s for the purposes of their study, in this research I am suggesting that the term be expanded to include the body-based discriminations that boys and men experience as well.
Guy” in Chapter #5), as well as social and cultural position of the speaking subject (see Chapter #4 The Discourse of Fatness).

It is important to note that Zeek would have been a relatively good basketball player given that he was playing on the school team in an area of Toronto renown for its high caliber of basketball. However, like Tiny and Rick, the two heavier athletes discussed previously, body size discrimination in the form of ridicule and teasing damaged Zeek’s sporting experience to the point where he eventually stopped playing basketball altogether (FG#3_1; FG#4_1). Again, obesity-informed health discourse and normative body beautiful discourse legitimate fat discrimination (Gard and Wright, 2001; Rice, 2005) which ultimately exclude young men—and women, for that matter—from sporting and physical activity contexts. Somewhat ironically, health and body discourses are ostensibly designed to promote increased levels of physical activity and exercise amongst overweight and obese individuals but, according to the narratives of the young men involved in the present research, they can have the exact opposite effect, driving boys and men from the very physical activity contexts that health promotion discourses claim are necessary to the production of healthy bodies.

A little further on in the same focus group discussion, I probed the participants on why fatness was funny.

Ted: Is fat funny?
Ajay: No.
Omar: De way it jiggles.
Jamie: (Laughs)
Ajay: Jiggles. (Laughs)
Omar: De way it jiggles, I’m sorry.
Omar: Dere is dis guy named Steve, when he runs he makes limp ‘cause he’s so fat.
Jamie: Steve’s so fat.
Omar: …an’ everyone’s like “He’s makin’ an earth quake”
Jamie: You know all fat people dere shoe’s is like…
Sean: Yeah!
Jamie: …worn out at de sides…
Sean: Yeah, de sides and de back.
Jamie: Worn out at de side.
Sean: Look at how dey walk.
Jamie: Well, look at Paul’s shoes…worn out. (FG#4_1, Feb, 22, 2006, pp. 22-3).

The “jiggliness” and “sweatiness” of fatness poses a problem for masculinity because it points to a fluidity or leakiness that is culturally coded as feminine (Grosz, 1994; Longhurst, 2005a). In western ontology, the viscous, fluid, and indeterminate is coded as feminine and is subordinated to the fixity and solidity of the masculine (Grosz, 1994; Theweleit, 1989). In short, the fluidity of the feminine is marked as inferior to the concrete and phallic. This is not to say that women’s bodies are in actuality fluid and ambiguous, but rather to highlight the degree to which femininity and feminine embodiment are constructed as such within a phallocentric context (Grosz, 1994). In contrast to the fluidity or leakiness of the feminine body, the masculine sporting body is supposed to be contained, in control, and tight (Pronger, 1999; Shogan, 1999). The “jiggliness” or leakiness of the fat male body is so troubling precisely because it threatens to dissolve the identity constituting border between the masculine-self and the feminine-Other. Robyn Longhurst (2005b) writes of the fat men with breast that “breasted men disrupt understandings of sexual specificity because they are coded as feminine-fluid and as abject bodies that are subject to loathing and derision” (p. 165). Through laughter, derision, and mockery the fat male body is abjected, or displaced from its position of masculine privilege, thus preserving the integrity of the border between the masculine and feminine, and thereby recuperating the category of the masculine as concrete and phallic. Thus, the ridicule and derision that the participants described was as much about
preserving the masculine category as a culturally meaningful one as it is about containing and controlling the fat body. However, as I describe in chapter five, the fat male body can “phallicize” its flows (Grosz, 1994) by performing a particular aggressive, space occupying masculinity. In the section that follows, I explore how the participants constructed fat discrimination as a positive technology of the self.

**Fat Discrimination as Normalization**

As I argued earlier in this chapter, fat discrimination results in the oppression of individuals with certain body sizes and shapes (see section “Fat Oppression”), but some of the participants also suggested that fat discrimination functions as a positive normalizing technology. The liberal humanist subject is implicitly a slender subject (Hartley, 2001) and any embodiment short of that ideal is culturally coded as a flawed body type. Jamie, a participant from the Pinevale Community Centre, explained that the marginalization and exclusion of fat people serves to help fat people take control of their bodies:

Jamie: …like, like, when you’re modeling, right, you model a fat person wants to come, and you’re like “No, you have to lose weight!”. Dat’s actually good for dem ‘cause dey could actually lose weight. Don’t have to be fat [said with exaggerated and disdainful emphasis] for de rest of deir lives.

Sean: So dat’s an example.

Ted: So, what were you saying, Jamie?

Jamie: Like, like you know how dey’re sayin’ dat “Why can’t fat people model?”

Ted: Yeah.

Jamie: …and you know dey say dat you have to lose weight? Dat’s actually good for dem, ‘cause dey won’t have to be fat for de rest of deir life, dey might go work out, be skinny an’ den dey come back, can be skinny again.

(FG#4_1, Feb. 22, 2006, p. 43)

Jamie argues that creating exclusionary environments will help people to help themselves take control of their body weights. According to Jamie, fat discrimination plays an
important and valuable function in normalizing bodies. Jamie is not alone in his thinking. In fact, the notion of stigmatizing fat people as a technique of normalization has become a prominent weapon in the “war on obesity” (Gard and Wright, 2001). This is the hypothesis of Greg Critser’s best selling novel Fat Land: How Americans Became the Fattest People in the World. Critser suggests that there are no longer “boundaries” in contemporary America, but rather an ethic of accommodation prevails where kids are allowed to eat what they want, purpose-built environments (i.e., seating and turn-stiles) accommodate increasing body sizes and weights, governments are afraid to regulate food and diet, and “political correctness” prevents people from directly confronting and publicly humiliating the overweight and obese and, taken together, these lax cultural attitudes have resulted in the ever-increasing waist lines of Americans. Critser argues, in other words, that we need to make it more uncomfortable or less easy to be fat in America by (re)-establishing normative physical, social, and political boundaries that marginalize, exclude, and humiliate fat people which, he argues, will compel the overweight and obese to lose weight.

The notion of making fatness uncomfortable as a technique of normalization came up in a focus group at Lawson. In the exchange below, Bobby was responding to an image of Homer Simpson standing in his underwear, his belly protruding, with a huge smile on his face, a TV remote in one hand, and a beer in the other. Bobby worries that such a representation of male fatness may send the message that it is possible to be fat as well as happy.

Bobby: It’s [The Simpson’s television program] that a bit outta shape guys can still be happy. Like he’s smiling [Homer Simpson] he’s got the TV remote in one hand and he’s got the beer in the other, it’s promoting the idea
that you do not necessarily have to be extremely fit to be happy. (FG#6_1, May 3, 2006, p. 6)

In a subsequent focus group I returned to the same discussion.

Ted: I wanted to talk a bit about...the other day we were telling about Homer and somebody said that Homer promotes the idea that you don’t have to be extremely fit to be happy. And I was wondering are these representations of sort of the fat man, are they bad for us? Like, do they tell us...do they give us the wrong idea?

Sidney: Yeah, I think so.

Bobby: Yeah, you see these movies and there’s all these big guys in there and their moms are like “Eat, eat, eat”, you just stuff your stomach and you just keep getting fatter and fatter and then it gets harder and harder to get healthy again. And when you’re like 30 pounds overweight (pauses) I don’t think that’s really healthy, you can’t get control of your body, you just keep eating, that’s not healthy.

Sidney: What if it’s just like, if they’re not obese\textsuperscript{118} but like they don’t look that fit, but they are still happy, is that sending a good message? Like you don’t have to be completely fit to be happy. Like you can be happy like however you are. And like, obviously people want their body type they can’t achieve, like a ripped body, then it’s better to let them know they can be happy with themselves instead of getting like the perfect body. Like I agree, too, that it’s, like it’s kinda bad to show that like say being obese would be a good thing, but it’s also, like, I dunno...(FG# 6_2, May 10, 2006, pp. 6-7)

In this exchange, most of the participants argued that representations of “happiness” should be limited to normatively sized and shaped bodies. They suggested that positive representations of fat bodies and unhealthy practices (i.e. overeating, sedentariness, and alcohol consumption) linked with happiness potentially send the “wrong” health message that “you do not necessarily have to be extremely fit to be happy”. Although Sidney took exception to this perspective, the other members of the focus group suggest that fatness should be represented as an uninhabitable subjectivity. For these young men, a healthy and happy subjectivity was representationally linked to a particular type of embodiment,

\textsuperscript{118} Note the use of biomedical terms—“obese”, “overweight”, and “healthy”—to describe bodies and body practices, as compared to the young men from Pinevale who were more likely to use more colloquial language.
one which was normatively sized and shaped. Effectively, the young men take up obesity discourse as justification for limiting the cultural representations of the fat body to one’s where the fat individual was unhappy, psychologically lacking, and in a chronic battle to lose weight. The young men in this focus group argued that dominant discourse should not construct the fat subject as being—happy, proud, and satisfied with their bodies—but as becoming—struggling to lose weight, depressed, and frustrated at their lack of control. Sam Murray (2005) argues that her embodied subjectivity as a fat person is one of becoming. She writes,

The act of living fat is itself an act of defiance, an eschewal of discursive modes of bodily being. Seemingly, the fat body exists as a deviant, perverse form of embodiment and, in order to be accorded personhood, is expected to engage in a continual process of transformation, of becoming and, indeed, unbecoming. The process of transformation entails a constant disavowal of one’s own flesh. The fat body can only exist (however uncomfortably) as a body aware of its own necessary impermanence. Consequently, in experiencing my fat body there is a sense of suspension, of deferral, of hiatus. One is waiting to become “thin”, to become “sexual”, waiting to become. (p. 155)

Thus, in order for the fat person to “become” a subject at all they must subject themselves to various health and body regimes of normalization. By arguing that representations of fatness be limited to pathology, deviance, unhappiness, and ill-health, the participants at Lawson perpetuate dominant discourse that constructs fat individuals as occupying uninhabitable subjectivities. However, television cartoon series like The Simpsons and The Family Guy are satirical observations of contemporary American life. In other words, they are not necessarily to be taken as straightforward commentaries, which the participants acknowledged later in the focus group.
A little further on in the same focus group discussion, however, Kyle argued that few people were going to take seriously representations of characters like Homer Simpson and Fat Albert\textsuperscript{119}.

Kyle: …if you see something like Fat Albert they’re, I mean, he’s just a joke, Family Guy and The Simpsons, they’re portrayed as a joke. I mean some kids will take what that the wrong way and think, “Oh yeah, this guy’s happy”, right, but most people just see that as like, “Wow, I really don’t want to end up like him”…(FG#6_2, May 10, 2006, p. 7)

Popular representations of the fat male body are ambivalent. While, on the one hand, they connote a positive masculine identity at any size, on the other hand, they construct the fat male body as ridiculous, as a “joke”. The sentiment of Homer Simpson as a joke was repeated across many of the focus groups, including one at the Pinevale Recreation Centre.

Ted: What about that? [Image of Homer Simpson]
John: Ahhh…[Laughs]
Phil: Brewski…
John: He’s just a chump!
Syed: You can tell he doesn’t care about his bodies.
John: The picture tells you everything. Okay, the person likes to sit around, drink booze, and watch TV…
Phil: Not go to work.
John: And sleep at work, I mean, c’mon, no! (FG#3_1, Feb. 1, 2006, p. 11)

Popular media representations tap into and perpetuate stereotyped constructions of the fat male body as lazy, stupid, and out of control (Bell and Valentine, 1997). While the preceding narratives demonstrate that there are multiple ways of reading representations of the fat male body, I would argue that these readings share the underlying assumption that fatness is an undesirable mode of embodiment and, ultimately is the mark of an uninhabitable subjectivity. On the one hand, there is the argument that “positive” representations of the fat male body must be limited because they send the wrong

\textsuperscript{119} The original Fat Albert, which was created and narrated by Bill Cosby, was re-made as a movie in 2004.
message to the viewing population, while on the other hand, comedic representations of fatness like those found in *The Simpsons* or *The Family Guy* are read as completely absurd mockeries of masculinity. In either case, the fat male body is seen in a negative light, either as a “joke” not to be taken seriously, or as a problem that needs to be limited, contained, and/or eradicated.

In reference to media representations of the fat female body, Le’a Kent (2001) suggests that the fat body is “caught up in a narrative of erasure” (p. 134) where the properly constituted agentic subject is a “presumptively thin” self, “cruelly jailed in a fat body” (p. 135). In order to gain full subjecthood, Kent argues, the fat female body must shed the fatness that encases the “real” person lying within. However, girls and women are not uniquely subjected to narratives of erasure, as the preceding narratives indicate. The fat male body is similarly subject to normalizing technologies of erasure through representational practices that limit, contain, and mock the fat male subject.

Happiness, however, was not the only emotion that the young men denied the fat male body. During other focus groups the young men spoke disparagingly of fat men who expressed “confidence” and “pride”. For example, a group of participants from Lawson had different reactions to the fat male characters in the popular television cartoon, *The Family Guy*. In the following excerpt, Ronald is describing a particular episode where Chris, the son, experiences fat discrimination.

Ronald: [The episode] started off with something where Chris ah is standing at a diving board at a pool and he had his shirt on and someone came up to his father [Peter] and said, “Sir, I’m gonna need to get you to move your mini-van from the diving board” [Group giggles], and then Peter said “That’s my son, he’s just refusing to take his shift off to go swimming”.

Jack: Yeah, I actually felt bad for Chris in that episode.

Ronald: Yeah.

Adam: Yeah.
Marty: This other time they were at the shopping mall and these two guards thought that Chris was smuggling a ham in his shirt, and they like lift up his shirt and they were like, “Oh, he’s just a really fat kid”. [Group laughs]

Ted: Do you think—it’s interesting, why do you feel bad for Chris in that one and ah do you ever feel bad for Peter?

Adam: No.

Ronald: Peter’s not self-conscious about it [his weight].

Jack: Yeah, Peter’s really confident, Chris is like…

Edward: And he doesn’t care.

Ronald: Um-hm.

And a little further on in the discussion,

Marty: Aside from that, Peter is just obnoxious and annoying. Like, you don’t feel bad for him ‘cause you’re like, “God, you’re annoying, you deserve that”. Chris is, well, not intelligent, but aside from that he is a fun guy. (FG#1_2, Oct. 26, 2006, p. 7)

Being comfortable, confident, and aloof were narratively constructed as incompatible with fatness. The participants argued that the “proper” fat male subject should perform his fatness as a mark of shame, anxiety, and social pathology, thus rendering him acceptable as a subject of empathy and compassion. The fat male subject who displays confidence and a lack of concern over his corpulence deserves the public humiliation and ridicule that he endures. Thus, the proper performance of fatness is not only an expressed desire to transform the body through diet and exercise, but also a particular way of expressing and living a fat identity. There is, in other words, an appropriate way to perform fatness, where culturally constructed expectations of the fat body compel particular embodied and emotional performances.

This emotio-corporeal performance stems from the cultural belief that it is impossible for the liberal humanist subject to be both fat and psychologically stable. Bronwyn Davies (2000) writes that “displaying the correct emotions for the situation is an important part of being properly subjected, or having taken up the correct liberal
humanist version of the self” (p. 156). Thus, the fat subject is discursively compelled to display appropriately remorseful emotions as a result of their “flawed” embodiment. It is possible to see how fatness is discursively constructed as a medical, social, cultural, and political pathology to be eradicated through disciplinary technologies—as I mentioned previously, fatness is constructed as an uninhabitable identity. However, male fatness is not always constructed as uninhabitable. In Chapter Five I explore how in specific cultural contexts and amongst localized communities, male fatness was recuperated as a positive way of being masculine, particularly when it meets the masculine imperative for the aggressive occupation of space.

Conclusion

The preceding narratives demonstrate how the young men from Pinevale took up and used health and body discourses in a very different way than did the young men from Lawson. Identity is multiply interpellated and thus a more nuanced understanding of how situated subjects see, interpret, and experience their bodies and the bodies of others from their situated positionings needs to be explored. Recognizing the multiple perspectives from which situated subjects see the world enables us to embrace the recognition that eyes do not see the “truth”, but rather are specific and localized “ways of seeing” that engender situated “ways of life” (Haraway, 1991, 190). Thus, interpretations of body size and shape and their relationship to health and fitness are not merely biomedical facts, as health experts such as obesity scientists, health promoters, and health educators might have us believe, but are always situated interpretations of a version of “truth” that are productive of particular and situated lived subjectivities. The complex, shifting, and situated manner in which the participants took up and articulated health discourse
challenges the simplisitic assumptions of the behavioral modification approach to health promotion, where it is assumed that providing the population with “accurate” health knowledge will result in improved health behaviours (McElroy, 2002; Lupton, 2003; Kelly, 1998; Wright and Burrows, 2004). Health experts need to account for the manner in which health knowledges are both embedded in particular social and cultural assumptions (Crawford, 1994, 2006; Gard and Wright, 2005) as well as the way in which these “situated knowledges” (Haraway, 1991) are differentially taken up and deployed from particular social locations (Wright and Burrows, 2004). Gaining a more sophisticated understanding of how health meanings, practices, and identities exist at the crossroads of socio-cultural conditions is crucial to understanding why young people do health the way they do. It helps to direct attention to the investments young people have in everyday health choices (Ioannou, 2003, p. 357), and how these investments are meaningful within particular gender, racial, ethno-cultural, and social class circumstances. Furthermore, a more nuanced understanding of this sort helps to prevent the moralizing generalizations that position young people as ignorant, irrational, and out-of-control (Lesko, 2001; Lupton and Tulloch, 1998) with respect to their health understandings and practices. Constructions of young people as lazy, gluttonous, and out-of-control—representations that are common in obesity discourse (Gard and Wright, 2005)—are replaced with richer, more developed analyses that consider how health discourses compete with a range of discourses in the constitution of the embodied subject.

Moreover, the situated and fluid ways in which health discourses are articulated are not just reflective of different embodied social locations, but are at the same time
constitutive of those locations. Robert Crawford (1994) reminds us that “‘health’ is a key concept in the fashioning of identity” (p. 1347). “Health”, he argues, is not just a biological and practical matter, but also “metaphorically layered, packed with connotations about what it means to be a good, respectable, and responsible person” (p. 1348). Health serves as a symbolic marker of class, race, and sexuality. Thus, the ability to perform health—to talk about it, practice it, and embody it—are practices that constitute a particular social identity. Simon Williams (1998) takes up Crawford’s notion of health as identity-constituting and explains that,

health...is not simply something one *has*, or *is*, rather it constitutes a reiterative set of ritualized practices by which one, literally and metaphorically, becomes ‘viable’ at all...Health, in other words, is a prime site from which claims to social membership are demonstrated and the material re-working of the body occurs. (p. 410)

Thus, global health discourses were taken up by the participants in my research within local contexts as a means of articulating a sense of belonging to particular social communities. Whereas at Lawson—an exclusive private school for the “intellectually gifted”—the use of biomedical health discourses served to establish—both metaphorically and as an inscribed embodiment—the white, middle-class status of the participants, the racialized, poor working-class members from the Pinevale Community

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120 Although the determination of racial identity through visible markers is problematic because there is the potential to “essentialize, homogenize, and fix identity in such characterizations” (Cooky and McDonald, 2005, p.162). I deemed it to be an important exercise in my research because I am trying to unpack the process by which racial hierarchies are reproduced through health discourses. Not all the participants at Lawson self-identified as a particular ethno-racial identity, but using commonsense notions that understand race as visibly marked on the body, I visibly discerned that four of the participants were Asian Canadian while the other ten were understood to be white based on physical appearance. Indeed, when I argue that the reiterative and highly regulated performance of health produces a white, middle class identity, I am not suggesting whiteness as a fixed biological essence or a skin colour. Rather, I understand race to be a discursive construction (Dyer, 1997) that is embodied through socio-cultural expectations of what ‘raced’ bodies do or should do (Shogan, 1999). Whiteness, then, is produced through a set of reiterative performances that, within a particular racializing logic, mark the “white” body as “clean, pure, contained, orderly, controlled, restrained, and disciplined” (Shogan, 1999, 64). Thus, health practices that produce a slender, “healthy”, disciplined body is consistent with cultural markers of “whiteness”, regardless of skin colour.
Centre were more likely to use colloquial, non-medical language. When they did use the language of “health” they did so in fluid and dynamic ways that marked off the boundaries of community membership\(^\text{121}\) as well as proper performances of social identity (i.e. strength and athletic competence=dominant masculinity) as much as biomedical “truths”. Although these “inaccurate” readings of health discourses could be interpreted as a “lack of education” that requires expert intervention and health (re)education, others have cautioned (Wright and Burrows, 2004) that such conclusions serve to marginalize different social and cultural ways of knowing the body, as well as the individuals that embody these understandings. As previously mentioned, health discourse generally, and obesity discourse specifically, are not objective scientific knowledges, but are inscribed with cultural and moral assumptions that privilege some ways of being and knowing (i.e. white, middle class, masculine) over others (i.e. non-white, poor, feminine) (Campos, 2004; Rich and Evans, 2005; Gard and Wright, 2005). Thus, it is highly problematic to, first, assume that health knowledges are neutral scientific “facts” (Murray, 2005; Gard and Wright, 2005) and, second, to impose these knowledges onto other “ignorant” ways of knowing the body. To do so both serves to stigmatize different cultural ways of knowing and embodiment as unhealthy (Wright and Burrows, 2004), and even “unenlightened” (Smith, 1999), not in the name of health, as we tend to assume, but as techniques of constructing and stabilizing the “normal” and normalizing the “abnormal” (McDermott, 2007). The final analysis chapter explores how the young men involved in this research used the multiple and conflicting discourses available to them to understand and explain bodies—both theirs and others—and their embodied practices.

\(^{121}\) See Chapter #5 Men, Masculinity, and Fatness, section Proximity to the Fat Body.
CHAPTER EIGHT

COMPETING DISCOURSES

It was evident from the young men’s narratives that multiple, conflicting, and contradictory discourses structured their experiences of health and health related practices. Although the participants demonstrated a strong awareness and understanding of health messages, adherence to dominant health messaging was not always the primary motivation for doing and engaging in the practices that they did. Nor did they always refer to abstract health standards as a means of making sense of bodies, both their own and others. Rather, the young men rationalized their practices and embodied perspectives using multiple discourses, including health and body discourses, discourses of consumption, as well as identity discourses such as gender and age. Thus, the participants did not assume that the logic of dominant health discourse was the only rationality available to them. They spliced together narratives in creative and complex ways that demonstrated a situated rationality of their own. Ioannou (2003) argues that the dominant “health logic” prevents researchers from examining young people’s lives from any other perspective than the health perspective. In the following paragraphs I, like Ioannou, take the rationalities of the young men who participated in my research seriously. I do not measure them against some abstract “accurate” health standard, but rather explore them as containing a rationality of their own.

This chapter is divided into three sections. The first section explores how the young men made sense of technology consumption. More specifically, it examines how they talked about and understand their own technology use as well as that of others within a social climate where video and digital technologies have been “biomedicalized”
(Clarke et al., 2003) by “obesity epidemic” discourse (Gard and Wright, 2005). The second section examines how the participants attributed causation of body weight and shape using the reductive opposition between “genetics”, on one hand, and “lifestyle” on the other. Finally, the chapter closes with an analysis of how the social construction of age influenced how the young men spoke about body size and shape. In addition, this section demonstrates how differently situated youth made sense of bodies according to their social location. The common theme through all of the sections is to highlight how multiple and, at times, contradictory discourses criss-cross the body in rendering the body and its embodied practices culturally meaningful.

**Technology**

There is growing concern that youth and children in Canada are facing a health crisis of overweight and obesity brought about by sedentary western lifestyles (Chief Medical Officer Health Report, 2004). Lay and expert assumptions posit media technologies—particularly television, computers, and video games—as promoting a culture of sedentariness that is putting the health of Canada’s youth at risk (Active Healthy Kids Canada, 2008). For instance, Canada’s Report Card on Physical Activity for Children & Youth recently awarded the nation’s youth a letter grade of “F” for “screen time” suggesting that the “data are clear: all children, regardless of background, are spending too much time in front of screens” (Active Healthy Kids Canada, 2008). Despite the growing discourse that positions youth as lazy and addicted to technology, there has been little consideration of how young people consume and make sense of technology in their everyday lives (see Crawford, 2005; Goodings, Locke, and Brown, 2007; Wilson, 2002 for notable exceptions). In this section, I argue that the “moral panic”
(Chritcher, 2003) surrounding young people’s leisure technology use serves to obscure several important considerations, including: how young people make sense of both their own and others technology practices; how young people resist health discourses that pathologize media technologies; and finally, how young people use technology as a practice of self-constitution.

Despite the current moralism around media technologies (see Active Healthy Kids Canada, 2008), the participants talked about technology in complex and highly nuanced ways. Their stories demonstrated that media technologies sit at the cross-roads of multiple and competing discourses that the young men took up and deployed in diverse and contextually specific ways in the process of fashioning a stable masculine subjectivity. In this section, I examine the ambivalent relationship the participants had with media technologies. On the one hand, they were quick to take up dominant moral discourses that construct media technology as an evil, corrupting force that saps the social, emotional, and physical energies of youth. Within this perspective, there was widespread agreement across the focus groups and interviews that certain media, particularly violent television programs and video games, were harmful to individual well-being. On the other hand, however, the young men also spoke of media as a positive “technology of the self” that could be deployed in fashioning a culturally meaningful masculine subjectivity.

Technology, Laziness, and the Fat-Other

Discourses, Foucault explains, are “practices that systematically form the objects of which they speak” (Foucault cited in Wright, 2004, p. 20). Obesity discourse, then, shapes or constructs fat bodies by providing a framework for thinking about, talking
about, and seeing the body. A fundamental and reoccurring narrative that the young men drew upon to talk about fatness was the connection between obesity and technology. Technology, the participants argued, was a cause of laziness which was thus directly linked to fatness. In many ways, it seemed as though the participants could not talk about fat people without at the same time talking about the way they consumed technology. For the participants, the fat body equaled a lazy body, which equaled a body addicted to technology. In the following extract, the participants drew the connection between fatness, laziness, and technology.

Josh: Dey’re [fat kids] lazy. Dey get home from school, stay home on de computer.
Ted: Heavy people, are they all lazy?
Akeem: Yeah, I think so.
Josh: Yeah, ‘cause when you’re becoming fat, um, when you’re startin’ to be fat, you jus’ think you won’t do a lot. You start getting’ lazy, bored, probably. It’s like when you’re bored an’ you wanna go somewhere your will say no. (FG#5_3, Apr. 19, 2006, p. 13)

Obesity discourse that links fatness, laziness, and technology proved to be a key discursive resource through which the participants understood the practices of their friends, peers, and acquaintances. It was quite common for the participants to evaluate the health and wellbeing of their friends and peers by analyzing their patterns of video gaming. For instance, during a focus group discussion at Lawson, the participants had the following to say about obesity.

Ted: A lot of people are saying that video games are causing obesity. Do you buy that?
Misha: Um, my friend is obese and he plays 24/7. He goes to sleep at like 11 and wakes up at 7 and has like a PSP or a PSIII [Play Station II] and like he games constantly.
Vincent: Like if you obsess and game non-stop than I guess you have problems ‘cause you’re not doing anything else.
Misha: He [his friend] eats really healthy food, but he’s at home all the time, he
doesn’t go anywhere, he doesn’t do any exercise. He’s just at home all day.
Vince: I guess most people would be fine if they just game in moderation.
CR: Yeah, and exercise.

(FG#2_1, Nov. 2, 2006, pp. 3-4)

By focusing on technology as the cause of obesity, as reductive health promotion discourse tends to do (see Active Healthy Kids Canada, 2008), many of the other complex social, cultural, and biological factors that influence body size and shape are overlooked. In place of a nuanced articulation of the socio-cultural body, the participants took up the neo-liberal rhetoric of “obesity epidemic” discourse that situated the fat body as a lazy, techno-addicted body. Indeed, obesity discourse provided the participants with a lens by which to understand and make sense of their fat peers as out of control and undisciplined.

Two themes run through each of the two preceding extracts that were common to most of narratives that linked fatness and technology. First, was the theme of the “home” as a place of sedentariness and thus risk. Whereas at one time the home used to be a “safe” space which, within the context of “obesity epidemic” discourse, it is increasingly being re-articulated as a primary site of unhealthy practices and and bodies (Burrows and Wright, 2004). Second, was the notion of exercise as an antidote to unhealthy living. Increasingly exercise is not valued for the embodied pleasure it offers, but as a mechanism for disciplining and taking control of the unruly, potentially pathological, body (Gard and Wright, 2001; Pronger, 2002) In the following sections I explore these themes in greater detail.
Obesegenic Environment

The notion of a generalized “obesegenic” (Miller, 2006) environment is increasingly used to highlight the supposedly in-built sedentariness of our contemporary way of life. In order to demonstrate the perils of our current society, obesity commentators have taken to juxtaposing western lifestyles against those of prehistoric civilizations (Gard and Wright, 2005). The argument is quite simple: western civilization has given rise to time saving technologies that have resulted in a decrease in “incidental physical activity”. The “obesegenic” explanation of body size and weight was used in several of the focus groups. While talking about an image of Homer Simpson, Jordan commented about Homer’s fatness:

Jordan: If he was born like 2000 years ago he would never look like that [referring to an image of Homer] ‘cause you had to be active to survive and now that we can buy everything, walk into a grocery store and buy it […] you’ve got all this energy going into nothing that’s how we’re gonna turn out ‘cause he can’t do anything. (FG #7-1, July 4, 2006, p. 6)

Here, Jordan drew upon the notion of an “obesegenic” environment to explain increasing body weights. According to this narrative, obesity is almost inevitable given western reliance on time and energy-saving technologies. Jordan suggested that such technologies disrupt energy balance, where people no longer have to expend as much energy on daily routines of securing the basics of survival. Thus, in comparing contemporary western civilization with civilizations from many thousands of years ago, our daily routines are more sedentary. What is most interesting about the “obesegenic” environment argument, however, is that almost all of the participants across the various research sites self-identified as neither fat nor sedentary. In other words, despite their narratives of the perilous entrapments of the obesegenic environments in which they lived, these young
men constructed themselves as having enough will-power to maintain a healthy or normative body weight through a lifestyle that included regular daily physical activity. In this sense, “obesity epidemic” narratives were taken up and deployed as central components of self-constitution, whereby the participants drew a boundary between themselves as active, normatively embodied subjects over and against the fat, over-technologized Other who, they argued, succumbs too easily to the conveniences of western civilization. The construct of a “time before” was not limited to prehistoric societies, however, as will be demonstrated in the following section.

A Time Before Obesity

“Obesity epidemic” discourse centres around a nostalgia for a time gone-by where kids were supposedly more active than they are today (Gard and Wright, 2005). Both popular and expert representations draw comparisons between the technology-enabled sedentariness of contemporary children and youth with those from more active, outdoor-oriented generations of a different era. The narratives of the participants implicitly contained a temporal orientation that inferred a time before the twin epidemic of obesity and sedentariness that is supposedly plaguing children and youth today. For instance, in the following extract Thomas makes reference to “kids nowadays” thus subtly implying a difference between kids today and kids from previous generations.

Thomas: 
Like there’s a lot more chubby kids nowadays, but it’s jus’ ‘cause dey stay home like dere’s too much video games an’ stuff like dat, an’ dey don’t get as much exercise. Dat’s de problem with a lot of kids. (FG#5_2, Apr. 12, 2006, p. 11)

122 Gard and Wright (2005) discredit much of the empirical evidence that suggests a generational trend towards a more sedentary lifestyle amongst children and youth. They argue that recording daily physical activity across a representative sample of the population is difficult if not impossible in contemporary society, let alone collecting and comparing data from previous generations. Thus, Gard and Wright conclude that claims that children and youth are less active today than they were in previous generations are anecdotal as opposed to factual.
Through a generalized reference to “kids nowadays” type statement, Thomas, along with the other participants who used such narratives, accomplished two things. First, they established themselves as more mature, properly contained adults “in-the-know” as compared to the younger, less disciplined, seducible “kids” that they referred to. Thus, through the articulation of obesity discourse they not only positioned an abstract and generalized conception of “kids”, but also themselves as knowing adults, distanced from the frivolities of childhood. In short, by positioning or naming the kid-Other as lazy, techno-addicts, the participants served to shelter themselves from the pathologizing effects of obesity discourse, instead, constructing themselves as controlled, healthy, adult subjects. Secondly, by taking up and narrating the notion of a “time before” kids were sedentary and addicted to technology, the assumptions within obesity discourse come to be naturalized as “truth”. Instead of outright dispute of the obesity discourse that constructs youth as irresponsible and out-of-control, the participants deflected, projected, and shielded themselves from such discursive positioning and, in the process, naturalized obesity discourse as “truth”. Historians have noted, however, that the current moral panic surrounding physical inactivity amongst Canada’s youth is not new, with some scholars suggesting that the “crisis of physical inactivity” has been a reoccurring discourse since the late nineteenth and early twentieth century (Burstyn, 1999; Kidd, 1996; Lesko, 2001). One hundred or so years ago the concern was over the feminizing effect urbanization was having on young men living in large cities. Moral entrepreneurs of that time publicly worried that boys and young men living in urban centres were increasingly divorced from the masculinizing spaces of the “great outdoors”. The luxuries afforded within the modern city, the argument went, were sapping young men of their moral fortitude. As a result,
large-scale movements, such as the Boy Scouts, were initiated in an attempt to curb the feminizing effects of city life (Lesko, 2001). The current discourse of “obesism”\textsuperscript{123} shares with the “crisis of masculinity” of the early twentieth century a suspicion of modernization as a process that jeopardizes the wellbeing of youth, but differs in that health, not masculinity, appears to be the primary focus of the present moral panic. As I argue in the next section, however, gender anxiety is not absent from contemporary obesity discourse.

\textit{Binaries}

Michael Gard and Jan Wright (2005) suggest that the trope of the “couch potato” has become the “brand” of the “obesity epidemic”. The discursive construction of young people as lazy, addicted to technology, and unable to control their appetites for fatty foods has come to occupy a dominant lens or framework for thinking and talking about young people and their bodies. Indeed, the triad of laziness, gluttony, and media technology proved to be a key cultural resource in how the young men in the present research talked about their own bodies and the bodies of those around them.

Central to their deployment of the “couch potato” trope were several binary oppositions that can be mapped onto a masculine/feminine dichotomy in the interpellation of particular gendered ways of being. While the participants did not explicitly gender their “couch potato” narratives, their use of public/private, sport/technology, and inside/outside binaries left to no uncertain terms the gendered identities their narratives were hailing.

\textsuperscript{123} I use the term “obesism” here to refer to a particular form of healthism that is informed by obesity discourse where it is assumed that health, rationality, self-governance, along with other characteristics valued within a neoliberal context are assumed to be located in the size and shape of an individual’s body.
Visual media representations of the “couch potato” are almost exclusively images of a slothful boy or young man, sprawled across the couch in front of the TV with bags of half eaten fatty treats littering the space around him (Gard and Wright, 2005). Thus, it is hardly surprising that the participants in the present research talked about the “couch potato” as implicitly—if not explicitly—male. One participant infers the male “couch potato” in the following narrative when he explains that “the TV is probably the greatest reason why kids don’t get that much exercise these days ‘cause they watch so much of it, they’d rather do that than go outside and play a game of basketball or something” (FG#6_3a, May 17, 2006, p. 5). This characterization draws upon the binary opposition between the masculine space of the outdoors (Lesko, 2001; Duncan, 1996) and the masculinizing practice of sport (Messner, 1992; Whitson, 1990) over and against the feminine space of the indoors (Duncan, 1996) and the corrupting, softening, and polluting practices associated with technology. Indeed, the construction of the outdoors as a positive, purifying alternative to the polluting, corruptive, and degenerative spaces of the indoors were common binary narrations that occurred in both focus groups and interviews. In this way, the moral panic surrounding the epidemic of sedentariness was gendered. Research into gaming patterns of young people demonstrates that boys and young men are more likely to consume video game technologies than are girls and young women (Crawford, 2005; Canada’s Report Card on Physical Activity for Children and Youth, 2008). For instance, one study concludes that “screen time is higher among boys when compared to girls and playing video games appears to be responsible for the difference” (Canada’s Report Card on Physical Activity for Children and Youth, 2008).

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124 Greater research is required to gain insight into the gender patterns of technology consumption within the home. It may well be that boys are winning the “remote wars” over their sisters and other female family
Thus, anxieties about “screen time”, which are largely dominated by concerns over video gaming, can be implicitly read as gender anxieties over the masculine subject. In this regard, the current crisis of obesity shares similarities with the “crisis of masculinity” from the early twentieth century, albeit, buried beneath the banner of concerns for health and well-being.

**Constructions of Self and Other**

During a focus group discussion at Pinevale the participants characterized fat people as lazy and overly reliant on technology.

Akeem: You can’t watch de TV all day, dat’s jus’ bein’ lazy. Fat people watch too much TV.

Ted: How do you know that?

Akeem: ‘Cause ahhh let’s see…okay, dere was dis kid in my school in grade 8, right? An’ his friend told me when he went to his house, he said he called in sick, he went to his house, an’ he’s watchin’ Jerry Springer. De kids fat, fat, fat, he’s me, you, and Josh put together. (FG#5_3, Apr. 19, 2006, p. 30)

The connection between technology, laziness, and fatness was prevalent throughout much of the research, as I have already discussed. This is hardly surprising given the explosion of popular and biomedical constructions of obesity as a health problem that is putting the wellbeing of both the individual and social body in jeopardy (see Campos, 2004; Gard and Wright, 2005; Monaghan, 2005; Oliver, 2006). With the exception of one participant members and are thus able to use video and digital technologies as they like. Whereas at one time it was girls who were perceived to be at greater risk in masculine “street cultures” and thus were forced to carve cultural niches for themselves in “safe” public spaces and the private spaces of the home (McRobbie, 1991), within the contemporary “culture of fear” (see Phillips & Kidd, 2004 for a discussion of the “risks” facing Toronto neighbourhoods) boys and young men are increasingly finding themselves restricted to the spaces of the home as a safety precaution (MacNeill, 2000). This leads to new familial gender relations which require further research.

Studies have also noted that there are gender patterns in relation to physical activity, with boys and young men being more physically active than girls and young women (CLFRI, 2007). These numbers are not surprising given that research indicates that girls and young women face marginalization (Wilson, 2001b) and discrimination and harassment (Larkin & Rice, 2005) within sporting spaces. These patterns of gender discrimination were observed during the present research at the Pinevale Community Centre.
from Lawson, all of the young claimed to use media technology on a regular basis. This presents a seeming contradiction, however, because technology was discursively linked to laziness and fatness. Yet, as mentioned earlier, the participants did not self-identify as either fat or lazy. How then is it possible to draw a connection between technology, fatness, and laziness for others while, at the same time, not subjecting oneself to the same logic?

On several occasions, I challenged the participants on the differential manner in which they made connections between media technology, laziness, and fatness for Other bodies, but not for themselves. I wanted to know how they could ameliorate this seeming contradiction between both using media technologies and yet avoiding its pathologizing stigmas. One answer, of course, is that most of the youth self-identified as “skinny” to “average” in body weight. Indeed, the normative shape and size of their bodies was likely read by society as reflective of a particular moral-self, one that is entrepreneurial, self-disciplined, and in-control (Crawford, 2006; Shilling, 2005). In several instances, the participants referred to their non-fat bodies as illustrations of their health and fitness, as though their body size and shape were evidence of their moral, healthy selfhood. Another common strategy for marking the healthy, active, thin self off from the unhealthy, lazy, fat Other was to refer back to sporting practices. Sport and sporting spaces were constructed as purifying technologies of the self, whereby so called health “wrongs”, such as watching TV, playing video games, and eating junk food, could be erased. A little further on in the same discussion with Akeem and Josh I challenged them on the connections they had drawn between technology, laziness, and fatness.

Ted: Do you watch TV?
Akeem: Yeah.
Ted: But you’re not fat.
Akeem: No, ‘cause I come here to play ball. When I watch TV I don’t eat chips, junk food an’ stuff.

And a little further on in the same discussion,

Ted: Do you watch TV and drink Orange Crush?
Akeem: Yeah, sometimes, but me, I come here to work it out, but de kid [watching Jerry Springer that he referred to previously], I don’t think he does anything… (FG #5_3, Apr. 19, 2006, pp. 29-30)

The young men used sport and physical activity as antidotes to the negative health consequences that linked technology, laziness, and fatness. Thus, in their narratives it is possible to see multiple discourses—all of which are encompassed within “obesity epidemic” discourse—skillfully spliced together in the constitution of a meaningful sense of self. Within obesity discourse physical activity and technology are posited in a dichotomous relationship, where sport and physical activity is constructed as a “good” in contrast with technology, which is constructed as a “bad”. The discursive dichotomy pitting sport and physical activity over and against technology served as a useful opposition whereby the young men in the present research were able to narratively healthify their self-identities by cleansing their health “bads” (i.e. technology use) with their health “goods” (i.e. sport and physical activity). The participants understood health as a moral enterprise that involved balancing the “goods” and “bads” in the production of a healthy and culturally meaningful sense of self. As health sociologists have argued (see Crawford, 2006; 1994; Lupton, 1997; Williams, 1998), healthy living involves much more than biomedical health practices designed to maintain wellness and ward off illness, but are at the same time symbolic and representational technologies of self constitution. Health provides an abundant and complex set of cultural resources whereby the individual is able to craft an intelligible subjectivity through technologies of the self. This
means that at moments there will be considerable torque, tension, use, and abuse between socially invested terms such as “health”, “physical activity”, and “technology” as individuals try to constitute an intelligible sense of self within the resources available to them. In this way, the young men were not “misreading” health directives, as some health experts might claim, but rather were reading and making sense of them from within situated social positions. They were, in short, using “tactics” of everyday life (DeCerteau, 1984) to transform the resources available to them as a means of producing subject positions to their advantage. This form of resistance is tactical in variety, as opposed to outright oppositional. However, there were instances where the participants directly challenged obesity logic that links fatness and technology. In the following sections I will explore these instances.

Resisting Obesity Discourse

Because the “obesity epidemic” is a “complex potpourri of science, ideology, and morality” (Gard and Wright, 2005) it brings together a range of convoluted and contradictory discourses and thus is a site of discursive struggle. Its meanings are never fixed and transparent, but rather fluid, relational, and opaque. From this complexity the participants took up and deployed obesity discourse in sophisticated and unanticipated ways. What became evident during my research is that the link between fatness, laziness, and ill-health proved to be a point of leverage where the participants could challenge obesity discourse. Because the embodied experiences of the participants did not always align with the logic of obesity that links sedentary video gaming with fatness they often used this as a point of refutation of obesism. Below I include an extract that highlights the manner in which obesism is challenged from an embodied perspective. Josh’s embodied
Josh understood there to be an inconsistency between his embodied self, his extensive video gaming practices, and obesity discourse that links technology consumption with obesity. His skinniness, Josh argued, was evidence that technology does not necessarily cause obesity. The participants often pointed to the inconsistencies between their own embodied experiences and obesity discourse as evidence that the logic underlying the “obesity epidemic” was flawed. There is, of course, a flip side to this reading of obesity discourse. If fatness is linked to ill-health and unhealthy practices, the skinny body is assumed to be immune to “obesity epidemic” informed health discourse. Indeed, by focusing on overweight and obesity as health risks, obesity discourse effectively limits its discursive purchase to fat bodies as opposed to a more general focus on health practices. In other words, in the discursive frameworks of the young men, the fat body came to be the sight of pathology, and skinny bodies were read as healthy regardless of the unhealthy practices they may engage in. In the minds of the participants—and I would argue the general population more broadly—the fat body bears the burden of unhealthy embodiment while the remainder of the normatively sized population is exonerated from the extensive public disciplining, regulating, and surveilling that encloses the fat body.
Resistive Readings of Video Technology

Video gaming has often been negatively constructed in public consciousness as leading vulnerable young people towards social isolation, sedentary lifestyles (Crawford, 2005) and violent fantasy worlds. Dominant frameworks pit the social pathologies associated with video games against more socially acceptable leisure practices, such as sport, which is assumed to have the opposite effect of video games, and promote social interaction and physically active lifestyles. However, recent research indicates that sport and video gaming may not be in polar opposition to one another as they are so often assumed to be (see Crawford, 2005). In his research, Garry Crawford found that “digital gaming can inform and increase both interest and knowledge of sport, and in turn, interest in sport as a participant and follower” (p. 268). Similar findings were evident in the present research. Despite the widespread moral panic around youth and technology consumption, the participants often spoke positively about technology and, in some cases, even went so far as to suggest the health-promoting benefits of technology generally, and video games specifically. Positive constructions of technology occurred along two predominant axes, including technology as preventing boredom and technology as improving sporting strategy. Although at moments the participants constructed technology as a negative, on other occasions they suggested that when using the “right form” (i.e. sports as opposed to violent games), in the “right way” (i.e. moderation as opposed to excess), and in the right context (i.e. to promote exercise as opposed to sedentariness) technology could be beneficial.

While it has become commonplace to bemoan technology—specifically “screen time”—as resulting in the degeneration of today’s young people (see Active Healthy Kids
Canada, 2008; Hall, 2007), seldom do studies explore the cultural meanings technologies have in the everyday lifeworlds of young people themselves. In the present research, the participants did not necessarily see technologies as a debilitating force in their lives, but when used within certain parameters and contexts, they spoke about it as a positive technology of the self. For instance, technology was understood as combating boredom. One participant commented that video games are “good if they are like hand-held and they keep you entertained while you are like driving”. Thus, video games can prevent boredom in activities such as driving or running, as another participant explained. The iPod, he suggested, is “a way to listen to music on a run. Like whenever I’m...not doing any sports, I like to get a run in once in awhile like just through the neighbourhood and I’ll always bring some music because for me it’s really annoying to run without anything to do” (FG#6_3, May 17, 2006, p. 5). In this narrative, technologies were not thought of as impeding physical activity, but were in fact creating the conditions that foster activity. Recently, there has been a lot of media attention on the splicing of video technology with physical activities through the WII gaming systems (Reuters, 2008). These systems are touted by some experts as offering innovative technologies to get kids moving. The assumption is that young people are inherently sedentary beings and do not have enough initiative of their own to use technology in such a progressive manner. However, listening to the narratives of the young men that participated in my research, it seems as though they were already creatively using technology in their everyday lives as a means of producing healthy, physically active bodies. Technology was not just a means to prevent boredom, however. The young men also talked about video games as inspiring increased physical activity.
It was quite common for the participants to make a distinction between violence-oriented video games and sports-oriented games. Sports games, it was argued, instilled a desire to go outside and be physically active. While media constructions of video games tend to use broad brush strokes to paint them as all promoting unhealthy lifestyles, the participants argued that there were important differences between the various games.

Ted: Do you think video games are as bad as they [critics of video games] say?
Group: No.
Luke: If they are promoting good thinking and choice making they are not that bad.
Abe: I like the sports games.
Carl: *Grand Theft Auto* and stuff like that are the only games that give video games a bad rap.
Abe: I played that game in Europe. That’s not even a fun game.
Ted: But do they make you lazy though?
Group: No.
Alex: Well, if you go and play a basketball game, it makes you want to go out and play basketball more.
Abe: Exactly, yeah, or football or something.
Ted: So it actually encourages sport?
Group: Yeah. (FG #7_1, May 26, 2006, p. 17)

By separating violent games from sporting games, the participants were able to protect themselves from the moralizing critique that understands video games as corrupting the innocence of youth. Sports games, they argued, are innocuous enough and it is violent video games that end up giving “gaming” a bad name. In their arguments, the young men use the positive discursive construction of sport as a “good” and “healthy” practice and juxtapose it against violent fantasy games which, the participants argued later on, fosters socially delinquent ways of being. Thus, the tactic of dividing video games into “good” (read sports-oriented games) from “bad” (read violence-based games) and then projecting all negative constructions onto “bad” games, proved to be a common technique for justifying their gaming practices across the focus groups. Moreover, several different
focus groups argued that sports-oriented video games actually encouraged participation in
sport, rather than discouraged it, contrary to what many critics of video games have
suggested. In so doing, the participants resisted the dominant construction of video games
as fostering sedentary and lazy lifestyles in children and youth. Not only did video games
encourage sports participation, but some participants went so far as to argue that video
games actually improved sporting skills.

Kyle, a student from Lawson, spoke extensively about his constructive
relationship with video games. During the interview it became clear that sport-oriented
video games were a positive technology of the self for Kyle, as they taught him sport
strategy that had direct transference into real sporting situations. Indeed, video games
provided Kyle with the sports knowledge, strategy, and skill that have been identified by
other scholars as key features of hegemonic masculinity (see Messner, 1992; Whitson,
1990). These technologies of constructing a masculine self were important resources in
the formation of masculine social bonds, and this can be seen in how Kyle talked about
the prominent position sport occupies in the relationship he has with his father. Viewing
digital and video media from a Foucaultian analysis of technologies of the self allows us
to see how young people are agentic subjects who use various media, such as video
games, in the process of self-constitution. From the following narrative, it is evident that
Kyle was not passively consuming digital and video media, but rather was an engaged,
intelligible subject who was creatively using the cultural resources available to him in the
construction of a situated masculine identity. Below, I quote Kyle at length as he
discusses the reciprocal relationship between his sport and video game consumption and
the constitution of his masculine subjectivity.
Kyle: …I would play some video games and I watched so much hockey it’s unbelievable, like I have the Centre Ice thing, so I have every NHL game, and I would watch the Leafs all the time, so I would just kind of over time, I’m one of those players who is so interested in the NHL that I’ve just become so exposed to hockey that I know the strategy […]

And a little further on in the conversation,

Ted: It’s interesting because often video games are lamented as the worst thing ever, but it sounds like you actually benefited from them.

Kyle: Yeah, for sure […] Like the fact that I have played so much Madden Football means that if I watch a football game with my dad, I have so much more of an idea of what’s going on than he does. Like he’ll say “That’s a dumb play” and I’ll say like “No, he’s actually running a dummy route” or something like that. And I’ll recognise routes. I’ll recognise things that happen. When I go out and play football with my friends, ‘cause we’ll play tackle football during the summer, if I play quarter back I know, I know stuff to do just to from playing Madden or from watching so much football. (Int. #4, June 8, 2006, pp. 7-8)

As I argued earlier in this section, dominant discourse constructs video games as a “softening”, or feminizing even, technology that keeps boys away from masculinizing sport practices and spaces (i.e. home versus the outdoors). However, listening to Kyle’s detailed narrative it is evident that there is an alternative way of viewing sport-based video games. That, in fact, they equip young men with the skills and knowledge that are necessary to the constitution of a successful sporting masculinity. Furthermore, far from creating social isolation, as some commentators have suggested, the sport knowledge and skills acquired through video games appear to act as a site of masculine bonding between father and son, and amongst male peers. Video games in the sense can be seen as masculine technologies of the self that enable specific culturally appropriate gender performances. As the interview progressed, Kyle went on to explain that his sport-based video games had relevance beyond sport-related practices.

Ted: Do you think it [your video game playing] has a transference into other areas of your life?
Kyle: In a way, if you’re able to recognise kind of, if it helps you build strategy for certain things, and if you’re used to thinking when you play hockey than you’ll probably get used to thinking when you do other things. Like, if you’re playing Madden and you just pick random plays, than you’ll—that’ll probably get transferred into your work life. But if you use a lot of strategy and kind of plan out your next three plays, “Okay, I’m gonna do a run, a short pass, and that’ll open up for a deep pass” than when you’re kind of in a work related environment, or, I guess even if you’re setting up like a diet or something like that, if you’re used to really thinking about what you do, than my guess is it will help. (Int. #4, June 8, 2006, p. 8)

By including themes of strategy, discipline, and foresight into his narrative, Kyle contradicts discursive constructions of video games as leading to overweight and obesity, suggesting instead that the life skills learned through gaming could potentially enable body-disciplining technologies of the self. His narratives are instructive in that they force a re-evaluation of dominant constructions of video games as socially isolating technologies that are passively consumed by sedentary youth, on the one hand, as well as a re-thinking of dominant notions that construct youth as irrational, out-of-control, adults-in-becoming (Lesko, 2001). However, there were limits to the positive evaluations Kyle and the other participants ascribed to digital and video technologies, as they all suggested that a healthy gaming practices were always in “moderation”.

Kyle, as with most of the participants, talked about the need to balance gaming with “getting good exercise” as an appropriate ethics of the self. Ethics, in the Foucaultian sense, is the relationship between the individual and the codes that regulate their lives (Foucault, 1985). Thus, moderation of gaming or a balance between video games and physical activity were crucial ethical negotiations that the participants discussed in relation to their gaming habits. Indeed, while they may have suggested positive aspects to gaming, these positives were only in relation to moderate use of
gaming technology. Excess gaming was associated with pathology, laziness, and social isolation. Thus, in their narratives, the participants simultaneously took up and resisted dominant discursive constructions of video games, suggesting that a healthy individual is a “well-balanced” individual, a theme that is consistent with dominant health promotion messages.

In this section I have explored how young men take up, negotiate, and resist dominant health and body discourses in understanding their own bodies and the bodies of others. More specifically, I have argued that the pathologization of digital and video media within obesity discourse has provided the young men in the present research with a set of powerful cultural resources to construct a healthy embodied sense of self over and against the fat, lazy, techno-addicted Other. In other words, obesity discourse provides a discursive lens for talking about and experiencing embodied ways of being and linking these to particular body sizes and shapes. In this sense, obesity discourse does not describe a found body type, but rather discursively constructs the bodies and embodied experiences of which it speaks. I further suggested that the young men creatively resisted dominant discursive constructions that paint video and digital technology in a negative light. I showed how the participants used video games, specifically, as technologies of the self in the production of embodied masculine subjectivities. Rather than passively consuming video games, as dominant obesity discourse suggests, the young men demonstrated considerable agency and creativity in their consumption patterns. The manner in which they took up and utilized technology demonstrated complex techniques of self-constitution that often go unrecognised in dominant representations of youth and technology consumption.
Rather than reductive discourses that characterise youth as incompetent actors in the face of the seductions of consumer culture in late modernity, youth need to be understood as active and creative agents who splice together disparate pieces of their material and non-material socio-cultural worlds in the construction of meaningful subjectivities. Categorical statements about the perils of technology and youth are unhelpful at best and pernicious at worst and need to be shifted to nuanced questions about the manner in which digital and video media are taken up as technologies of the self. There is indeed a moral panic surrounding technology and youth. This panic is largely gendered, as I have argued here. Moreover, it appears to lack nuance, as many of the participants in the present research demonstrate that technology is used in diverse and creative ways in the production of meaningful embodied identities. Left unchallenged, reductive constructions of youth and technology can have the adverse effect of perpetuating dominant representations of youth as docile, irrational, out-of-control adults-in-becoming who pose health threats to both themselves and the social body more generally. In the following section, I explore how dominant explanations of body size are reduced to binary opposition that positions “genetic” factors over and against “lifestyle” factors.

**Genetics versus Fully Individuated Self**

Competing discourses were also to be found in the way in which the participants understood and articulated responsibility for body size and shape. One way that obesity discourse constrains how people see, understand, and experience bodies is through the binary opposition that understands body weight as either a product of the biological body or the end result of a particular lifestyle. Within the present research, determinations of
responsibility for body weight usually oscillated between the individual as responsible for
t heir body size, on the one hand, to the individual as helpless due to their genetics, on the
other. Elizabeth Wheatley (2005) argues that risk discourse operates through an
oppositional model—biology vs. behaviour, genetics vs. lifestyle, for example—where a
broader consideration of social structural context remains unexamined. Thus, risk
discourse provides a framework for understanding and articulating body size, shape, and
health in general, while obscuring factors that are positioned outside this framework, such
as socio-cultural context. For the most part, the participants limited their narratives to this
discursively constructed binary, and seldom articulated a more comprehensive social
structural assessment of the factors that went into body size. The binary opposition
between body size as a matter of “choice” and “individual responsibility” versus “genetic
background” that lay beyond the control of the individual was illustrated in a focus group
discussion with the young men at Lawson. In the following extract, Alex offers up a
genetic explanation as to why his cousin is so heavy. The other members of the focus
group, however, suggest that parental responsibility plays a role in body weight.

Alex: My cousin, he’s ten and he’s like 150 pounds. It’s the same as his
dad. His dad is a really big guy.
Ted: So, do you think genetics factor into it?
Alex: Yeah.
Ted: So, if genetics play into it, could you do something about that?
Micheal: Yeah.
Abe: Yeah.
Carl: It would be a lot harder, though.
Michael: I don’t think it’s genetics, I think it’s the way you were raised…
Michael: …’cause if your parents are like “Oh, you don’t have to go out and

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126 See the following section in this chapter for examples of where the participants did articulate alternative explanations.
Here, the conversation takes the form of a “nature” vs. “nurture” debate, with Michael arguing from the “nurture” perspective with his suggestion that the size and shape of a child’s body is predominantly attributable to the way he or she was and is raised. His argument is embedded in a moral discourse where he implicitly outlines “good” and “bad” parenting practices by drawing upon the broader discursive construction of physical activity and sport as health-enhancing and therefore “good” practices as contrasted with “bad” health jeopardizing practices such as watching television or using the computer. Obesity discourse is a moral technology (Gard and Wright, 2005; McDermott, 2007) that compels particular performances in the construction of healthy governmental subjectivities. Michael’s narrative drew upon obesity discourse in constructing the “good” and responsible parent as one who maximizes health “goods”, such as healthy eating and physical activity, while minimizing health “bads”, such as television and computer game use.

The “genetics” versus “lifestyle” binary was a commonly articulated opposition at all of the research locations. It proved to be a powerful discursive construct for understanding people and their bodies. However, the participants at Lawson were more invested in the notion of the “free” and autonomous subject exercising control over their bodily margins than were the participants at Pinevale. In other words, the Lawson participants tended to fall more on the “lifestyle” side of the debate. In contrast, the young men from Pinevale suggested that it was possible for fatness to be completely
attributable to “genetics”. In separate focus groups, both Thomas and Syed conjured notions of the genetically-determined fat body.

Ted: Is fat a problem of the person or is it a problem of their body? Is it a problem of what they do or is it of the body?

Thomas: Like, it could be, it could change like the way that there body is like dey don’t have ta…how am I gonna say this? (pause) If they eat properly and exercise there is no reason why they should be fat, really, you know what I mean? But, if there’s nothing they could do about it, like even if they work out, work out, an’ dey’re still like de same weight, den, I don’t know, dat’s jus’ how some people are. (FG#5_2, Apr. 12, 2006, p. 13)

The “energy-in/energy-out” (Gard and Wright, 2005) model for understanding human body weight figured prominently in each of the preceding narratives. The “energy-in/energy-out” model is central to “obesity epidemic” discourse and which operates as a “social constraint” (Fraser, 1989), enabling some ways of seeing, and making statements about, body weight while curtailing the articulation of others. In this case, the body was conceptualized of as either a passive object to be manipulated and controlled by the agentic self or as a “broken” body that refuses to respond to the directions of the controlling self. Obesity discourse thus constrains the narrative terrain upon which discussions about the body, its shape, size, and health can proceed.

Generally speaking, the young men from Pinevale were more likely to acknowledge that “genetics” strongly influenced the size and shape of an individual’s body. The articulation of the “genetic” perspective, however, was guided by a reductive biological determinism. This can be seen in Syed’s narrative in the extract below.

Syed: […] Like some people’s body, it’s like dey can’t lose weight. For example, dere’s dis guy, he’s like, you can tell he wants to lose weight, but he can’t lose weight, even…he does all de things to lose weight, but he can’t, you see. It usually depends on your body. (FG#3_3, Feb. 15, 2006, p. 16)
In Syed’s narrative, the individual subject is completely at the mercy of his biological body. The notion of the biological body being beyond control, as unresponsive to the disciplining techniques of the self, was shared by several participants at the Pinevale Community Centre (FG#4_2, Mar. 1, 2006; FG#5_1, Apr. 5, 2006). Thus, the participants at Pinevale narrate an “un-docile” body. One that is biologically transgressive, refusing to be contained, tamed, and brought into tow by the rational, autonomous self. However, as I mentioned previously, the participants at Lawson were reluctant to see the biological body as having that much influence.

Although the narratives of the participants at Lawson oscillated between “genetic” and “lifestyle” explanations of body size, they were heavily invested in the notion of the (neo)liberal governmental subject exercising control over the body.

Ted: There was this discussion about the individual being responsible for their body and then there was also this discussion about genetics. Some people thought that some people are just genetically built that way.

Abe: But you’re not genetically made to be very obese, you can be genetically heavy.

Alex: Like for some people they are genetically tall. But you’re not, you don’t be genetically 400 pounds. That’s not just because of genetics, there’s a lot of help there from overeating.

Abe: And their parents.

Michael: Like with genetics you could be big boned and you might look a little bit overweight, but really you’re not, you’re just really big boned and wide, like you’re just built that way. There is a big difference between that and being fat. (FG#7_2, May 29, 2006, p. 4)

Here, the participants acknowledged that genetics influence body size and shape, but refused to acknowledge that they might determine body contours. It is evident from the preceding extracts that the binary opposition between “lifestyle” and “genetic” attributions of body size were prominent in how the young men made sense of bodies. However, it is also evident that differently situated subjects invest and take up the binary
in differing ways, with the participants from Pinevale more likely to invest in the “genetics” side of the opposition with their articulations of a biological body beyond individual control, whereas the young men from Lawson refused to discount the role of “lifestyle” and the agentic subject by reducing body size to biology alone. In fact, the young men from Pinevale were generally more likely to explain fatness in relation to adult responsibilities and with such explanations went beyond the reductive opposition between “genetics” and “lifestyle”.

In speculating why these differences in the uptake of obesity discourse existed, it is likely that socioeconomic and cultural differences mediated the way in which the young men took up and situated themselves within the “genetics” versus “lifestyle” opposition. Whereas the young men from Pinevale were from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, the participants from Lawson were mostly from middle class backgrounds. Robert Crawford (2006) points out that healthism, with its emphasis on individual responsibility for health and wellbeing, lines up with a middle-class neoliberal economic rationale, where values of individualism, self-control, and self-discipline are cherished as admirable characteristics of the self. Thus, it is possible that social class background influenced the way in which the young men talked about the fat body and how they made sense of who was responsible for its size and shape.

Cultural differences may also influence how people attribute responsibility for body size and shape. Kathleen LeBesco (2004) contends that “anti-fat bias is more pronounced in individualist cultures that emphasize personal freedom and autonomous goal achievement…than in collectivist ones”. She goes on to argue that people’s beliefs about whether or not fat can be controlled…are linked to their
more fundamental social ideologies. The endorsement of a Protestant ethic ideology leads one to view stigmatized peoples as willful violators of traditional American values such as moral character, hard work, and self-discipline. (p. 55)

All of the participants from Pinevale self-identified as first-generation Canadian and it is possible that they placed different emphasis on the rational, self-governing subject than did the middle-class participants from Lawson. In the following section I will extend this cross-cultural analysis, exploring how the participants from Pinevale invested different meanings in the intersections between age and body size than did the young men from Lawson. Whether socioeconomic and/or cultural differences mediate the uptake and deployment of obesity discourse begs further analysis.

From the preceding narratives it is possible to see how obesity discourse reduces the complex social, cultural, and biological factors that shape body size and weight into a binary opposition of either “genetics” or “lifestyle”, neither of which are particularly helpful in understanding why people organize their dietary and physical activity practices the way they do. Both sides of the opposition, for example, obscure social structural and cultural factors that have been shown to strongly influence body size and shape (see Gard and Wright, 2005; Larkin and Rice, 2005; Massara, 1997; Rice, 2007). Furthermore, both sides act to legitimize expert intervention into the lives of fat people in general and young people in particular. Whereas the “genetics” argument may give the impression that it is not the individual’s fault that they are fat, “genetic” explanations provide biomedical rationale for more invasive technologies of surveillance, discipline, and regulation, and thus new modes of subjectification. Novas and Rose (2000) argue that biopower, with its objective of “making live”, has gone molecular. As such, molecular biology is increasingly producing the “genetically at risk” self, where the subject is equipped with
“life strategies, involving practices of choice, enterprise, self-actualization and prudence in relation to one’s genetic make-up” (p. 485). Suggestions that fatness is a matter of “genetics” do not shield the individual from biomedical interventions nor social pathologisation, but rather subjects him or her to greater techniques of normalization. This can be witnessed in the way the young men from Lawson talk about “genetics” as influencing but not determining body weight. As I mentioned previously, the young men from Pinevale were reluctant but more likely to resort to alternative explanations of body size. For instance, on several occasions the participants talked about how other life duties, such as family life and work, acted as potential obstacles to maintaining a normative body size and shape. In the following section, I explore some of these alternative explanations.

**Alternative Explanations of Body Weight**

Competing discourses were detected in relation to how the young men at the Pinevale Community Centre talked about the relationship between body size and age. While there was much discussion about how fatness was an undesirable masculine embodiment, there were moments when the participants at Pinevale talked about the fat body size as something that was an inevitable outcome with age and “adult responsibilities”. For the young men at Pinevale, adult responsibilities included factors such as marriage, kids, family life, and working. The responsibilities that come with adulthood, they suggested, influenced body size and shape. Narratives of adult responsibility were interesting in that they were instances where discussion expanded to include social structural factors. In the previous section I explored how the participants reduced causation of body size and shape to a binary opposition between “genetics” and

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127 See Chapter #5 Men, Masculinity, and Fatness for an elaborated discussion.
“lifestyle” factors and I suggested that such oppositional logic precluded any consideration of socio-cultural factors. Adult responsibilities, however, points to social and cultural factors beyond individual responsibility (i.e. lifestyle) and the biological body (i.e. genetics). Narratives of adult responsibility thus represent alternative explanations of body size and shape. By “alternative” I mean explanations that go beyond those outlined in obesity discourse. Alternative explanations are non-dominant, perhaps even subversive, narratives that struggle for meaning against health and body discourses that situate body weight at the intersection of individual responsibility and genetic inheritance.

These alternative explanations typically centred around a construction of adulthood as a period where other “responsibilities” take priority. Thus, age and the responsibilities associated with it were constructed as an important factor in determining body weight. The narrative of adult responsibilities was a common one at Pinevale and can be seen as the young men at the Pinevale Community Centre talk about the body of their basketball coach.

Syed: Paul is strong. He’s strong.
John: He’s slow. I know dat for sure, he’s slow.
Kareem: Lookit ‘em, he’s huge!
Ted: What do you mean “lookit” ‘em?
Kareem: He’s big now.
Syed: He’s fat.
Kareem: He used to be skinny, but I guess marriage changed him.
John: Well, stayin’ home an’ havin’ kids, yeah, changes you, yeah.
(FG#3_2, Feb. 8, 2006, p. 20)

The following week I returned to the notion of adult responsibilities and asked the participants what they meant when they suggested that “marriage changes you”.

Ted: You guys also said last time we met you said that he [basketball
[coach] got married he had kids an’ that changes you. How does it change you?

Kareem: Because you don’t play basketball as much, you don’t run as much.

Syed: Job!

[...]

Syed: Depends if you have to work a job.

John: You’re a family man after dat, you know, it’s like you’re stuck, There’s no turning back except for divorce, but that’s not gonna help you. (FG#3_3, Feb. 15, 2006, pp. 23-4)

Unlike obesity discourse, which tends to constrain discussion about body weight to narrow oppositions between the biological body and the agentic self, these young men include mediating factors such as family life, employment, social class, and availability of free time as contributing to body size and shape. The inclusion of these influences adds a level of complexity to the understanding of body weight that is largely absent in accounts provided by both the popular media and, in most cases, health experts (see Gard and Wright, 2005 for an exploration of dominant constructions of the fat body).

The individualism that lies at the core of healthist discourse was resisted in the narratives of the young men at Pinevale as they articulated a series of contributing factors to body weight that lie outside the control of the individual. As Thomas in a subsequent focus group explained, adults have “different priorities” (FG#6_1, May 3, 2006) besides physical activity, sport, and the maintenance of a normative body size and shape. Thus, the responsible agentic adult subject is not one who obsesses over body size and shape, but provides for his family. There is thus a tension between health discourses which situate the individual as responsible for their health and wellbeing, which includes the maintenance of a normative “healthy” body weight, and the responsibility of the man as “breadwinner” (Carpenter and Austin, 2007). Both are culturally dominant discourses, each interpelling the male subject to perform their maleness in a particular way.
However, the above narratives demonstrate how these discourses are, in particular circumstances, irreconcilable. Watson (1998) found similar patterns in his research into the intersections of masculinity and health. He observed that while his informants were “thoroughly conversant with…public health discourse” that called for particular body weights, the participants tended to “put more emphasis on responsibility in connection with the gendered nature of social roles and obligations” (p. 174). At the top of the list of gendered obligations was providing for the family. Similarly, the men in Monaghan’s (2007) research articulated a “compatibility of heaviness, healthfulness, and physical fitness” (p. 605). They understood “healthy” body weights as defined by Body Mass Index charts to be incompatible with an everyday masculinity. Most of Monghan’s participants self-identified as coming from working class backgrounds and thus Monghan was unable to provide an analysis of how constructions of healthy body weights shift across different social class positionings.

Social class did appear to be salient in how the young men in present research spoke about the relationship between adulthood and body size. While the young men from Pinevale spoke about adulthood as a period of responsibilities that made maintaining a normative body size and shape difficult, the participants from Lawson spoke about maintaining a slender, “healthy” body size as absolutely essential to their adult self-identity. For example, they articulated the importance of maintaining a healthy, fit, and attractive body into adulthood. In contrast, some of the participants from Pinevale articulated a very different relationship with their adult bodies, where they seemed to accept that the responsibilities of adult life were going to make it difficult for them to maintain their slender, toned bodies. I asked all of the groups “what do you think you will
look like in twenty years?” As already mentioned, social location seemed to influence how the participants responded to this question. Kyle, a student at Lawson, suggested that maintaining a slender, healthy body was key to his adult identity.

Kyle: It’s really important for me to stay in shape, like I don’t want to have like high cholesterol. I don’t want to be overweight because I want to keep up, you know, with playing hockey. I want to be healthy, I don’t want to live the lifestyle that he lives [referring to an image of Homer Simpson that we were discussing]. I think that’s mainly because we live in a society where you’re tryin’ to stop from being obese, because to be overweight is looked down on, much more encouraged to be ahh in good shape. (FG#6_1, May 3, 2006, p. 6)

In his narrative, healthfulness, fitness, and appearance all converge and were situated as important aspects of Kyle’s adult identity. Kyle acknowledged the pathologizing social stigma that is associated with fat bodies, including fat male bodies, and suggested that he was going to work to distance himself from such an embodiment. Body shape and size have increasingly become markers of one’s health status (Gard and Wright, 2005) and health status is increasingly used as a technique for marking the boundary between the self and the Other (Crawford, 1994). A healthy looking, attractive, normatively sized and shaped body are thought to indicate a set of practices of the self that transform the self into a body that meets a certain cultural ideal. Scholars of the body have suggested that the normatively sized and shaped body is reflective of a middle-class ethos (Campos, 2004; White, Gillet, and Young, 1995). Michael Atkinson (2008), for example, found that the white collar professional men involved in his study articulated a gender ideal where a slender, toned body was reflective of youthfulness and competence, characteristics which they perceived to be necessary to their success in their highly competitive business settings. As I have demonstrated above, not all men share these narrow conceptions of
acceptably masculine body shapes and sizes. For example, some of the participants at Pinevale had very different constructions of their futuristic bodies.

Ted: What do you think you guys are gonna look like in twenty years?
John: Same.
Phil: Sexy!
John: Same but bigger. Same but bigger.
Kareem: I know I’m gonna have a gut. I know I’m gonna have a gut.
Syed: I think I am gonna get fat, yo. I eat too much.
Ted: Why do you say that? Why do you think you’re gonna get fat?
Kareem: I’m gonna look like Paul, yo. (Paul is their basekball coach who they define as “fat”)
Ted: You think so?
Kareem: Yeah, as soon as I get married I’m gonna become lazy. (FG#3_3, Feb. 15, 2006, p. 23)

Whereas for the young men at Lawson the idea of getting fat and out of shape was unimaginable, Kareem and Syed seemed to embrace fatness as an inevitable part of growing older. These two divergent responses highlight a different relationship with the body. Whereas the participants from Lawson anticipated a future of aggressively controlling and disciplining their bodies, the young men from Pinevale foresaw adulthood as a period where they were going to relax their control over their corporeality.

Significantly, these differences do not merely highlight distinctive personal preferences, but may in fact be constitutive of the separate socio-cultural contexts in which the young men are embedded. While the participants from Lawson can safely assume adult careers that will enable the resources, both time and money, to play hockey, football, and other physical activities that will ensure they maintain their health and physiques, the participants from Pinevale have a less certain future in terms of their material and cultural resources. Moreover, there seems to be a different emphasis placed on achieving a normatively “healthy” body weight. Neither Syed nor Kareem seem particularly bothered
by the fact that they are going to put weight on as they age. For the young men at Lawson, however, their future social identities as successful, middle-class professionals is directly connected to their ability to maintain a healthy and normatively slender body size.

These narratives demonstrate how privilege is inscribed onto bodies through discursively constructed norms of “health”. Seemingly neutral notions of “health” obscure the socio-cultural complexities in which individuals live by constructing and circulating universal standards of “healthy” body weights that are in fact constitutive of white, professional middle-class ideologies more than they are objective ideals of “health”. The worth of an individual comes to be moralistically evaluated by the degree to which their body meets these discursively constructed norms. As we have seen in the preceding section, health discourses in general, and obesity discourse in particular, give little consideration as to why people might think differently about body weight. Moreover, there is little questioning of how normative notions of “healthy” body weights line up with culturally specific ideals of slenderness as beauty, success, and wealth that are not only discriminatory to other cultural perspectives on embodiment, but also discount the degree to which these ideals are not universally achievable due to factors beyond individual control, such as social class, genetics, and the globalization of the food industry, for example.

Health discourses are thus primary ways of constructing and reconstructing privileged and subordinate subjectivities through appropriating and building on existing hierarchical constructions of gender, race, ethno-cultural identity, age, social class, ability, and so on. What I have been arguing throughout this dissertation, and in this
section in particular, is that it is not just that white middle-class young men have greater access to health institutions (i.e. expert health knowledge, clinics, hospitals, and institutions of health behaviours such as sports facilities etc) and health practices (i.e. healthy eating, sport and physical activity) but that health is also a central vehicle for the transmission of dominant cultural values and bodily expectations (Crawford, 2006, 1994; Williams, 1998). Thus, work needs to be done to displace health discourses from their façade of objectivity and expose them as technologies of power that stabilize and perpetuate existing relations of inequality by culturally compelling particular normative health performatives. Perhaps this task is nowhere more pressing than in the discourse of obesity where individuals are incited to take responsibility for themselves and their bodies through rigorous exercise and diet regimes regardless of the various social, cultural, economic, and genetic factors that make individuals either unwilling or unable to comply with normative body weight ideals. Questions need to be asked of obesity discourses that pathologize different cultural embodiments and/or blame individuals for circumstances that are beyond their control. Body weight needs to be thought of less as a pressing health problem but as a cultural construct that is deployed in taming both the individual and social body.

Conclusion

This chapter has demonstrated that young people do not simply take up health discourse in a straightforward manner. As Bronwyn Davies (2004) notes “human experience is…constituted through multiple discourses, which give rise to ambivalent understandings and emotions” (p. 7). The manner in which young people contend with multiple discourses pulling them in multiple directions can be seen in the shifting and
nuanced ways the young men talked about health, health practices, and bodies. To reiterate, it is important that young people not be seen to be irrational subjects in need of more health education to set their misguided interpretations “right”. Rather, young people need to be understood as situated at the crossroads of complex and multiple discourses out of which they have to mold a “coherent” way of seeing and being in the social world. In order to make sense of the health understandings and practices of young people, health experts, such as teachers, medical practitioners, and parents even, need to learn to see youth as architects of their own health rationalities, and understand that these rationalities are embedded in real everyday life circumstances. While preventive medicine is premised on the assumption of rational subjects “freely” engaging in health “choices”, in reality health promotion does not permit choice at all, but assumes one correct healthy “choice” (Ioannou, 2003; Petersen, 1997). Thus, rather than imposing health rationalities from the “outside”, young people should be accorded the socio-cultural space and tools to build their own health frameworks, frameworks that meet the very real needs of their everyday lives.
CHAPTER NINE

CONCLUSION

This dissertation has explored the socio-cultural embodiment of fatness in young men. Fatness, for the purposes of this research, was not articulated as a real body size or shape, but as a set of discourses that frame the way we think, see, and experience our bodies and the bodies of others. Situating body size, or more specifically fatness, as a discursive construction has allowed me to highlight the obscure power relations that were at play in seemingly objective health and body categories, such as “healthy” and “unhealthy”, “normal weight” and “obese”. I have organized this dissertation around the premise that health categories, particularly those related to body size and shape, should not be approached as biological or biomedical essences, but as the outcome of complex power relations that construct some bodies as more attractive, healthy, and culturally valuable while denigrating others as unhealthy, unattractive, and culturally undesirable.

Following Nikolas Rose (1999), who suggests that “the language of social constructionism is actually rather weak” (p. xi)—that it is unhelpful to repeatedly claim that seemingly objective realities are in fact “social constructions”—I explored the manner in which regulatory norms are taken up and embodied in forcibly materializing particular bodies and subjects. In other words, it asks after the power relations through which the material body comes into existence as a specific type of body, such as a fat or slender body, healthy or unhealthy body, and attractive or unattractive body. In this regard, this dissertation investigated how health and body discourses construct the “truth” about bodies, their health, beauty, moral worth, and how these “truths” are taken up by young men in the construction of particular embodied social identities.
The Objectives

The specific objectives for this research were fourfold: to investigate the central discourses influencing young men’s embodied sense of self; to explore the role the discourse of fatness plays in the constitution of young men’s embodied sense of self; to examine if social position and location influences the up-take of health and body discourses; and finally to produce alternative and nuanced ways of thinking about the intersections of masculinity, health, and body weight with the hope that it will aid in more ethical knowledge production and dissemination in health-related fields, such as physical education, health promotion, and obesity science. The findings of this dissertation are important in that they provide insight into how young men take up and make sense of health and body messages. This knowledge has relevant implications for policy design for health promotion and health education. In the following sections I will briefly overview the major findings of this research and identify central theoretical and policy contributions.

The Discursive Construction of Male Embodiment

In this section I overview the central discourses the young men had available to them as well as how they took these discourses up in making sense of, and experiencing, their bodies. There were multiple discourses shaping how the young men thought about, talked about, and experienced their bodies in relation to its shape, size, and health. In particular, the young men used the neoliberal discourse of the knowing, rational, self-governing liberal humanist subject. They suggested that the proper subject was a disciplined subject who exercised and demonstrated control over their \textit{life} through taking control of their \textit{flesh}, its firmness, shape, and size. Because the body was understood to
be under the influence of the individual, the shape, size, and appearance of the body was assumed to be reflective of the self, to provide some insider information into the real identity of the subject—what sort of friend they would make, how good they were at their job, whether they were lazy or not. The body, for these young men, provided a window into the soul. These readings of the body were only possible within a cultural context where the body was posited as an object separate from the self.

The second major discourse that organized the participant’s articulations of embodiment was the construction of the body as a machine. Brian Pronger (1995) argues that machinic constructions of human embodiment have been central to modern western metaphysics. Once the body is conceptualized as an entity that is separable from the self it can be quantified and thus rendered knowable, and once knowable it is then possible for the rational, self-governing subject to gain control of the body and its flesh. The participants talked about the body as though it was separate from the self and they used machinic metaphors to demonstrate the self-evidence of the mind/body split. For instance, the model of energy-in/energy-out was a prominent framework for understanding and taking control of body size and shape. Here, the individual was incited to discipline their body carefully monitoring and controlling the amount of energy consumed through eating and balancing this against energy expended through exercise. Such machinic constructions, however, precluded the social, cultural, and material circumstances in which bodies were situated, thereby giving the impression that embodiment was an individual phenomenon rather than the sedimented effect of discursive power and situated social and material circumstances. The discourse of the body as a machine was thus prevalent in the manner in which the participants talked
about embodiment. The notion of the rational humanist subject in control of the objectified, body-machine made available particular constructions of the fat body.

The discourse of fatness situated the fat body as belonging to a lazy, uncontrolled, and unattractive individual. In other words, because the materiality of bodies was assumed to be an individual rather than a social phenomenon, the fat body was read as a reflection of a particular type of subject—one that was too irresponsible and lazy to worry about and work on their body’s health and appearance. Thus, I argued that health and body discourses enable and incite particular ways of seeing bodies (i.e. fat body as ugly, undisciplined, and lazy) while constraining alternative ways of thinking about bodies (i.e. fat body as attractive, athletic, or the fat body as a product of broader social and cultural power relations). Discourses of healthism and body as a machine combined to produce the discourse of fatness where the fat body was understood as an unlivable subjectivity that must be corrected through subjecting oneself to normalizing technologies of diet, exercise, and “healthy living”. In other words, the fat subject was incited to embody normalcy in and through the shape, size, and performance of their bodies.

Health was also a prominent discursive resource by which the young men talked about and made sense of their bodies. The fat body was articulated as health pathology. To be fat, the participants argued, was to be at risk of disease and premature death. Discourses of health were powerful vehicles for categorizing not only particular bodies, but also certain desires, such as the desire to eat, and control of those desires which, in the narratives of the participants, proved to be constitutive of privileged subjects (i.e.
healthy, controlled, thin, and thus “good” subjects) over and against other, culturally degenerate subjectivities (i.e. unhealthy, out-of-control, fat subjects).

However, fatness was not universally constructed as a negative embodiment. The participants at Pinevale talked about aggressive, space-occupying, physically competent fat masculinities. Fatness, they argued, was not necessarily a de-subjectifying embodiment, but harbored the potential to be recuperative of certain phallic forms of masculinity (i.e. they talked about fatness as potentially a powerful, athletic, and dominant way of being male), whereby fat boys and men could use their large bodies to occupy physical space as a means of dominating and controlling the bodies of women and smaller men. Nonetheless, these “positive” representations of fatness appeared to be limited to certain socio-cultural contexts, and were not commonly available in all of the research locations. In the ensuing section I explore how the discourses that the young men used to talk about bodies were embedded in, and shifted depending on, social, cultural, and material context.

Social Position and Location and the Speaking Subject

There were subtle but notable differences in how differently situated participants dialogued about health, health practices, and body weight. Whereas the mostly white, middle class participants at Lawson used the positivistic language of medical science to talk about the relationship between health and body weight, the black, poorer young men from Pinevale were more likely to use lay or colloquial language to discourse about embodiment. The manner of speaking about and practicing health, argues Williams (1998), are performances which serve to locate individuals within particular subject positions and social locations. For instance, the uptake and articulation of biomedical
discourse along with health practices rooted in bodily discipline are embedded in a middle class ethos of individualism, delay of gratification, and self control (Crawford, 2006). Thus, when some participants took up and practiced dominant health discourse, such performances were not only constitutive of their “healthy” identities, but were at the same time productive of their status as middle class subjects. Similarly, more experiential and colloquial performances of health were not only reflective of a particular social position and context (i.e. poverty), but were also constitutive of those marginalized positions. The ability to speak and practice dominant health discourse, in other words, were constitutive performances of privileged, white, middle class subject positionings. Indeed, it was evident in the present research that not all individuals had equal access to the cultural, social, and material resources necessary to perform health in dominant ways such that some bodies were constrained from materializing privileged embodiments (i.e. lean bodies, biomedical health talk, and “healthy” practices etc.) while enabling others. Thus, the ability to produce dominant “healthy” embodied subjectivities was disproportionately available to the participants.

The manner in which the participants took up and deployed health and body discourses was also gendered. For instance, the participants talked about healthy eating, dieting, and restrictive eating as feminine practices, whereas sport, exercise, and physical activity were understood to be masculine performances. The participants’ narratives revealed that “healthy living” health messaging is not taken up and practiced in gender

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128 It is important to note here that having access to social, cultural, and material resources does not necessarily mean that individuals will submit to dominant health practices. Indeed, as I demonstrated with this research, there are a variety of reasons why individuals do and do not practice dominant ways of doing health and being “healthy”. In this regard, I would critique social determinant models of health for their assumption of a rational humanist subject at the centre of discourse who, given the opportunity, will choose to practice health in dominant ways.
neutral ways. Rather, the participants surveilled and policed the health practices of both themselves and their peers, carefully monitoring for gender transgressions (i.e. dieting or eating “health food”), and thus health discourse served as important cultural resources in the forcible materialization of normative ways of doing gender. Similarly, the participants talked about healthy living, particularly healthy eating, as something that they did not need to worry about until they were older. Young people, they argued, did not worry about what they ate. Thus, health discourse was not only gendered, but was also performed along, and constitutive of, age categories.

The participants also discoursed differently about bodies depending on their social proximity to the bodies they were speaking of. For the most part the young men spoke disparagingly of abstract “unknown” fat bodies, constructing them as lazy, unhealthy, unattractive, and undisciplined. However, when the young men spoke of fat friends or family members they displayed very different narratives. While these narratives were contextually specific, they were nonetheless embedded in a protective discourse whereby the participants would re-name and re-categorize the bodies of those they cared about, thus deflecting the pathologizing effects of obesity and fatness discourse while recuperating the moral worth and subjecthood of those non-normative embodied subjects that were close to them. Health discourse and the discourse of fatness were differentially deployed depending on the speaking subject’s relationship to the fat bodies under discussion.

Health and body discourses were indeed taken up and deployed differentially depending on social position and location. As Bronwyn Davies (2006b) notes, “conditions of possibility are embedded not in discourse alone, but in mutually
constitutive social acts” (p. 426) and this was evident in the manner in which health discourse was not taken up and performatively embodied in any unified way, but was always embedded within localized social communities. Moreover, I argued that the deployment of health and body discourses occurred along gendered, raced, classed, and aged lines. However, the manner in which these discourses were differentially practiced were not only reflective of gendered, raced, classed, and aged bodies, but were at the same time constitutive of these social positions and embodied subjectivities. In the section below, I address the fourth objective of this dissertation. I explore the new and alternative ways of thinking about the intersections of fatness, masculinity, and health this research has opened up, and how these alternative knowledges might be instructive in the production and dissemination of more ethical ways of doing health and producing health knowledges.

Ethical Health Knowledge Production and Dissemination

A fundamental motivation for this dissertation research emerged from my desire to produce a different, potentially more ethical, way of thinking about, and doing, health and health research. I use the word “ethics” not to refer to a set of rules of conduct, as it is conventionally understood, but in the Foucaultian sense where ethics characterizes the relationship between the individual and the codes that regulate their lives. Whereas as the former definition of ethics refers to a static set of rules and codes against which individuals are measured as “good” or “bad” ethical subjects, Foucaultian ethics are concerned with the relations an individual forms with prevailing disciplines and technologies in the process of constructing oneself as an ethical subject (Markula, 2004; Shogan, 1999). Engaged critical thinking, Foucault argues, is fundamental to the process
of opening up a space of freedom to think otherwise as a means to an ethical constitution of the self. The freedom to think otherwise does not indicate a position of exteriority to power, but a particular way of thinking inside and through the matrices of power. He argues that thought is the “freedom in relation to what one does, the motion by which one detaches oneself from it, establishes it as an object, and reflects on it as a problem” (Foucault cited in Davies, 2008, p. xiii). Such engaged critical thinking “opens up a certain freedom, and a space in which the repetition of old thought is no longer necessary or inevitable” (Davies, 2008, p. xiii). Based on the findings I argue that health experts of all sorts need to foster and create socio-cultural spaces where health, health practices, and “healthy” bodies can be thought differently. In the following sections, I first outline an ethical model of producing knowledge about body weight, one which actively embraces its moral and political assumptions. The second section examines how ethics can be taken up and practiced at the individual level as a means of doing health differently.

The Big Fat Lie! A Different Way of Doing Obesity Science

Kelly Brownell (2005) laments the fact that questions of politics and morality enter the fray over body weight. He suggests that politics and morality detract from important scientific “truths” about obesity. What Brownell neglects, however, is that science does not proceed in a vacuum, rather it is always and necessarily embedded in a particular social, historical, and cultural context, thus any dream of a pure, apolitical scientific truth is from the start flawed (Longino, 1989). Moreover, even if there were pure scientific “truths” about a social, cultural, and biological phenomenon as complex as body size, there still would be no pure transmission of these “truths” to individuals. For example, Sam Murray (2007) suggests that
in upholding the norm/pathology binary in medical discourse, what is effected is a neglect of a recognition of the socio-cultural function of the categories “normal” and “pathological”, and medical participation in the way these terms come to “mean” in lay society. (p. 372)

Health experts have to recognize that biomedical representations of overweight and obesity are not value-free, and that in order to practice with professional integrity, experts have to more fully engage with the moral and ethical dimensions of their professional discourse. For instance, scholars have noted and this research has supported that obesity discourse labels, categorizes, and ultimately stigmatizes certain body sizes and shapes, and that living non-normative bodies elicits feelings of guilt, anxiety, and shame (Gard and Wright, 2001). Thus, simply identifying excessive body weights as “unhealthy” and then targeting those bodies as in need of expert intervention does nothing to foster supportive, safe, and inclusive social and cultural spaces where fat individuals are able to enjoy the status of full subjecthood, spaces, it is argued, that are necessary to the health and well-being of individuals (Larkin and Rice, 2005; Rich and Evans, 2005). The biomedical health model often assumes that it is possible to predict and control people’s health behaviours (McElroy, 2002) when, in fact, it is impossible to understand with reliability how biomedical or scientific “facts” about body weight, size, and shape are taken up in the everyday lives of individuals.

For the participants in the present research notions of health, normative and non-normative body size and shape, desirable and undesirable bodies, for instance, blurred together thus bringing about the realization that health discourses and directives are not received and taken up in isolation. Rather, the manner in which health and body discourses are embodied is a complex and fluid process that shifts across a diversity of socially situated positions. Although health experts—such as teachers, health
practitioners, and health promoters—might believe that there is one way to lead a healthy lifestyle (Ioannou, 2003), young people do not necessarily accord health and health-related behaviours the same cultural currency, rather positioning health discourse as one among many in their discursive repertoires. Health experts need to recognize that health “choices” and articulations are always embedded within the everyday social and cultural realities of youth. In other words, health discourse grapples for recognition with discourses of normative heterosexual masculinity, male body ideals, and the values of consumer culture, for instance.

Biomedical science is thus one way—albeit a privileged way—among many of making sense of our social lives. Therefore, rather than purging obesity science of its sociocultural context, we should look to embed its claims further in a situated social and cultural location. As social scientists concerned with the moral and political questions of a health based in social justice, we have to ask after the ways in which obesity science does not “simply inform us of medical or biomedical ‘facts’ but creates meanings that influence cultural understandings of health, the body and eating” (Rich and Evans, 2005, 344). Unlike Kelly Brownell (2005) who wants to purge obesity-driven health discourse of its less objective components by turning to science as the final arbiter of “truth,” I would suggest that we should go in the exact opposite direction and further embed health discourses in their social, cultural, and political contexts. Whether Brownell chooses to ignore it or not, discussions of body size and health are unavoidably embedded in broader relations of power, including ideological biases and moralisms, and thus can never be reduced to pure essence. With this recognition in mind, I endorse Michael Gard and Jan Wright’s (2005) insistence that instead of burying our heads in the sand we thoroughly
engage with “issues such as economic disadvantage, the workings of capitalism, increasingly deregulated labour markets and the imperative for companies, particularly …those that sell food, to be profitable” (p. 190). This, the authors point out, “would mean changing the very nature of science” by “articulating positions that are overtly moral and ideological” (p. 190). If we agree with Micheal Gard and Jan Wright that a more ethically responsible obesity science would embrace rather than reject our moral and ideological selves and assumptions, what then would obesity science look like?

A politicized, poststructural model of obesity science would look very different than current forms of science. For instance, the “war on obesity” would more properly take the form of a “war on poverty,”\textsuperscript{129} and not one that targets the “poor” as responsible for their positioning, but rather a war that recognizes the correlation between poverty and ill-health (Raphael, 2004, 2002) as well as the link between poverty and obesity (Campos, 2004). In the name of “health” for all, a war on poverty would openly acknowledge the “power, privilege, and structural inequality” associated with capitalism (Robertson, 1998) and deny the tendency to “blame the victim” for their impoverished state, as neoliberal models of health do. In addition to the war on poverty, an explicitly moral and ideological health knowledge would launch a “war on patriarchy” to challenge the discursive construction of gendered spaces and movements, and similarly a “war on racism” thus dismantling oppressive racialized notions of what bodies should and should not do. My politics of health would include asking broad ethical questions about the

\textsuperscript{129} Based on the feedback of Heather Sykes, I acknowledge that I am replacing one militaristic metaphor (i.e. the war on obesity) with another (i.e. the war on poverty). Thus, I want to exercise caution when using this metaphor and establish that my “war” is more properly a critical engagement of thinking otherwise through fostering discursive spaces where bodies can be thought and experienced in multiple and subversive ways. In this regard, I use the “war” metaphor merely as a technique to highlight the degree to which dominant obesity discourse is misguided in its focus.
social value of health discourses that seek to normalize diverse embodiments by erasing ethno-cultural values. It would challenge reductive stigmatizations and moralizations that see obese people as lazy and morally deficient. In short, my politics of body size and health would move the agenda away from questions of individual responsibility towards more complex attributions of cultural, social, and economic context.

Such a politics can be accomplished by re-naming the war on obesity by including and valuing multiple voices and perspectives on issues of fatness and health. For instance, this dissertation has demonstrated that young people often construct health rationalities that are divergent from dominant models of health (a finding that has been reproduced in other research protocols, see Iaonnou, 2003; Monaghan, 2007; Watson, 2000). These health rationalities demonstrate a sound logic of their own when considering the embedded social and cultural contexts from which they emerge. There is, in other words, lots to be learned by listening to, and hearing the voices of young people themselves. While such narratives may not have the scientific and professional legitimacy of the “health expert”, they nonetheless emerge from lived experiences that are crucial to the way individuals take up and practice health. I realize that this is not a small recommendation, as power hierarchies are pervasive in health encounters between patients and practitioners (Lupton, 1997), teachers and students (Gard and Wright, 2001; Tinning and Galsby, 2002), and even children and their parents (Burrows and Wright, 2004). However, imposing dominant health rationalities onto individuals without taking into account their everyday social and cultural life worlds is not only ineffective, but can also be destructive, as the narratives of the participants in this research have revealed. Moreover, “listening” across the professional power thresholds that are constitutive of the
discipline of health does not mean listening to some bodies (i.e. thin and “healthy”) as legitimate and “worthy” speaking subjects, while denying and denigrating the voices and experiences of others (i.e. fat and “unhealthy”). Rather, this exercise would necessitate re-thinking dominant models of health such that those bodies traditionally thought of as “unhealthy” or “bad” bodies become a site of subversion, where alternative and potentially deconstructive narratives are heard, fostered, and even given legitimacy. What I am advocating here is truly an “insurrection of subjugated knowledges” (Foucault, 1980), where previously silenced voices are heard (i.e. children, ethno-cultural minorities etc), and bodies that have hitherto been subjected to technologies of normalization and thus cultural erasure (i.e. fat and disabled bodies) are understood and seen under the light of a more encompassing model of health that is not limited to biomedical science alone, but also psychological, social, and spiritual measures of wellbeing. In the following section I expand on ways of doing health differently.

**Practicing an Ethics of Health**

Health, as I have demonstrated in this dissertation, is not defined nor experienced in a unified or singular manner. Rather, differently situated youth take up and experience health in different ways. Health always exceeds the limits of dominant biomedical models. There is no one “health” or way of embodying “health”, as I have argued here. Rather, we should think in terms of “healths”, multiple, contested, situated, lived, and practical ways of giving meaning to, and being, “healthy”. Basing notions of health in the positivistic and seemingly objective language of biomedical science results in a cultural ontology that demonstrates a “limited imagination regarding differential embodiment” (Titchkosky, 2007, p. 117). Fat bodies, according to dominant biocentric ontology, are
unhealthy, lazy, unathletic, and unattractive bodies, as I have demonstrated through the present research and has been supported in other research projects (Wright et al., 2006; Sykes and McPhail, 2008). But what is a biomedically dominant ontology to make of fat bodies that can move, run, swim, that can win the race? Do such bodies harbour disruptive or subversive potential? Do they make us re-think what we take for granted and seem to objectively know about fat bodies and what they can and cannot do? The young men at Pinevale spoke of the fat male body in ambivalent terms, at times reducing it to dominant narratives of disease and laziness, but at other moments they spoke of fat male bodies in ways that shattered culturally constrained assumptions about what differently sized and shaped bodies are capable of. I would argue that the fat athletically competent body indeed represents a “subversive bodily act” (Butler, 1990) that potentially initiates a thinking (and moving) otherwise. Put simply, the fat male body that can run fast, faster than the lean supposedly “athletic” body, challenges deeply held cultural assumptions about what fatness can do and what it is. It forces a re-thinking of embodiment that, with proper care and nuance, could be usefully employed to pry open limited definitions of “healthy” and normative embodiments. Along these lines Sykes and McPhail (2008) suggest that the athletically competent fat body can potentially “formulate a particular fat politic that actively rejects and resignifies the logic of obesity discourse that conflates the fat body with inactivity and being healthy” (p. 89). Thus, non-normative bodily movements (i.e. fat athletically competent bodies) potentially enable a thinking otherwise.

Such a project, however, would necessitate a different way of thinking about, and doing, health. It would require that different health rationalities are fostered and allowed
to emerge as recognized and viable contenders for legitimacy in otherwise sealed biomedical paradigms. Currently, local and experiential knowledges are interpreted within the “expert-lay” dichotomy and, as such, are rendered marginal, irrational, and even unintelligible (Hepworth, 1999). Moreover, the discourse of children and youth as “adults in becoming” (Jackson and Scott, 1999; Lesko, 2001) further marginalizes the voices of young people as unintelligible and irrational. In short, only the perspectives of adult experts are legitimized as recognizable and worthy in current models of health. Thus, thinking otherwise about bodies, health, and health practices is foreclosed by dominant health discourse.

Acknowledging that health is not merely a physiological phenomenon isolated in the individuated human body, but rather the effect of complex social, economic, and political conditions allows for alternative voices to be articulated and heard. Re-thinking health in non-physiologically reductive terms enables a re-imagining of health practice where healthful living is embedded in engaged practices of critically thinking otherwise. As opposed to practicing health as usual,130 I am advocating for ways of listening, hearing, and allowing for the voices, practices, ways of moving, and embodied subjectivities that are at present excluded from contemporary health models. Recognizing that healthy eating and daily physical activity, two practices that are touted as essential to the production of “health”, are constrained by interlocking discourses and social locations of ethno-cultural background, social class, and gender, for instance, are important to understanding why people do health the way they do. For example, I have revealed that

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130 The term “health as usual” is an adaptation of Bronwyn Davies (2006b) term “teaching as usual”. I use it here to refer to the dominant discourse which positions and legitimizes health experts (i.e. practitioners, health promoters, teachers, and researchers) as the unquestionable authorities on matters of health and health practices.
performances of masculinity and youth are not necessarily compatible with dominant health messaging about “healthy” eating. I demonstrated how a constitutive performance of youthful masculinities within the localized context of Lawson was to eat voraciously and without regard for future health consequences. Thus, dominant definitions of “health” were at odds with the lived socio-cultural realities of the young men at Lawson who were trying to meet cultural standards of normative masculinity. These young men were articulating notions of “health” that were based in “healthy” social identities—as opposed to physiological ideals of health—that entailed the performance of normative masculinity as unfettered appetite, not moderation, self-governance, and discipline, as dominant health discourse would prescribe.

A critically thinking otherwise would foster a situation where dominant health discourse and institutional practices can be, as Foucault would say, detached from oneself and established as an object of critical reflection. In the example above, eating practices would not be seen as merely a matter of physiological health, but as a social, cultural, and material phenomenon embedded in larger power relations of gender, sexuality, social class, and age. Critically thinking otherwise would enable subjects to examine the cultural conditions of possibility that shape their embodied subjectivities, how such conditions constrain and enable particular ways of being and modes of embodiment, and with what consequences for others. This is an important project because such critical reflection allows health to be done differently, and doing health differently allows for a re-imagining of bodies, health, and power relations more generally. Markula (2004) elaborates on this project:

To be able to think differently creates an opportunity to question the limits of one’s freedom instead of merely coping with one’s situation. The critically self-
aware individual constantly questions what is seemingly “natural” and inevitable in one’s identity and, as a result, creates an identity of his or her own. (p. 308)

However, I would push Markula’s explanation one step further, arguing that the re-creation of the self has ripple effects in that it provides new ways of seeing, thinking about, and experiencing embodiment for others. In short, critically thinking (and embodying) health otherwise is not an individual engagement.

Doing health, I have argued throughout this dissertation, is not merely a personal project, although it is always rooted within individual biographies. Rather, I have argued that forces outside of the self are implicated in one’s health—the environment, prevailing economic structures, friendships, family, available material resources, and social factors and relations such as gender, race, ethnicity, ability, and age. Thus, health should not be reduced to neoliberal versions of self-responsibility, but rather expanded to include the health of social and cultural networks. To this end, I prefer Bronwyn Davies version of responsibility to that of neoliberal definitions:

Our responsibility lies inside social relations and inside a responsibility to and for oneself in relation to the other—not oneself as a known entity, but oneself in process, unfolding or folding up, being done or undone, in relation to the other, again and again. (2006b)

I am borrowing Davies definition of responsibility to re-imagine health as more than an individual project of living healthy. To be healthy is more than just being a well disciplined subject and productive citizen. Health entails a responsibility to the Other, to critically interrogate how “health” is constructed, under what social circumstances, and with what consequences for others. For example, with this dissertation, I have demonstrated how healthy subjects construct, understand, and experience their health relationally by contrasting it over and against the “unhealthy” Other. In shoring up the
boundaries of their own healthy subjectivities, the participants in the present research obscured the complex social and material relations that enabled them to embody their normatively slender bodies in the ways that they did. Recognizing that not all bodies have equal access to the social, cultural, and material resources to construct and perform normative embodiment, as I have demonstrated in this dissertation, makes it all the more imperative to question after the processes by which one’s own “health” identity comes into being at the expense of the Other.

Although my research is limited to young men, health experts and health researchers need to ask similar questions of themselves. What, in other words, investment do health promoters and obesity scientists have in the discursive production of the “obese” body? How are their professional identities embroiled in the production of health pathologies, especially body size and shape? How are health experts and the unhealthy subjects they seek to identify, objectify, and normalize mutually embroiled in the constitution of one another, and with what consequences for each? In other words, health “experts” need to critically reflect on the knowledge they produce and disseminate, treat it as a problem, and examine how their professional identities as practitioners, teachers, and researchers, for example, are constituted in and through the supposedly objective knowledge they produce and disseminate. As I argue above, knowledge is neither objective nor apolitical, but should be thought of in terms of what Foucault would label “an instrument of confrontation” (Arnold, 1997, p. xx). For Foucault, knowledge and truth are always situated and perspectival and strategically deployed, much like a weapon, to gain supremacy for one’s perspective (Foucault, 1997). Questions need to be asked about who gains and who loses with the discursive construction of boys’ bodies.
and embodied practices’ in terms of pathological health discourse. Until health experts ask serious questions about how their knowledges empower some while constraining others, health discourse generally, and obesity discourse more specifically, will continue to wage an unjustified and destructive war on certain sectors of the population and specific embodied subjects. Below I give an illustration of what a politicized, critically reflective model of health promotion might look like in relation to the intersections of boys, their bodies, and health knowledge.

Thinking Fatness, Masculinity, and Health Otherwise

With this research, I have demonstrated that fatness matters to men. I have explored the multiple and diffuse meanings that fatness has across diversely situated groups of young men, and revealed that, although fluid and shifting, the identity category “fatness” is a salient one for how the young men come to see and understand their own bodies as well as those of others. This finding fills an important research gap that leaves the relationship between men, masculinity, and body size relatively unexamined (Bell and McNaughton, 2007; Gilman, 2004; Monaghan, 2007). The failure to adequately investigate men and fatness has resulted in the common misconception that men are unconcerned about the size and shape of their bodies. In contrast to this perception, I have revealed that physically competent fat men can feel discriminated against and marginalized in the masculine conferring spaces of sport and athletics. Furthermore, I have argued that ignoring the relevance that fatness has for boys and young men is no longer a tenable option, especially in a context where the body size and shape of youthful male bodies are increasingly biomedicalized as health pathology (CLFRI, 2007;
Monaghan, 2007). Nevertheless, boys and men continue to be excluded from much of the scholarly literature on fatness in the social sciences.

It is not uncommon for otherwise nuanced research accounts to make reductive claims that position the male body as less disciplined by normative gender ideals and thus as “freer” modes of embodiment. Thus, statements such as the “consequences of body size standards and stereotypes are especially exacting and far-reaching for girls and women” (Rice, 2007, p. 158) seem self-evident even though there is no empirical research to support them. I have demonstrated that boys and men are likewise constrained by oppressive gender norms, albeit in different ways. For example, while it was revealed that it is possible for “large [male] bodies [to be] powerful and appropriately masculine” (Gard and Wright, 2005, p. 161), that the “fat boy” (Gilman, 2004) can perform an aggressive, space-occupying version of phallic masculinity, such constructions of masculinity were not universally recognized across all social positions and locations.

Positive attributions of the fat male body, in other words, appeared to be limited to particular socio-cultural communities, and even then there were limitations to their positive articulations. The fat male body only appeared as a positive embodiment within certain cultural representations (i.e. rap videos, football fields) and even then only amongst certain social groups (i.e. poorer black participants from Pinevale). Therefore, far from being a widely accepted mode of male embodiment, I found that the positive readings of the fat male body were limited to a few cultural contexts and modes of performativity.

If, as Gard and Wright (2005) argue, “women’s subordination requires that their power be contained, that they take up smaller amounts of physical space in society than
“men” (p. 161), what are the cultural requirements of the male body generally, and the fat male body more specifically? If the feminine imperative is “containment” the masculine equivalent is not liberation, emancipation, or freedom, as is sometimes assumed, but equally constraining cultural imperatives of “occupation”, “dominance”, and “control of others”. For the fat male body, the embodiment of a phallic masculinity is that much more urgent. Unlike the lean male body, which occupies masculine disembodiment in and through the invisibility of its normatively sized and shaped body, I have revealed that the only viable and culturally intelligible subject position for the fat man is to recuperate his masculine privilege by re-embodying the Other—by dominating, conquering, and “scoring” on women and smaller, weaker males. If the de-masculinizing mark of embodiment is located in those “lesser” bodies—in women (Gallop, 1988) and gay and weaker men (Mac An Ghaill, 2000; Martino, 2000), for example, the fat male body must abject and project his excessive and feminizing (Sykes and McPhail, 2008) corpulence onto the Other through the aggressive occupation of space on the sports field, in fistfights, through the spectacle of excessive consumption (Gross, 2005), and through hyper-heterosexual conquest in order to accrue the patriarchal privilege that is culturally accorded to the disembodied masculine subject. Thus, Bethan Evans (2004) only has half the equation when she writes that,

being bullied for being fat [is] common. There is a danger that by reinforcing the idea that thin is good and fat is bad and that fat people are out of control and irresponsible citizens, then health education is justifying the thought process which underlies size based bullying and, at the very least, is avoiding the underlying cause of bullying. (p. 289)

What is lost in her analysis is the degree to which health education discourse not only legitimizes fat people as subjects of bullying, but also as bullying subjects. By truncating
the possible subject positions available to fat individuals, by constraining fat embodiment as uncontrolled health pathology, health discourse offers boys and men few opportunities to construct a culturally intelligible masculine subjectivity other then through the performance of an aggressive, space-occupying, phallic masculinity. Indeed, my research findings are limited to the experiences of boys and young men, additional research is required to determine if these findings can be extrapolated to the experiences of girls and women.

All of this is to argue that male embodiment is not “free”, but rather has disciplinary codes of its own that are equally, albeit differently, constraining. This is important to recognize because narrow codes of masculinity are harmful to both those boys and men who either fail or refuse to live up to them as well as those Others who are the re-embodied victims of fat masculine disembodiment (i.e. the bullied, conquered, and conquered). Thus, it is not enough to acknowledge that masculinity and the occupation of space are compatible cultural imperatives, rather a more nuanced exploration of how masculine gender norms are embodied, within what social and cultural contexts, and with what consequences is necessary.

I see two problems with reductively concluding that male fatness is consistent with the masculine imperative to aggressively occupy space. First, conclusions that lack nuance such as these leave unexamined the way gender hierarchies, along with other social identities, are reproduced and naturalized in and through the cultural pathologization of male fatness where notions of the aggressive, space occupying fat male body serve to forcibly materialize ways of being male and male embodiment. Rather than simplistically conclude that this is the way it is, I am arguing that a more
sophisticated, and perhaps even health-inducing, approach would be to examine why this is a culturally permissible way of being both male and fat, with what consequences, and under what social and cultural contexts. Second, the assumed link between fatness and masculinity is also problematic because some fat men fail to perform their fatness in aggressive, space occupying ways. What of the fat man that does not perform a phallic hardness, but is “soft” and flaccid? As fat theorists have pointed out, cultural representations of the fat male body oscillate between the fat man as solid, tough, and masculine and the fat man as soft, infantile, and feminine (Moon and Sedgwick, 2001). This research has provided an analysis of the multiple and shifting ways in which fatness, the male body, and masculinity intersect and materialize. Recognizing and being critically reflexive of the multiple and contesting discursive regimes that are constitutive of male identity serves to expose “gaps that can be exploited when it is necessary to refuse homogenizing [disciplinary] impulses” (Shogan, 1999, p. 45).

In the preceding paragraphs, I am advocating for a new form of health education, one informed by critical obesity studies and poststructural feminism, where young men are provided with the cultural tools and encouraged to examine their constitution as subjects of sport, physical activity, health, and other disciplinary technologies. In particular, I am trying to re-think health education as a form of open and inter-subjective dialogue where male embodiment can be re-imagined as multiple, shifting, contested, and vulnerable. The goal of such education is not to preach the “right” way to do health and be male, but to problematize [health and male] identities by becoming more self-reflexive” (Markula, 2004, p. 308) thus expanding the limitations of discursive masculine and health identities. If boys and men, as well as those expert-Others that study and
“know” them and their bodies, are provided with critical space to step back and reflect upon the dominant, inter-locking disciplinary discourses through which they are constituted, it then becomes possible to do health differently. To re-think and re-do dominant ways of knowing and doing health, gender, race, sex, class, ability, and body size in the production of “healthier” bodies. “Healthier” not only in a physiological sense, but “healthier” social, emotional, intellectual, and sensate intersubjective beings as well.

Based on the findings of this research, I suggest that a primary goal of scholars, feminists, and health advocates alike should be to pluralize the disciplinary technologies and institutional practices that constrain the fat male subject such that different, less phallic modes of embodiment are legitimized as culturally available discursive resources. This requires both challenging normative masculine ideals as well as re-articulating cultural expectations of the fat male subject. While fatness scholars are correct in their suggestions that masculinity and fatness are not necessarily incompatible, their failure to explore the multiple and shifting meanings of fatness across differently situated socio-cultural communities (see Gard and Wright, 2005; Hartley, 2001; Kent, 2001), as well as their inability to articulate alternative ways of being fat and male, of challenging limited, constraining, and harmful disciplinary codes of masculinity, ultimately proves to be unhelpful at best, and destructive at worst. I have demonstrated that fatness does matter to men, that it can be a painful and constraining embodiment, and that alternative ways of being fat and male are of critical importance to the health and wellbeing of fat boys and men.

In summary, I want to overview the three key points I have articulated in this section that go some way towards the creation of a more ethical health knowledge
production and dissemination. This includes creating and fostering discursive spaces where young people can critically reflect on the inter-locking discourses that construct their bodies, thereby exposing what appears to be “natural” as the outcome of reiterative regulatory practices. Second, I have argued for re-thinking normative ways of moving. As Unan (2003) and Sykes and McPhail (2008) have demonstrated, the moving body is uniquely positioned to disrupt oppressive dominant constructions of what bodies can and cannot do. Allowing for non-normatively shaped and sized bodies to perform with athletic skill, competence, and in leadership capacities in sporting and physical activity spaces that are designed for, and constitutive of, normatively sized bodies serves to subvert and pry apart dominant assumptions about the moving body and thus forces a re-thinking of culturally cherished expectations of embodiment. Third, and finally, health experts of all sorts, including the author of this dissertation, have to critically reflect and understand, to the extent possible, the complex conditions of our mutual foundation. We must understand our contribution to creating and withholding the conditions of possibility of various lives. We must constantly ask what it is that makes for a viable life [i.e. healthy and not fat] and how we are each implicated in constituting the viability, or non-viability of the lives of others. (Davies, 2006b, p. 435)

Thus, an ethical approach to the “obese” body means that it can no longer be understood as an object to be studied, warned against, and eradicated. Rather, as researchers, practitioners, and educators, all of us, fat or otherwise, have to try and understand that fatness or obesity is always more than merely an object to be studied or an inert health “problem”, but is, at the same time, a discursively constituted and intersubjectively lived category. Fatness, as the object of our study, is indeed the foundation of our collective professional subjectivities. As we name it, research it, teach about it, we are simultaneously bringing it into being as a social “problem” to be discovered, calculated,
known, and disciplined. In other words, our professional practices are constitutive of the very object that we so often assume preexists our investigations. Thus, we are all—myself included—invested in the naming and existence of fatness. Without the biomedicalized category “obesity” this dissertation would not have been possible. My identity as an aspiring doctor of philosophy is embroiled in, and mutually constituted through, the discursive production of the fat body. Thus, professional ethics cannot be reduced to prescriptive lists of “rights” and “wrongs” when studying the fat body, rather it involves reflexively thinking otherwise about how the discursive production of fatness is the foundational condition of possibility that enables the emergence of the health expert in the first place.

**Contributions of this Research**

This research employed multiple and innovative qualitative methods to answer key research questions related to the intersection of masculinity, fatness, and health. These methods included non-participant observation, photo(focus) group interviewing, and one-on-one interviews. There are several potential implications for future research designs emerging from the current research protocol. For instance, the qualitative methodological design of this research was one of its greatest strengths. One of the advantages of qualitative methodologies is that they provide insight into the everyday lived realities of the research participants (Denzin and Lincoln, 2005). To date, discussions of body size and health have been dominated by the postitivitic psycho-biological sciences leaving little room for the narrative testimonials of those whose bodies and embodied practices are being medicalized. By drawing upon critical sociology to explore young men’s body image, health and physical activity practices through a
feminist poststructural socio-cultural approach, this dissertation addressed this important lacunae in the existing literature base.

Additionally, the use of internet images during focus group discussions proved to be helpful in generating discussion amongst the participants. While some scholars have suggested that boys and men are uncomfortable talking about their bodies because to do so is culturally coded as a feminine practice (Davis, 2003), I found that the young men were quite competent at body talk, but demonstrated more comfort, particularly during the initial stages of the research, when talking about the bodies of others, such as those found in the images (i.e. Homer Simpson, Beyonce Knowles, Bowflex bodies, etc.). Multiple focus groups with the same participants also appeared to aid comfort level and willingness for the young men to engage in body talk. Thus, the methodological approach of this dissertation makes important contributions to the study of men and masculinity, generally, and men, the male body, health, and fatness, more specifically.

A further advantage of this dissertation research is to be found in its use of a feminist poststructural epistemology. The narratives of the participants were submitted to a poststructural discourse analysis (see Edley, 2001; Wright, 2004; Weedon, 1997). An advantage of poststructuralism is that it recognizes the “presence of multiple voices, multiple views, and multiple methods when analyzing any aspect of reality” (Cheek, 2000, p. 5). Thus, I did not analyse the participants’ narratives based on the notion of biomedical “truth”, but rather treated their comments as “truthful” accounts emerging from situated socio-cultural perspectives (Haraway, 1991). Such an approach allowed me to see health discourse as one discourse among many that represents a particular set of political interests engaged in a constant struggle for authority, status, and power over
other discourses (Weedon, 1997). Thus, the use of a poststructural approach enabled me to examine how historical, cultural, social, and material conditions of possibility both enabled and constrained differently positioned subjects in making the health choices that they did. Moreover, a poststructural analysis was also central to my ability to examine and articulate how inter-locking discourses produced differently located subjects as subject to various discourses.

Furthermore, this study applied Judith Butler’s theory of performativity to understand and explain how “obesity epidemic” informed health discourse is taken up and practiced in the materialization of “healthy” and “unhealthy” subjectivities. Butler’s theory of materialization is more conventionally used to articulate how gender identity is performatively constituted in and through the reiteration of normative ideals (see Davies, 2000, 2001, 2006a, 2006b; Nayak and Kehily, 2006, 2008; Rasmussen and Harwood, 2003). Thus, applying Butler’s theory to the discursive construction of health identities is an important and novel contribution to the theory of materialization. By using Butler’s theory, this research has engaged in an ontological critique of salient identity categories, including categories of health and body size, revealing their discursive production in the everyday lived practices of social agents. Moreover, Butler has been critiqued for her abstract theorization about the material production of bodies (see Davies, 2006b) without considering how subjects take up, negotiate, and resist dominant discourse in their everyday lived experiences. With this research I have added to an emerging body of work that examines how subjectification is actively produced in and through everyday practices.
This research also made several significant contributions to masculinity studies. First, critical sociological examinations of men and masculinity tend to be dominated by the Gramscian informed theory of R.W. Connell’s “hegemonic masculinity”. By employing a feminist poststructural epistemology, I was able to shed a different light on the intersections of men and masculinity (see Petersen, 1998; Pringle, 2005). Furthermore, by studying men, masculinity, and health, I have added to the emerging, but still understudied, field of masculinity and health (Robertson, 2006; Watson, 2000). Finally, I have pushed masculinity studies into new territories by empirically examining young men’s understanding and experiences of fatness. Although some research in the social sciences is starting to appear on the experiences of men and fatness (see Atkinson, 2008; Monaghan, 2005, 2007, 2008), it continues to be an underexamined topic, especially in relation to young men and body size.

I have also made two important contributions to the emergent discipline of critical obesity studies. First, empirical investigations into the ways in which young people take up and experience obesity discourse has been called for (McDermott, 2007), along with specific calls to gain greater insight into the experience of boys and young men in relation to “obesity epidemic” discourse (Wright and Burrows, 2004). This research, with its focus on how young men in different social and cultural circumstances take up and produce themselves in relation to health and body discourses, has gone some way towards answering these calls.

Finally, this dissertation develops existent risk theory by adding to, and building upon, the important work that situates the “obesity epidemic” as a technology of youth at risk (Burrows and Wright, 2004; McDermott, 2007). This study has revealed that
diversely situated youth from various social class and ethno-cultural backgrounds, take up and employ fatness discourses in conflicting and competing ways. By centering the voices of youth, the findings from this study illuminate the absences and silences in obesity discourse when considered through biomedicalized adult-centred perspectives. By unearthing and unraveling the destructive and discriminatory ways in which such youth take up and deploy fatness discourses, this study will contribute towards disrupting the biomedicalized body weight landscape, and produce more diverse and thus less oppressive means of seeing, thinking, and experiencing fatness and the fat body.
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Appendix A

Sydney’s Photovoice Images

1.

2.
Appendix B

Kyle’s Photovoice Images

1.

2.
Appendix C

Jack’s Photovoice Images

1.

2.
5.

6. STUDENTS ARE NOT ALLOWED IN THIS GYMNASIUM UNLESS SUPERVISED
Appendix D

John’s Photovoice Pictures

1.

![Image 1](image1.png)

2.

![Image 2](image2.png)
3.

How do you measure yourself?
Take action to improve from the inside out.
Appendix E

Phil’s Photovoice Pictures

1.

2.
Appendix F

Ajay’s Photovoice Pictures

1.

2.
3.

4.
Appendix G

Corporeal Biographies

Although the biographies below are about individuals, their bodies, and their embodied relations, these narratives are not meant to be read as isolated biographies. Rather, the story of one body inevitably reflects the experiences of another and embodiment in these accounts is understood as an intersubjective or inter-corporeal process of subjectification. The participants shared a discursive space where their bodies were mutually constituted through social relations and thus I have written these biographies to reflect the manner in which embodied identities are socially constituted in and through the discursive spaces of a Toronto area private school and community centre. Thus, these accounts are not, strictly speaking, representative of the collective life history of the group(s), but do reflect commonly experienced moments of subjectification, such as ethno-cultural background, racialization, social class, community membership, and the experiences and meanings of sport, to name a few.

Lawson’s Student Bod( y)ies

Kyle’s Body

At the time of the research, Kyle was a fifteen year old student at Lawson. Both his parents were white, middle class professionals. Kyle himself had professional ambitions as he intended to pursue a career in law and possibly politics. He stood five foot ten inches tall and weighed one hundred and fifty pounds. Kyle took pride in his body, admitting that part of his motivation for playing sports was to attain a lean, more muscular appearance. He was seen by both his peers and his physical education teachers

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131 This is not information I requested, rather he volunteered this information during a one-on-one interview I had with him.
as a leader. At least two of the students that volunteered for the research project did so at Kyle’s suggestion and coaxing. During the focus groups he was confident and his opinion seemed to be well-regarded by his peers in the group.

The first time I saw Kyle, I was observing the grade ten physical education class outside playing Ultimate Frisbee. He was dressed in a shirt, tie, and dress pants, standing confidently with his hands in his pockets at the side of the playing field. His dress and confident, mature interaction with the students in the class led me to believe that he was a student teacher and it was not until some time later that I realized the students on the field were actually his peers and that his formal dress was part of the game day requirements for the school hockey team.

Sports talk was a big part of Kyle’s autobiographical narratives. He commented that “sports matter so much to me [...] it’s been such a big part of my life” (Int. #3, June 2, 2006, p. 3). Sport appeared to play a central function in his family relationship, particularly with his father, “raised [him] as a huge sports fan” (p. 2). Sports, Kyle claimed, helped to keep him in “really good shape” (1). Thus, his father clearly played a central role in his embodied sense of self, but his mother was largely absent from the discussion. When I asked about his mother, Kyle articulated a gender division of labour between his father, who was responsible for his passion for sports, and his mother, who helped him with healthy eating and healthy living. He explained that the reason why I never gained too much weight was because of my dad allowing me to [...] go so far in sports and my mom ensuring that I kept a really good diet and that I would do things that were healthy for me. (p. 17)

132 Lawson used different terms for the various “grades”, but Kyle was in the equivalent of grade ten. 133 Looking at some of Kyle’s photos (see Appendix B1-10), it is possible to see how prominently sport and physical activity figures in his pictorial biography.
Here, Kyle’s father was constructed as educating his son in masculine performances of athletics, while his mother was responsible for his bodily well-being. There were limits to Kyle’s commitment to sports, however. He was a self-described as a recreational competitive athlete. He commented that school and education were more important than sports:

[…] my goals are to end up in law school and, you know, winning the state championship, or the city championship, in football is not going into law school (p. 15).

The attitude of school before sports was prevalent at Lawson. As I show with in the corporeal biographies of the participants from Pinevale, sport commonly took precedence over school, which may well be reflective of the different social location of the participants at Pinevale.

*Sidney’s Body*

Sydney was a fifteen year old Asian-Canadian at the time of the research. He had a lean, slender build, and described himself as “skinny” rather than muscular. He was interested in sports and played on the school badminton and wrestling team, but did not demonstrate the same verbal passion for sports as did Kyle or Marcel, two of his peers that took part in the same focus groups as Sidney. He describes his relationship to sports in very casual terms. For instance, when talking about the photograph of a tennis racket he had taken for the photo(focus) groups (Appendix A8) he suggests that his skill level at tennis is “like okay”.

Um, tennis racket ah, I don’t really play, like I took a couple of lessons and I know how to play like okay, but I’m not really like pro tennis like, you know, or anything. I find that over the winter like I kinda put my rackets away and my sports balls and everything, like, they get kind of pushed to the corner […]
Sidney thus gives the impression that sports are more of a hobby as opposed to a passion for him. His photovoice pictures and accompanying narratives seemed to support this observation as his pictures tended to be of food and places of eating rather than physical activity and sport (Appendix A1-11). On several occasions he described his relationship with food as somewhat strained as he often desired foods that he knew he should not eat (FG#6_4, May 19, 2006). This was an interesting admission, as many of the young men were reluctant to acknowledge that they thought about eating or had trouble controlling their diets.

Sidney, however, did carefully articulate an emphasis on achieving a lean, muscular ideal male body, as can be seen from his decision to check out *The Complete Book of Abs* from the library (Appendix A7). As I mention in chapter seven, Sidney, similar to the other participants, was reluctant to explicitly state that he cared about the size and shape of his body, but rather cautiously suggested that he picked this book up to “just try out some of the exercises” and that it’s not something that he would “go out and buy or anything” (FG#6_4, May 19, 2006, p. 8). Sidney was the only participant at Lawson who talked about the cost of sports commodities, explaining that he “just bought cheap” sporting goods because he only used them for “school sports” (FG#6_4, May 19, 2006) thus giving the impression that quality sporting goods were reserved for more competitive sporting opportunities outside of varsity sport and gym class.

*Jack’s Body*

Jack was a polite, well spoken, self-confident young man, who was clearly regarded as a leader by his peers. He stood just under six feet tall and described himself as “slender” to “skinny”. Like most of the young men at Lawson, concerns about
overweight or obesity were not top of mind. Rather Jack worried more about being “too small”. During one focus group Jack commented that “[…] I’d like to be bigger, that just helps with sports. Like for sure with hockey and I’m sure it would help with rugby, but ah, that’s just me” (FG#1_1, Oct. 19, 2006, p. 8). Lifting weights and working out were important aspects of Jack’s sporting experience as he worried about being too small for contact sports. These concerns were reflected in the photos Jack took for photovoice portion of the research, as exercise equipment and weights figured prominently.

Like many of the other participants at Lawson, Jack characterized his life as over-programmed\(^{134}\). Because of his busy schedule, Jack described himself as having autonomy from his family. In relation to eating, he explained that,

> My parents don’t really control what I eat because my time schedule is really different from a family like an average family because outside of school I play a lot of sports, I volunteer twice a week. So, I eat dinner whenever I can. So, I eat whatever I want and I choose what I prepare. (FG#1_1, Oct. 19, 2005, p. 3).

Although Jack articulated independence from his parents, in a subsequent focus group he revealed that his family had a live-in housekeeper from the Philippines who cooked most of the family’s meals. She prepared what he referred to as “good” and “healthy” meals with “lots of vegetables” (FG#1_2, Oct. 26, 2006). Thus, it was unclear to what extent the family housekeeper had responsibility for Jack’s eating practices. It was quite evident by the way Jack spoke about his family life (i.e. family vacations, family cottage, live in housekeeper etc.) that his family was quite wealthy.

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\(^{134}\) Many of the participants talked about not having enough “time” to watch TV or play video games because of their busy schedules. Moreover, Lawson itself was narratively constructed by the participants as an intense academic institution that did not allow for much “spare time”. The students at Lawson talked about themselves using discourses of self-discipline, ambition, autonomy, and dedication as those these were inherent values of the fully individuated selfhood of the students at Lawson without considering how these values may well have been embedded in their socio-cultural backgrounds.
The Bodies of Pinevale

John’s Body

John was a tall, lean, first generation African-Canadian. Since his immigration to Canada John had taken up basketball and the sport was clearly important to his embodied sense of self, as it was for most of the young men who participated in the basketball program at Pinevale. His peers considered him to be quite muscular and his size was used to advantage on the basketball court as he was “de big man”\textsuperscript{135} (Int. #1, May 2, 2006) on his high school basketball team. During a one-on-one interview, Ajay explained that John had set a high school record the previous season for most points in a single basketball game. During basketball games at Pinevale, John displayed a calm, confident demeanour on the court, but he was fiercely competitive, and whichever team he played on was usually the winning team. He was very popular with his peers and generally treated the other players with a lot of respect. During focus group discussions, he was a dominant voice and he would often determine the direction of the discussions.

John took his basketball very seriously and routinely talked about how he lifted weights, ate healthily, and engaged in fitness training as means of improving his basketball game (FG\#3_1, Feb. 1, 2006; FG\#3_2, Feb. 8, 2006). While he acknowledged that “de girls” liked his muscles, his motivation for working out was sports related. Although there was some indication that John secretly aspired to play basketball in the NBA, he was more likely to talk openly about playing basketball on a scholarship in the American college system.

Both his mother and his African ethno-cultural background were prominent themes in John’s narratives. His mother, John explained, played an instrumental role in

\textsuperscript{135} In colloquial terms, the post position is occupied by the “big man”.

the formation of his “mental toughness”. During one focus group he commented that “no, I’m not soft, I’m mentally strong and physically tough, because I am determined not to give up”. He went on to explain that his mother raised him to persevere through difficult situations and that often when a task seemed overwhelming, his mother would encourage him: “Okay, don’t worry, jus’ keep pushin’ yourself” (FG#3_2, Feb. 8, 2006, p. 22). John spoke fondly of his mother and characterized her as a woman strong in character and spirit. John’s characterization of his mother was quite different than the participants at Lawson, who mostly spoke of their father’s in relation to sports and values of self-discipline, perseverance, and “toughness”. There was little discussion of his father.

John’s African heritage was also important to his autobiographical narratives. He affectionately referred to the Ivory Coast as “my country”. Often he would compare the average Canadian diet of “pop” and “fast food” to the healthier “soul food” of his home country. He positively defined the food in his country in the following way:

‘Cause in my country we usually eat like yams and like you know wheat an’ stuff, you know, so it’s really healthy, so it can give you like strong bones an’ everything. (FG#3_3, Feb. 15, 2006, p. 7)

Furthermore, he explained that with farming in Africa “dey don’t use chemicals de way dey do in Canada” (FG#3_3, Feb. 15, 2006, p. 8). Thus, African food was constructed as more nutritious and healthier than Canadian food. He also told stories of how his mother would travel great distances across the city of Toronto to African vegetables markets to get “fresh food and vegetables”.

John’s pride in his African descent was not immune from white supremacist (hook, 2004) values that privilege lighter skin colours, however. During the photo(focus)

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136 When I asked the participants to define “soul food”, they described it as an “African (or Caribbean) thing” that referred to home cooked meals, usually of potatoes, rice, and/or yams (FG#3_2, Feb. 8, 2006).
group sessions he was very disappointed with a picture he had taken of himself\textsuperscript{137}. At the beginning of the photo\textsuperscript{(focus)} group John showed the picture of himself to Phil (another participant in the focus group). The following exchange ensued.

Phil: Holly, you’re soooo dark in dis, yo! No offense, but it’s soooo dark!
John: I know, eh. I am not dat dark

John was clearly distraught by how dark he looked in this particular photo and a minute or so later he again commented on the photo, commenting:

John: I’m rippin’ up do one where I look so dark. I don’t like dat one (FG\#3\_3, Feb. 15, 2006, p. 2-3)

John stood up, walked over to the waste paper basket, tore the offending picture up in an aggressive manner, and with dramatic affectation sprinkled the shredded contents into the basket\textsuperscript{138}. While John was proud to be African and demonstrated a good deal of pride in his blackness, he clearly had internalized white values that privileged light skin over dark skin.

Phil’s Body

What Phil lacked in talent on the basketball court he more than made up for with his aggressive and tenacious play. Although he was not the tallest of his peers (he was about 5’8”), he was quite muscular and used this to his advantage, blocking players out of the key, shouldering his opponents, and occasionally aggressively fouling them. He was widely recognized by his peers as a perseverant player, but less so for his basketball skills. His identity as a basketball player was heavily invested in what he repeatedly

\textsuperscript{137} Permission to use images of people was not sought through the Research Ethics Board at the University of Toronto, thus I am not allowed to include this image.

\textsuperscript{138} The participants were the first to look at the pictures and they were invited to remove or destroy any images that they did not want to share with the larger group. John was the only participant who exercised this option.
characterized as “toughness, mental and physically” (FG#3_2, Feb. 8, 2006). Sometimes this required “bending the rules a bit” as he explained during a one-on-one interview,

> When you gotta cheat sometimes, ye gotta cheat...you can’t be too goody, goody, ye know. When de ref doesn’t see you gotta pull de guy, run an’ get de ball. I cheat sometimes, dat’s how I do it. (Int. #2, May 16, 2006, p. 9)

Phil was not intimidating to his peers, however, and rarely got into verbal or physical confrontations for his aggressive style of play. Generally speaking he was well liked by his male peers. However, he was less well liked by the group of Tibetan female players that regularly attended the basketball program when I first started my observations at Pinevale. The presence of the female players was not particularly popular with most of the boys in the basketball program, and they regularly stated that the girls were there “to have fun” and “didn’t take it [basketball] seriously” (FG#3_1, Feb. 1, 2006) and this proved to be a source of frustration and hostility. About a month after I had started my non-participant observations, the Tibetan girls stopped attending the program. When I asked what had happened, I was told that Phil had “fouled one a dem hard” (FN Feb 26, 2006) and as a group they stopped coming to the program. The gender order was prevalent on the basketball court at Pinevale, but there were some young women “who played like guys” (FN Jan 23, 2006) that the young men seemed to respect.

Like most of the other participants at Pinevale, Phil was a first generation Canadian, having immigrated from Serbia Montenegro when he was six. Although the sport of choice from his home country was soccer (as it was for most of the participants at Pinevale) he started playing basketball shortly after arriving in Canada because, as he explained, “it’s all about basketball in Pennington” (Int. #2, May 16, 2006, p. 7). Thus,

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139 Fictitious name of the neighbourhood where Pinevale is located.
cultural context proved to be a key factor in the sporting activities of the young men at Pinevale.

Phil was raised by his father. During a one-on-one interview Ajay explained that Phil’s mother died when he was seven. Phil had a lot of respect for his father and spoke about him fondly, but seemed particularly affectionate to his older brother who was eighteen years his senior. Phil explained that his father took little interest in his basketball games and he seemed disappointed when he told me that he seldom came to his high school basketball games because he was “too tired after a hard day at work” (Int. #2, May 16, 2006). Basketball was a central part of Phil’s identity and Phil told me with incredible excitement that he told me that he looked forward to his second year playing as a senior as he would get more court time and play a pivotal role in the team’s success. It was thus quite sad when I returned to Pinevale six months later to visit with the young men who had participated in the basketball program and I learned that Phil had been cut from the high school team. Paul, the basketball coach at Pinevale, cruelly and somewhat mercilessly taunted Phil for failing to make the basketball team. The following exchange transpired:

Paul: Jus’ skills, not training for anything anymore, eh Phil?
Another kid: Is it alright if I come [to the basketball program] for fun, Paul?
Paul: Phil comes for fun, right Phil? [Referring to Phil’s failure to make the basketball team]
Phil: Straight up! [Phil, who is usually good-natured and playful, looks away from Paul and is clearly annoyed and hurt by Paul’s mocking comments]
Paul: Everyone’s welcome, don’t need to train for something, Phil ain’t trainin’ for anything.
Phil: Straight up!
Paul: Phil’s got no basketball anymore, right Paul? Straight up! (FN Nov. 15, 2006)
Of course, Phil does still have basketball at the Pinevale recreation centre, but Paul’s comments highlight Phil’s new, post high school basketball status. His failure to make the team has made Phil vulnerable to mocking and derisive comments from both his peers and even his coach. This exchange demonstrates that the sporting space of Pinevale is not necessarily an easy space to occupy. Paul was in the process of finding out what the young Tibetan women had discovered prior to him, and the young Tibetan men prior to them, that there is a pecking order at Pinevale, and that “fun”, “healthy”, physical activity is not the first order of business. Far more important is the constant morphing, construction, re-construction, and erosion of social identities within the localized context of the Pinevale basketball court.

_Ajay’s Body_

Ajay was tall and skinny and was widely respected by his peers for his superior shooting skills and lightening speed on the basketball court. Ajay was also known for his skinniness. The other participants often mocked and made fun of Ajay for his skinny body. Ajay was also mocked—seemingly playfully—for his ethno-cultural background. Ajay self-identified as Sri Lankan Canadian, and explained that he moved to Canada when he was eight. His peers often referred to him as “Curry”, as Ajay did himself, on the basketball court in reference to his Sri Lankan Canadian background. Nick names referring to ethno-cultural heritage were common in the sporting spaces of Pinevale, for

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140 For the first several weeks that I attended the Pinevale community centre, a group of four or five Tibetan young men regularly participated in the basketball program. Their skills were not as honed as the “regulars” (most of whom participated in the research focus groups), but they were very keen and demonstrated considerably tenacity on the basketball court. Prior to one of the basketball sessions I chatted with one of the Tibetan youth and I asked him why he came to the basketball program. He explained that basketball was “cool” and it is what Canadian kids did. Sadly, the racism at Pinevale was pervasive and eventually the Tibetan youth were driven away from the basketball program. Racism is often overlooked as a factor that contributes to lack of participation in physical activity and sport. At Pinevale, I found both sexism and racism to powerfully shape notions of belonging, and thus influenced who participated in what activities.
instance Sean was referred to as “Trinny-Boy” or “Trinidad” in reference to his Trinidian background, Phil was called “White Bread” or “White Chocolate” in reference to his whiteness, and Josh was nick-named “Africa” or “Angola” because of his African background. Most of these “racial projects” (Omi & Winant, 1994) were passively accepted, reproduced, and even celebrated by their namesakes, however, Ajay had a decidedly ambivalent relationship with the name “Curry”. At moments Ajay referred to himself as “Curry” and explained that it didn’t bother him. At other points, however, he became quite agitated at the name and aggressively reprimanded his peers for calling him “Curry”. His peers always defended themselves by pointing out that Ajay referred to himself as “Curry”, therefore he had no right to get indignant when they did too. None of the young men seemed to acknowledge or critically reflect upon the power relations that were at play in racializing labels such as “Curry”, nor the politics involved in self-naming, which I understood as an interpellative to locate oneself in racializing discourse as a means of forming a meaningful subject position within the context of this localized social group.

Ajay recognized, intuitively anyhow, the politics of ethno-racial identity labels as he actively tried to distance himself from the smell of ethnicity. During one focus group he explained in detail how he, unlike other Indo-Canadian’s, took measures to prevent himself from smelling of his ethnicity, in other words, from smelling like “Curry”. There are certain measures, Ajay suggested, that need to be taken in order to prevent oneself from smelling like curry.

‘Cause you know why [some people smell like curry], when deir parents make food, like ya know an’ stuff like dat, de smell dey don’t close deir
closet or something like dat, de smell goes in all da clothes and dey smell like curry [...] So when you make it, de smell goes other places, like if you leave de door [to your room] open. (FG#4_3, Mar. 8, 2006, pp. 22-3)

Clearly, for Ajay, the smell and the association with curry was a negative racializing mark that he sought to distance himself from\(^{141}\). Ajay took other measures to disguise his ethno-cultural background. During a one-on-one interview he elaborated on how he negotiated North American food cultures with those of his own family. Ajay had never experienced McDonald’s until he first came to Canada. One of his first meals in Canada, he explained, was at McDonald’s, but even then he just had fries and a fillet-o-fish, neither of which he particularly enjoyed. However, once he started attending public school he increasingly found himself at McDonald’s because it was the restaurant of choice of his friends. He eventually started eating at and enjoying McDonald’s hamburger’s, an eating practice that he carefully guarded from his mother\(^{142}\). Moreover, during another focus group he explained to his friends and fellow participants that he did not like his ethno-cultural diet as it contained a lot of fish. Thus, Ajay, along with the other participants, had to carefully negotiate the different food cultures of their friends, family, and dominant Canadian dietary cultures in the construction of a hybridized ethno-cultural identity.

\(^{141}\) Courtemanche (2004) provocatively writes about the intersection of ethnicity and body smells: “you blacks often say we whites give off a dead-body smell, a medicinal smell. Our emanations make you think of test tubes and laboratories” (p. 69-70). Critical whiteness scholars have argued for the need to displace whiteness from its place of normative invisibility (Dyer, 1997). Smell be one strategy to accomplish this task. In other words, an investigation into the smells of whiteness might provide some interesting insight into how whiteness both stabilizes and entrenches its normality and privilege.

\(^{142}\) Ajay identified as Tamil, but it was unclear whether red meat was part of his traditional Tamil diet. Nevertheless, several of the participants at Pinevale did not eat meat for ethno-religious reasons. In a moment of extreme cultural insensitivity, I ordered pepperoni pizzas for the focus group discussions, which was agreed upon as part of their compensation for participation. I quickly realized my mistake when I noticed Ajay and Syed picking the pepperonis off of their pizza during the first focus group. Although neither of them informed me of dietary requirements—which I did ask about—I quickly rectified my mistake for the following focus groups.
During a one-on-one interview Ajay expressed frustration at his mother’s lack of support for his basketball. Ajay commented that his mother expected him to work two jobs\textsuperscript{143}, attend Tamil school on Saturdays, and do well in his grade nine year, all of which inhibited his ability to play and practice basketball. Furthermore, Ajay’s mother worried about Ajay’s participation in the basketball program at Pinevale. Initially, I assumed this was because his mother worried about how his involvement in sport would impact his grades, Ajay explained that in fact his mother worried about his safety. Specifically, she thought of the Pinevale community centre as a black space and had taken up racist constructions of blackness as “criminal”. In his own words, Ajay commented,

‘Cause mom thinks that after, all she heard about dese situations around dis area—shooting an’ violence an’ stuff, my mom doesn’t want me stayin’ [at Pinevale] too much, you know, most of de time black people cause more violence, right? So mostly I hang out with black people an’ she gets angry about that too.

And he continues,

my mom, my mom, because my mom doesn’t know most of de, all of de black people that are my friends, right. So she doesn’t sometime trust me. She thinks that I might be dealing drugs or anything, something like that. (Int. #1 May 2, 2006, pp. 4-5)

Indeed, racial discourse played a central role in the narratives of the participants from Pinevale, and Pinevale was palpably constituted in and through racial discourse, inserting different bodies into racial hierarchies of privilege and oppression.

\textsuperscript{143} The emphasis on part-time work was one significant difference between the young men at Pinevale and the participants at Lawson. Whereas the young men at Lawson talked about work as “more about experience than it is about the money” (FG\#6,4, May 19, 2006, p. 6), the participants at Pinevale described part-time work as a central and necessary part of their everyday lives, such that those who did not have work were desperately looking for it.
Appendix H

Institutional Descriptions

Lawson Private School

Lawson was a private school geared for the “intellectually gifted”. With a difficult and competitive entrance exam and $10,000 tuition, Lawson was an exclusive school. Although Lawson does offer scholarships for students who meet the entrance criteria but cannot afford the tuition, it was unclear how many scholarships were awarded. Generally speaking, the students at Lawson were from professional middle class backgrounds. Although there was no way to determine their socio-economic backgrounds of the students without asking them directly, I was able to discern approximate wealth using other, less invasive, indicators, such as clothing and style, references to parent occupational status, and references to recreational activities (see Appendix I). Many of the students described their parents as medical doctors, lawyers, and university professors. Moreover, many of the students talked of their participation in expensive, upper middle class recreational activities and sports such as competitive sailing, hockey, wake boarding, and downhill skiing, while others shared experiences of March break vacations skiing in Europe and British Columbia. One participant even talked about his family’s live-in housekeeper from the Philippines. Using the indicators I concluded that the majority—although by no means all—of the participants were from middle-class to upper middle class backgrounds.

The Physical Institution

Despite the affluence of the student body, the school building itself was less auspicious. Lawson is located in a grand old red brick school building in downtown
Toronto. While the main hallway to the school is well suited for a school of Lawson’s stature, with wide hallways, tall ceilings, and well polished wood floors, the rest of the school is not quite so impressive. The classrooms were functional but dilapidated, with long since worn out tablet desks, and tired black and white boards. Even the new addition to the school had a portable type feel, with thin walls that barely muffled the happenings of adjacent classrooms and thin floors that creaked loudly when walked upon. Most of my time at Lawson was spent in the basement hallway, where the physical education department, main gym, and exercise room were located. The basement hallway had lower ceilings and was lined with lockers decorated with student art, which gave the hallway a claustrophobic feel. The gym itself appeared as though it had changed little since the early twentieth century, with large, ominous brick walls and poor lighting. Across the top of one wall there was a row of windows that let in some natural light on sunny days. The boy’s locker room was an open, expansive space, but was seldom used by the boys who were in the classes I was observing. Although I was partial to the look and feel of Lawson’s physical structure, I was aware that Lawson did not have many of the contemporary amenities of many of the public school facilities that I have witnessed.

Aside from a small parkette located immediately behind Lawson, the school had no outdoor space for sport and physical activity. However, the school did have a playing field located roughly 300m away from Lawson, on the other side of a busy Toronto intersection. The field was separated from the rest of the city by an old, largely ineffective, chain link fence. The playing field itself was well used as it was jointly shared and maintained by a nearby post-secondary institution. The extensive use of the natural field resulted in a rough, uneven, patchy playing surface.
Access to the school’s spaces and facilities was regulated. Gallagher (2007) notes that school buildings are not just “concrete spaces for organizing individuals, but that buildings, architectural arrangements, and spatial organization (in corridors, hallways, classrooms, locker bays, offices, theatre auditoria [gymnasia]) are mechanisms of power reduced to their ideal (spatial) form” (p. 29). Spatial power relations create matrices of belonging/not belonging, authority/non-authority, powerful/subordinate, as well as a range of other identity positionings, such as the gendered, racialized, sexed, and aged subject, for instance. These relations were produced and maintained in and through the various rules and structures that governed movement within the spaces of Lawson. For instance, I was produced as an outsider, as not officially belonging, through the “visitor sign in policy”. All visitors to Lawson had to sign in and out at the main office, and wear a “visitor badge” for the duration of their stay. The badge was to be clearly visible to the staff, students, and others who “belonged” at Lawson as I found out one day when I was chastised because my badge had flipped over, backside facing out.

The subordinate status of the students was also produced and re-produced through the various rules governing their movement in the spaces of the school. For instance, as part of his photography for his photo narrative, Jack took a picture of a sign outside the gymnasium (see Figure 1) which outlines who belongs in the gym space and under what conditions.

Figure 1
Such signage is productive of the marginal, youthful subjectivities of the student body while at the same time it is constructive of the legitimacy and authority of the adult bodies of teachers and staff. Jack resented these instructions and had the following to say about them,

Jack: Students not allowed in this gym unless supervised”. And like this sort of restricts the amount of exercise you can get. Like I think that they put too much of a leash on students sometimes because they don’t want anyone getting hurt because they can get sued. But um really sometimes the only time you can get in is when there isn’t a teacher to supervise. Like, if you have a spare and you want to use it, you usually can’t. Or if you want to go into the gym during lunch, it’s probably not going to be open. It’s only open for gym class (FG#1_3, Jan. 19, 2006, p. 3).

Jack’s comments highlight the degree to which discourses of health and safety are not always unified and coherent. In this narrative, the discourse of healthy active living, including regular daily physical activity, competes with the discourse of safety, such that protecting young people from injury and danger is pitted against healthy living. Within the spaces of Lawson, access to physical activity was disproportionately available according to age and institutional authority. Such rules and regulations were not merely reflective of preexisting categories of age and authority, but were at the same time constitutive of those categories.

The People

Despite the clear power demarcations that were inscribed between teacher and student in the spatial arrangements of Lawson, the students and teachers seemed to have had a very respectful, convivial relationship with one another. Generally speaking, the teacher-student relations at Lawson were relaxed, and the teachers showed a lot of respect for the students and the students responded in kind. The physical education teachers that I observed were enthusiastic and spoke very fondly of the students at Lawson. During my
observations, I never witnessed a student being explicitly disciplined and rarely did I hear teachers raise their voices at all to students. The relations at Lawson were such that one of the participants characterized Lawson as subdued and explained that, “this is Lawson, nobody gets too excited or out of hand here” (FG#1_2, Oct. 26, 2005). Moreover, the students were also very respectful and supportive of each other as well. During several non-participant observation sessions, the students broke out into song and chants as they supported and encouraged their fellow students in various physical activity sessions. The respectful, good natured relations at Lawson were dramatically different than those I had experienced at my high school.

Miss McDonald and Mr Kinnear, the two teachers of the classes I observed, both spent time explaining how the students at Lawson were “special”. They explained that, unlike other schools, the students at Lawson were very intelligent, mature beyond their years, and generally a “good group of kids” (FN, Feb. 27, 2006). Both students and faculty recognized that Lawson was an academic school. On several occasions I was told that Lawson was not a “sports school” and that the emphasis was on scholastics. Despite the academic orientation, students were required to complete at least one physical education credit each year through to grade twelve, which is considerably more than the public secondary system where students are required to have one credit between grade nine and twelve. The required physical education classes at Lawson, although not a central focus of the formal curriculum, proved to be essential to the informal curriculum in constructing gendered and racial modes of embodiment.

Many of the physical education classes were gender integrated. During one class, Mr Kinnear divided the class into a “boys versus girls”, best two out of three volleyball
game. During the first game the boys dominated play and beat the girls 21-4. The ambiance in the gym was light and playful and relatively non-competitive. During the second game, however, the girls put up a far better show and held the lead for most of the game. This appeared to threaten the masculinity of the boys’ as the playful comments and mockery of the first game morphed into the screaming and yelling of sexist comments about the repercussions of losing to a “bunch of girls” (Field Notes, Feb. 1, 2006). The sexist and gender banter went undisciplined by Mr Kennedy and even appeared to be implicitly endorsed as he playfully commentated from his place atop the referees stand that the “boys are going to lose to the girls, oh boy” as though this would disrupt the natural gender hierarchy, thereby displacing the boys from their place of natural physical superiority. With these playful comments, particular gender performances were compelled and naturalized as part of the informal physical education curriculum at Lawson, a pattern that has been detected by other gender theorists (Wright, 1995). “Race” was also forcibly materialized through the institutional and discursive practices at Lawson.

For instance, Miss MacDonald explained that Lawson was not a particularly competitive school in inter-collegiate sports, which she attributed to both the high percentage of Asians at Lawson along with the low percentage of blacks compared to other schools. With her comments, Miss McDonald takes up the dominant construction of Asian masculinity as academically-oriented and “racially castrated” (Eng, 2001) and blackness as powerful, aggressive, and athletically dominant (Shogan, 1999), thereby reiteratively constructing cultural expectations of racialized bodies that has real effects on how individuals see and experience racial identities. Interestingly, whiteness remained
unnamed in both the narratives of Miss MacDonald as well as those of the participants. Thus, particular racial and gender bodies were forcibly, albeit implicitly, materialized through the discursive and institutional practices at Lawson.

In terms of body size and shape, the young men at Lawson tended to be lean to skinny. When I initially described my research as exploring the experiences of fatness in young men, Mr Kinnear explained that I was conducting my research at the wrong place because the students at Lawson were “thin and healthy” (FN, Oct. 19, 2005). Generally speaking, he was correct in his assessment of the boys’ body sizes and shapes at Lawson. Using commonsensical definitions of fatness\textsuperscript{144}, I would say that none of the young men in the classes I observed were overweight or obese. In terms of height and muscularity, there were minor differences in the bodies of the students I observed. Most of the students were roughly the same height, with few extremely tall and a couple students who were noticeably shorter than their peers. The young men at Lawson did not seem to be particularly muscular. That said, I was informed by Kyle in an interview that Marcel, who participated in the focus groups, was “ridiculously strong” even though “he’s pretty skinny” (Int. #3 Kyle, June 2, 2006, p. 2). Thus, while I did not perceive an appreciable difference in the size and shape of the bodies of the young men at Lawson, the participants still categorized bodies in terms of strength, size, and fitness.

There were marked differences between the two research locations in how the young men dressed in athletic settings. Unlike the young men at Pinevale, who all wore branded sports commodities and professional sports team paraphernalia, the participants at Lawson wore non-descript gym clothing (i.e. blue shorts or track pants and a white tee

\textsuperscript{144} Using commonsensical definitions to define body size is problematic, however. As I demonstrate in the dissertation, notions of fatness are shifting and contextual. For instance, the participants at Lawson defined bodies that I would define as “normal” as “overweight” and/or “obese”.

shirt). If there was a dress code in effect, the teachers were lenient in enforcing it, as several of the students participated in gym class in regular school attire, such as jeans and a rugby shirt. Paul, on the other hand, was very strict regarding dress codes. Everyone was to wear proper gym attire and no jewelry, which at points resulted in tension between Paul and the participants.

*My Position At Lawson*

Unlike Pinevale, where my whiteness was both explicitly and implicitly marked, at Lawson my whiteness went unrecognized and thus I felt as though I “belonged”. Many of the cultural references that the participants drew upon (i.e. hockey, mountain biking, and popular television programs such as *The Simpsons*, *Family Guy*, and *Seinfeld*) I was familiar with, which fostered even greater comfort and facilitated more interactive conversation during the focus groups. Moreover, early in my doctoral studies I had lived close to Lawson and was thus with familiar with many of the physical landmarks and establishments the participants made reference to. Additionally, the normative white, middle class ethos of the school was reflected in the student body and their ability to articulate themselves. All of the students had a strong grasp of dominant modes of Canadian English and spoke with eloquence and fluency, which again served to make me more familiar and comfortable within this particular research context. Although I recognize that the researcher never entirely achieves “insider” status (Smith, 1999), I nevertheless felt like more of an “insider” in the mostly white, middle class spaces of Lawson than I did the mostly black, lower income context of Pinevale. My body—its skin colour, shape, size, and social class background—was “at home” in Lawson.
In many ways, my familiarity with the bodies and bodily practices of the students at Lawson made my investigations that much more difficult. Many of the mundane aspects of their lived embodiments were habitual to me as well, and thus were largely invisible. This group of young men talked like me, they dressed like me, they moved like me, they valued education like me, this group of young men were comfortingly familiar to me, and thus stubbornly difficult to “see” through researchers eyes.

Whereas my embodied self felt at home at Lawson, my researcher self did not. The faculty at Lawson were particularly curious as to the “validity”, “generalizability”, and “outcomes” of my research. During my initial meeting with the physical education faculty at Lawson, one of the teachers, Mr DeNiro, aggressively challenged me regarding the instruments and outcomes of my research. I spent some time educating him and the other faculty members on the merits of qualitative research, but his line of questioning and body language indicated that he was skeptical of both my research questions and instrument. Within the context of Lawson, I felt as though my way of researching and knowing was second rate, a feeling that I am, sadly, becoming accustomed to. I got the impression that a more valued form of knowledge would have been rooted in a positivist epistemology. Although the young men who participated in my study were very courteous and helpful, at times I also felt as though they too saw my knowledge as frivolous. This was particularly true during a focus group in the early stages of my research at Lawson where Marty took exception to my line of questioning. He suggested that I was “reading into it too deep” and later continued that my questions were not leading to “facts about stuff” but rather “personal opinion” (FG#1_2, Oct. 26, 2006). Although I again re-stated that the objectives of my qualitative research study were not
about “facts” but rather socially and culturally situated patterns of seeing and understanding the world, Marty seemed unconvinced and grew increasingly belligerent as the research progressed. As I will articulate in the paragraphs below, my positioning at Pinevale was quite different.

**Pinevale Community Recreation Centre**

*The Physical Institution*

Pinevale was one of three Toronto Parks and Recreation Centres in Pennington, all of which were directed by Jack Cunningham, the director of Pinevale. All of my research took place at Pinevale, thus I limit my descriptions here to Pinevale, but it is important to note that the participants in my research did intermittently use the other two Centres, particularly the Pennington Community Centre, which had an indoor swimming pool. Pinevale appears to be a relatively new building and was equipped with a snack bar, kitchen, games room, dance studio, day care centre, radio station, and various meeting rooms. The heart of Pinevale, however, was its gymnasium. It had a full-sized basketball court with a hard wood floor and elevated stadium seating lining either side of the court, which was mostly used for storage. The gym was brightly lit and large sky lights allowed for additional natural light. At one end of the gym there was a large stage. Although there were change rooms, they were often locked, and the young men in the basketball program rarely used them and instead opted to change into their basketball uniforms on the stage in the gym. Although Paul frequently complained about the lack of funding available for repairs to the gym, my impression was that the facilities at Pinevale were in good repair.

Unlike Lawson, where movement in and out of the school was heavily regulated, Pinevale was open to all sorts of users. There were, however, cameras located in the gym.
The cameras were installed shortly before I started my research at the Centre. I was told by Ajay that they were in response to an incident where a young man had brought a hand gun into the Centre and were therefore justified as creating a safer recreational space. Not all of the participants, however, saw the cameras as producing safety. I overheard a young man and a young woman complain that the cameras were “ridiculous” and suggested that these sorts of technologies of surveillance were unnecessary.

Across the street from Pinevale is the Pennington Public Library. The library had certain amenities that the Community Centre does not such as free internet service, which the participants regularly used. Users of Pinevale moved freely between the two locations and I often saw some of the young men who participated in my research at the Library, where I often went after focus group discussions or observation sessions to record more detailed field notes. The sidewalk out front of Pinevale was wide and the users of the facilities treated the sidewalk as an extension of the building itself. There were often groups of people of a wide range of ages gathered on the sidewalk play fighting, riding bikes, and just “hanging out”.

*The People*

Pinevale Community Centre was located in the neighbourhood of Pennington. The employees at Pinevale referred to Pennington as a “high needs” area, although it was gentrifying as I did my research, thus it would more accurately be described as a mixed income neighbourhood, where poverty exists alongside wealth. That said, during the months I was researching at Pinevale, the patrons seemed to be mostly from poorer backgrounds. Using visible identifiers of race to categorize those who attended the Centre, I would identify the majority as racialized, with a large black and Asian
A wide range of ages used the facilities at Pinevale, however, their patterns of use were divided along spatial and temporal lines. Thus, adult males tended to use the weight facilities in the evenings, older women were more likely to frequent Pinevale during the day and used tables that were set up for them in the "snack bar area" for playing cards. As near as I could tell the gym was predominantly used by younger girls and boys and adolescent males. That said, a group of middle aged women (one middle aged man joined this group on occasion) did use the gym for an aerobics class immediately following Paul’s basketball program. There was mild tension between the boys in Paul’s program and the women who used the gym for aerobics as it often took a long time for the basketball players to stop “shootin’ around” and leave the court. The “games room”, which contained a fooze ball-, ping pong-, and pool table-, was used by young adult and adult patrons, but was still dominated by adolescent men and women. There was a greater diversity of races, ages, genders, and body sizes in the games room. The informal, unstructured, recreation of the games room seemed to be more conducive to a range of people and their interests. Although I did spend some time observing the activities of the games room, the lack of structure made it difficult to engage with the youth and recruit them into my research. Thus the games room did not figure prominently in my research.

During my time at Pennington, I came to know seven staff members by name. Five of the seven staff members I would identify as black, while the other two I would identify as white. The director of the Centre was a white man in his mid-fifties who was rarely at the Centre during the evenings when most of my research took place. I also became acquainted with the program director, Bishop, who was a black man in his mid-
thirties. He was quite helpful in terms of booking rooms and helping me to gain access to the facility and its participants, but generally remained skeptical of my presence and research in the Centre until quite late into the research process.

Irene was similarly distant from me for much of my time at the Centre. Irene, a black woman in her late thirties, was stationed at the Centre but was on staff with and reported to the City. She worked with staff and youth at the Centre fostering community-based programming. She was well-respected at Pinevale by both the director and the youth participating in the programming. She was a strong, committed woman with a clear vision for enhancing community participation and regularly implemented initiatives to improve gender and racial relations amongst the participants at Pinevale. Her philosophy for Pinevale was based on a model of social equality. Paul, the basketball coach, loathed Irene. Paul was a short, fat, black man in his mid forties, with a big personality, and booming voice. He self-identified as a male chauvinist and spent considerable time one evening explaining to me how the women’s liberation movement had eviscerated black masculine selfhood (FN, Nov 22, 2006). He argued that black boys and men were experiencing a crisis of masculinity brought about by the increased social and cultural power of women generally and black women specifically. He suggested that black men were recuperating their masculine status and privilege through turning to crime and violence, including violence against women. Paul used this construction of the crisis of black masculinity to justify the exclusion of girls and young women from his sports programming¹⁴⁵, reasoning that because the violence and crime in the neighbourhood starts with black males, programming should thus target black males. Although I argued

¹⁴⁵ Interestingly, Paul’s basketball program was gender-integrated during most of my observations at Pinevale. This, however, might have had as much to do with the tenacity and perseverance of the young Tibetan women engaged in the program as it did Paul.
with Paul, trying to get him to see flaws in his philosophy, he wouldn’t budge, and suggested that his views on gender relations were embedded in his Trinidian upbringing, where the rightful place of the man was at the top of the social order.

There was chronic and sometimes palpable tension between Paul and Irene. On one occasion Irene, frustrated, blurted out “Paul, you’re a big fat bully!” (FN, April 22, 2006) as she stormed out of the gym. Although I had my critiques of Paul’s programming and program philosophy, critiques that I routinely shared with Paul, I suspect Irene saw me as one of Paul’s cronies. This was ironic given that I identified with Irene’s warm, playful, kind, and egalitarian style of interaction with the youth at Pinevale far more than I did Paul’s aggressive, dictatorial, and dominating way of coaching. Nonetheless, Paul was kind to me and was very helpful in promoting and supporting my research with the young men at the Centre.

There were, however, advantages to Paul’s authoritarian style of coaching. In Paul’s gym it was clear he was the boss. While the young men that attended his program playfully joked with him (the young women rarely engaged in such frivolity), there was a clear line that none of the participants crossed. For instance, teasing, racial slurs, and violence were strictly prohibited in Paul’s gym. He aggressively disciplined players for using racial slurs, stating that “no one talks like that in my gym” (Field Notes, March 8, 2006) as he threw players out. Ironically, however, Paul himself was prone to racializations as he routinely constructed whites as uncoordinated, blacks as aggressive, tough, and individualistic in playing style, and Asians as passive and overly conforming.

As I argued in the analysis chapters, these racial stereotypes forcibly materialized specific, racial ways of being within the institutional context of Pinevale. Paul was also
openly homophobic and habitually used homophobic comments to both encourage particular styles of play on the basketball court (i.e. aggressive and space-occupying) while dissuading others (i.e. passive, meek, and emotive). Research on physical education and sport cultures has demonstrated how homophobia operates as a technique of policing and compelling dominant performances of masculinity (Fusco, 1998; Mac An Ghaill, 1994; Pronger, 1990). Interestingly, the vast majority of homophobic talk came from Paul, the adult figure and coach, not the participants themselves.

Generally speaking, the young men who participated in my research were all relatively good friends and tended to treat each other with respect. There were tensions between the “boys” and the “girls”, however, and the young men routinely told me that the five Tibetan young women that attended Paul’s program did not belong. Although the young Tibetan women attended Paul’s program twice a week for two hours a session, for close to two months, none of the boys bothered to learn their names. Rather, they would refer to them using personality characteristics (i.e. “the tom boy girl”), or physical features (i.e. “the tall one”), and clothing (i.e. “you in the blue”). Often the boys would complain openly about the participation of the young women in their games and on a couple of occasions even yelled at them. Paul seemed unconcerned by this trend and did little to improve the gender relations. Irene, however, took a very different approach to the masculinist culture of Paul’s programming and I overheard her on two occasions imploring Paul to be more proactive in fostering gender equality within his gym culture. This appeared to be the primary source of tension between Paul and Irene.

Racial hierarchies were also apparent at the Pinevale Community Centre generally, as well as in Paul’s program specifically. There was a taken for granted
assumption at the Centre that black youth were aggressive, loud, and dominant, whereas Asian youth, Tibetan’s in particular, were quiet, demure, and passive. This assumption structured the way in which the staff interacted with the youth at the Centre, largely in that black aggression against the young Tibetan men was assumed to be part of black culture and was thus naturalized and rarely challenged for its racist underpinnings. From my own observations, however, I did not see the Tibetans to be demure and passive. Rather, I saw a relatively small group of recently immigrated youth being over-whelmed and chronically bullied by the black male majority at the Centre. On two occasions, violence broke out between a black and Tibetan male. In neither situation did the Tibetan youth back down, but in both cases the participants in my research pointed to the passivity and cowardice of the Tibetan combatant. More frustratingly, however, was the tendency by Pinevale staff to treat the incident as a simple case of male aggression rather than as a systemic and patterned act of violence against a racial minority. The staff treated such outbreaks as natural and inevitable, a response which resulted in most of the Tibetan youth turning to other locations outside the Centre to meet their recreational needs.

The participants involved in my research were discrete in their racial hostilities towards the Tibetans. None of them directly fought with, bullied, or openly verbally taunted the Tibetan males that attended Paul’s program, but neither did they befriend them. In the absence of the Tibetan’s, however, the participants openly articulated their racism towards the Tibetan presence in Pennington, and during one focus groups suggested that the Tibetan’s were “taking over” (FG#4_2, Mar 1, 2006). Unlike Lawson, where most of the school was white and racializations were rare, race talk figured
prominently at Pinevale. Although most of it was not racist per se, it was nonetheless racializing. For instance, most of the participants were identified by their ethno-racial background through nicknames such as “African Boy”, “Trinie Boy”, “White Bread”, and “Curry”. Some of these racializations proved to more painful than others, such that Ajay, who was often called “Curry” in reference to his Sri Lankan Canadian background, would aggressively react to this nickname. Paul also found the name “Curry” unacceptable and would routinely discipline those uttering it, but at the same time would refer to others as “African” or “Angolan”. Body size and shape were also central to the discursive spaces of Pinevale.

All of the young men who participated in the present research self-identified as either “skinny” or “normal/average”, with the exception of Omar, who oscillated in his self-identifications between “chubby” and “average”. Most of the young men were more worried about being too skinny than they were getting fat. That said, discourses of fatness still powerful inscribed the spaces of the Pinevale Community Centre. For instance, the participants regularly commented on Paul’s huge body, both behind his back and sometimes to his face. During focus groups they often talked about how much he sweats and how easily he would get winded. Despite Paul’s fatness, he himself was quite discriminatory to other large bodies. When Ira, a black male in his late twenties who worked as a custodian at the Centre, brought two fat women into the gymnasium, Paul loudly commented to those around him (and out of earshot of Ira and the women): “Oh my God! Don’t dey know winter’s over and dey need something lighter? Look who’s bringing de cattle home [referring to Ira]! I would be embarrassed to walk around wit

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146 At one point, Paul told me that he stood five foot nine inches tall and weighed over three hundred pounds.
Moreover, when two fat boys attended his basketball program, Paul mercilessly yelled at them for not being able to complete the warm up exercises. This was the first and last time I saw these two boys who, presumably humiliated, decided not return to the program. Carla Rice (2007) correctly argues that body size discrimination is an obstacle to the full participation of girls and young women in physical activity and sporting spaces. I would add, however, that boys and young men may also experience such discrimination and that these experiences need to be taken into account when obesity experts reductively claim that overweight and obese children and youth prefer sedentary practices without considering the cultures of fatphobia and discrimination that may impede more active practices (see also Sykes and McPhail). It is also worth noting that the discrimination and/or harassment of these two boys was coming from the adult-instructor, and not their peers, an aspect of the leadership/instruction/pedagogy of physical education and sport cultures that warrants further research consideration.

Now that I have spent time talking about the “people” of Pinevale, I now turn to an overview of my position within this social collectivity.

My Position at Pinevale

Whereas at Lawson I was unaware of my skin colour, at Pinevale my whiteness was front and centre. I was known as the “white guy” by many of the staff and participants. Although there were many white people that used the Pinevale facilities, few were from middle class backgrounds, and as Paul jokingly pointed out one day, “Nobody dresses as well as you. Where you getting’ all dat money from? You stealin’ from us?” (FN, March 8, 2006). Moreover, Paul was quick to introduce me to young people and adults alike as a “researcher from de university” (FN, Jan. 30, 2006). Paul turned to me as
the expert on all things. He had little idea of what I studied, and assumed that I was an expert on nutrition, sport injury, muscle building, health and illness, economics, politics and the list goes on. He would regularly turn to me to draw on my assumed “expertise”. This, of course, was partly my fault, however, because I did not spend the time to properly explain to Paul what it was I studied. An important challenge of ethically responsible “decolonized methodologies” is the task of “demystify[ing] and decolonize[ing]” the knowledge that one produces, because to “assume in advance that people will not be interested in, or will not understand, the deeper issues is arrogant” (Smith, 1999, p. 16). The failure to spend more time articulating my research question, and the theories that informed it, to the communities I was researching was one of the primary failures of this dissertation research. That said, the research participants had a better understanding of what I studied and the questions I was interested in, to the point where they would routinely come up to me during their basketball practices and explain some insight they had had with regards to their health practices or embodied sense of self.

One area I did spend time trying to challenge Paul on was his perspectives on gender, race, and the humanist individual. I would often politely argue with Paul about his perspectives on women or racial constructions. Moreover, Paul asked me to give a lecture to the participants about my experiences going to university, he wanted me to emphasis all the hardship and struggle that went into getting through my courses. He thought this would be a good lesson for the boys, in particular, who were, according to Paul, unlikely to pursue post-secondary educations\(^{147}\). I described to Paul how university came easy to me, that ever since I could remember my parents simply assumed that I

\(^{147}\) Paul’s characterization of the young men as not aiming to attend post-secondary education may or may not be correct, but well over half of them told me that they aspired to college and university.
would attend university, just as they had. I explained that my parents were from middle class backgrounds and that this made university that much easier. I reasoned with Paul that when I had learning difficulties early in life, I went to a private school and had weekly lessons from a private tutor, all privileges that come with my middle class status. I described that educational opportunities are disproportionately available across differently situated classed, raced, and gendered communities. I did not want to give a speech praising the meritocratic virtues of hard work and tenacity. Paul insisted that I speak to the boys, and so I did. I chatted with them about their aspirations for both school and sport, I asked them about the opportunities they had available to them, the role of their guidance counselors, their part time jobs, their family member’s experiences with education and employment, I talked with them about everything but my experiences at university. Paul was angry, but he accepted this as the best I could do, and never asked me to speak to them again.

Although he never stated as much, I figured that Bishop was skeptical of “do good” researchers “researching down” amongst the “high needs” populations in Toronto. When I first met Bishop, he explained that the youth at the Centre would be inherently suspicious of me and that he should be with me the first time I meet the participants. To the young men at the Centre, Bishop clarified, I looked like a cop, with my shaved head, white skin, and pen and note pad\textsuperscript{148}. I found that the participants were less suspicious and more curious about my presence. I got the distinct feeling that some of them thought I was a scout for some higher level of basketball, as they played aggressive and hard in scrimmages, and would frequently look over to see if I was witnessing their quality play.

\textsuperscript{148} After this discussion I left my note pad at home for the first three or four weeks until the youth became more comfortable with my presence.
In contrast to my experiences at Lawson where I felt relatively comfortable in my white, middle class body, at Pinevale I was cognizant of the embodied differences between myself and the participants. I was a white, middle class, well educated, life long resident of Canada, whereas they were mostly black, working class, first generation Canadians. Many of their cultural references I was unfamiliar with (i.e. college and professional basketball, basketball language and culture, gangster culture, and African and Caribbean food and culture), which proved to be a good catalyst for elaborating discussion as the young men were quite willing and pleased to share their everyday life cultures with me. Unlike the research context at Lawson, where my social body blurred into the background, the participants at Pinevale implicitly and explicitly referred to my body. During focus groups they variously characterized my body as “big”, “muscular”, “average”, “healthy”, and “fat”, thus highlighting the fluid, contradictory, and contextual readings of bodies.

Rarely did the participants talk about my whiteness, however, and on several occasions when I broached the subject of race I got the distinct sense the participants were reluctant to talk about racial politics—especially in relation to whiteness—for fear of offending my white sensibility. With the participants, my whiteness was the white elephant in the room, so to speak. An example of this can be found in Omar’s reaction to my inquiries about a reference he had made the previous week about the whiteness that Phil (another participant) and I shared.

Ted: You said to me “Why are you interviewing Phil, it’s about the whiteness”. Do you remember saying that? What did you mean by that?
Omar: He said that…
Ted: You said that.
Omar: No, Phil told me, so I’m like “What?” and he was like “And I got paid too!” [I laugh].
Ted: So, what did you mean by whiteness, I’m interested in that.
Omar: I don’t know. Jus’ goofin’ around.
Ted: I’m not offended by it, I’m actually just wondering what you meant by it.
Omar: I don’t know [Said in a very quiet almost shy voice—I get the feeling I am giving him trouble even though that is not my intent]. (Int.#4, June 8, 2006, p. 7)

Postcolonial scholars have argued that the topic of whiteness is a taboo subject in our current political climate because it disrupts the white “liberal belief in a universal subjectivity” (hooks cited in Dyer, 1997, p. 2). To recognize race is to acknowledge relations of privilege and oppression inscribed onto and into different bodies, which goes against the Western myth of meritocracy where it is assumed that the individual thrives or falters on his or her own merit, not on social and structural factors that are largely beyond his or her control. The myth of a universal meritocratic subject was at play during the focus group discussions as it appeared to silence and render taboo the topic of race and racism, issues which remained an absent presence throughout much of the interviews and focus groups, as well as in the broader spatial context of the Pinevale Community Centre.

At times racism and violence troubled my position as an adult, politically motivated researcher in the Community Centre. One particular evening at Pinevale, there was some unsupervised time left after the youth basketball program. Paul, the basketball coach, had left the gym. I stuck around, seated on the benches at the side, some distance away from the basketball court. I had been attending the program as an observer for a few weeks and the young men seemingly had grown increasingly comfortable with my presence. On that evening, I recorded the following entry in my field notes:

Tonight was the first time I have been uncomfortable in the gym at Pinevale. Within minutes after Paul left, the dynamics of the basketball game shift dramatically. Several older kids who I don’t recognize enter the gym space and start playing ball, and making fun of the other players. One black kid is particularly virulent with his insults. He is older and quite
muscular. The young Tibetan men appear to be the primary target of his mockery. It occurs to me that by virtue of my age and my connection with the Pinevale staff through my research, I’m the most senior person in the gym. This seems to me to be somewhat of a burden. Within ten minutes of Paul’s departure all of the Tibetan kids are off the court. One of them is changing on the next bench down from the one I’m sitting on. He does not react to the continued verbal abuse of his tormentor. I leave the gym. I don’t want to be there if a fight breaks out. If I were to break up a fight, how would this situate me in the eyes of the young men I’m researching? From their perspectives, I may well lose whatever semblance of neutrality I have and simply be seen as one of the Pinevale staff. On the way out, I told Bishop about the situation in the gym, let him deal with it. (Jan. 29, 2006)

I’m ashamed to read my own research journal. At the time of this incident I placed my “insider status” ahead of the comfort and security of the participants. My vain appeals to “neutrality” were indicative of my thinking at that point. I was still stuck in the mindset that I could somehow attain a position of “innocence” in relation to the social worlds I was researching. This brief entry into my research journal reveals two glaring violations of the feminist poststructural methodology that supposedly founded my research. First, the assumption that “neutrality” is a possibility in research is heavily critiqued by feminist scholars. Donna Haraway (1991) refers to the assumption of researcher neutrality as a “god-trick,” where the researcher maintains a position of omnipotent vision without occupying a location or “seeing everywhere from nowhere” (p. 183). In its place, she argues for “situated knowledges,” where there is no position of innocence, rather we are all embodied, politically positioned subjects. Only those “occupying the position of the dominators,” argues Haraway, are “self-identical, unmarked, disembodied, unmediated, transcendent, born again” (p. 193); in short, neutral. My second flaw stems from the first. Once I give up my status as an “innocent” observer of the social world, I am than able to embrace a political position (Fine, 1993; Lather, 1991). I can actively
engage as an agent of change in the social contexts I am observing. In fact, change should be—and is—the central objective of my feminist poststructural research. However, I would not be telling the whole truth if I did not admit that fear also lay behind my silence. I was scared of the scenario that I saw emerging. Fearful for my own safety and security, yes, but also fearful for my position as an “innocent” non-participant observer (as if a sociologist would ever believe it is possible to both be present and a “non participant” in a social situation). I missed the opportunity to intervene in a very real, practical way in the heavily racialized, racist, and violent encounters that transpire in the spaces of recreation and sport.
# Appendix I

## Chart of Participant Descriptions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group #1</th>
<th>Social Class</th>
<th>Ethno-Racial **</th>
<th>Body Size***</th>
<th>General Comments</th>
<th>Sports/Activities Played</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(Lawson)</td>
<td>Jack</td>
<td>Upper Middle Class</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>5’9”, Thin</td>
<td>Worried about his thin body for playing hockey</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Edward</td>
<td>Upper Middle Class</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>5’7”, Thin</td>
<td>Complained about being “too small”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Ronald</td>
<td>Upper Middle Class</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>5’8”, Average</td>
<td>No articulated body concerns</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Marty</td>
<td>Upper Middle Class</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>5’7”, Average</td>
<td>No articulated body concerns</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Adam</td>
<td>Middle Class</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>5’6”, Thin</td>
<td>Worried about his height</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Group #2</td>
<td>Collin</td>
<td>Middle Class</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>5’6”, Thin</td>
<td>No articulated body concerns</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Lawson)</td>
<td>Sam</td>
<td>Middle Class</td>
<td>Asian Canadian</td>
<td>5’6”, Average</td>
<td>No articulated body concerns</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Dominic</td>
<td>Unknown</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>5’6”, Average</td>
<td>No articulated body concerns</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Misha</td>
<td>Middle Class</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>5’7”, Average</td>
<td>No articulated body concerns</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Group #3</td>
<td>John</td>
<td>Working Class</td>
<td>Black</td>
<td>6’1”, Muscular</td>
<td>Proud of his muscular frame</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Pinevale)</td>
<td>Kareem</td>
<td>Working Class</td>
<td>Black</td>
<td>5’7”, Lean</td>
<td>Concerned about his height and gaining fat as he ages</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Phil</td>
<td>Working Class</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>5’7”, Lean to muscular</td>
<td>Worried about his height</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Syed</td>
<td>Working Class</td>
<td>Indo-Canadian</td>
<td>5’8, Average</td>
<td>Worried about gaining too much fat</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Group #4</td>
<td>Jamie</td>
<td>Working Class</td>
<td>Black</td>
<td>5’6”, Average</td>
<td>Worried about his height</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Pinevale)</td>
<td>Omar</td>
<td>Working Class</td>
<td>Black</td>
<td>5’6”, Average</td>
<td>Worried about his height</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Ajay</td>
<td>Working Class</td>
<td>Sir Lankan Canadian</td>
<td>5’11”, Skinny</td>
<td>Worried about thinness</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Social Class</th>
<th>Ethno-Racial</th>
<th>Body Size</th>
<th>General</th>
<th>Sports</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Name</td>
<td>Working Class</td>
<td>Background</td>
<td>Height/Body</td>
<td>Comments</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-------</td>
<td>---------------</td>
<td>--------------</td>
<td>-------------</td>
<td>---------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sean</td>
<td>Working Class</td>
<td>Black</td>
<td>5’11”, Muscular</td>
<td>No articulated body concerns</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Group #5</strong> (Pinevale) Thomas</td>
<td>Working Class</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>6’4”, Skinny</td>
<td>Worried about being thinness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Josh</td>
<td>Working Class</td>
<td>Black</td>
<td>5’9”, Thin</td>
<td>Worried thinness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Akeem</td>
<td>Working Class</td>
<td>Black</td>
<td>5’9”, Thin</td>
<td>Worried about acne</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Group #6</strong> (Lawson) Bobby</td>
<td>Middle Class</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>5’11, Average</td>
<td>No articulated body concerns</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sidney</td>
<td>Unknown</td>
<td>Asian Canadian</td>
<td>5’9, Thin</td>
<td>Non articulated body concerns</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kyle</td>
<td>Upper Middle Class</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>5’10, Average</td>
<td>Worried about gaining too much fat</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marcel</td>
<td>Unknown</td>
<td>Asian Canadian</td>
<td>5’9, Average</td>
<td>No articulated body concerns</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Group #7</strong> (Lawson) Michael</td>
<td>Middle Class</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>5’10, Thin</td>
<td>No articulated body concerns</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Luke</td>
<td>Unknown</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>5’9, Thin</td>
<td>No articulated body concerns</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Robert</td>
<td>Unknown</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>5’8, Average</td>
<td>No articulated body concerns</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alex</td>
<td>Unknown</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>5’8”, Average</td>
<td>No articulated body concerns</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Abe</td>
<td>Upper Middle Class</td>
<td>Black</td>
<td>5’6, Thin</td>
<td>No articulated body concerns</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Luke</td>
<td>Unknown</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>5’7”, Thin</td>
<td>Worried about his height</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Carl</td>
<td>Middle Class</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>5’11”, Large Frame</td>
<td>Worried about gaining too much weight</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jon</td>
<td>Middle Class</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>5’7”, Average</td>
<td>No articulated body concerns</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Social class was approximated based on comments the participants made about parents employment, recreational activities, vacation destinations, discussions of finances, and other indicators that would point towards particularly social class backgrounds. When few or no indications were provided, I input “unknown”.

** In some cases the participants self-identified while at other moments I used dominant constructions of “race” as visibly marked on the body to insert the participants into racial categories.

*** Body size characterizations were based on a combination of my impressions of their bodies as well as comments the participants made/revealed about their bodies.