“BODY IMAGE BY ASSOCIATION”:
WOMEN’S INTERPRETATIONS OF AEROBICS
AND THE ROLE OF THE FITNESS INSTRUCTOR

by

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B.A., The University of Victoria, 1993

A THESIS SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE
REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF

MASTER OF ARTS

in

THE FACULTY OF GRADUATE STUDIES

School of Human Kinetics

We accept this thesis as conforming
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THE UNIVERSITY OF BRITISH COLUMBIA

January, 1998

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Abstract

The increasingly popular fitness industry targets members of the middle-class who are anxious to lose weight, "tone-up" and "look great." Studies on women and body image consistently show that many active women express a multitude of concerns over their physical appearance (cf. Davis & Cowles, 1991; Markula, 1995). The aerobics class, an instructor-led, exercise-to-music workout, is a form of exercise frequented mainly by women. Many researchers consider aerobics to be representative of stereotypical ideologies of femininity and ideal beauty (Cole, 1993; MacNeill, 1990, White, Young & Gillett, 1995). Other researchers believe there is room for the empowerment of women and body image satisfaction in aerobics (Haravon, 1995; Markula, 1995).

Research which examines body image in the context of aerobics as a distinct social setting, particularly with a focus on the role of the fitness instructor, is largely absent from the literature. On one hand, the instructor's appearance and discourse can be influential in reinforcing cultural standards of an ideal female body among aerobics participants (Kagan & Morse, 1988; Kenen, 1987; Valdés, 1995). On the other hand, some researchers have suggested that the instructor has the potential to focus participants' attention away from weight loss and appearance enhancement in aerobics (Frederick & Shaw, 1995; Haravon, 1995; Kagan & Morse, 1988).

This study examined how female aerobics participants and female fitness instructors interpreted the role of the instructor and how this role related to the body image experiences of participants. Unobtrusive observations and one-on-one interviews were conducted with volunteers from a popular Lower Mainland fitness facility.
Results from this study indicated that both participants and instructors constructed personal meanings for their involvement in aerobics. Further, the impact of the instructor’s role on the body image experiences of participants was multi-dimensional. Instructors who emphasized appearance and weight loss in aerobics offended some women and inspired others. Certain women preferred an instructor who resembled an image consistent with media representations of a fit female body while others resisted this stereotypical look and sought an instructor with a larger, more athletic build.
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Acknowledgments

This study was financially supported, in part, by a Teaching Assistantship from the School of Human Kinetics at the University of British Columbia.

I received a great deal of support and invaluable guidance from my committee members (Dr. Lucie Thibault, Dr. Wendy Frisby and Dr. Nancy Theberge). Thank you especially to Lucie for your commitment, encouragement, advice, computer support and sense of humour. I would also like to thank my parents and Scott Estes for his continued encouragement, editing, computer support, feedback and patience. Thank you also to Margot Lang and Michael Firth who were both constant sources of peer support.

Most of all, thank you to the women who volunteered their time to take part in this study.
Body Image Experience

Research on body image has been extensively explored and well documented in various disciplines (cf. Bordo, 1993; Featherstone, 1991; Freedman, 1984, 1986; Hesse-Biber, 1991, 1996; Pruzinsky & Cash, 1990; Secord & Jourard, 1953; Zion, 1965). Although researchers concerned with the study of body image converge on the topic from various analytical perspectives and academic standpoints (psychological, sociological, cultural and/or feminist, to name a few), there exists a general understanding of body image as “the subjective image of one’s own body” (Reber, 1985, p. 99). However, the theoretical premise underlying this notion of body image as a “mental construction” addresses only a fraction of the themes that are typically explored in the scheme of research and writings on the body (Thompson & Hirschman, 1995, p. 150). Reber (1985) pointed out that although some scholars apply the term body image only to perceptions of physical appearance, others address variables such as body functions and kinetics. Still others focus on socio-cultural determinants such as class (Laberge & Sankoff, 1988; White, Young & Gillett, 1995), race (Al-Shaykh, 1994; Bordo, 1993; Buchanan, 1993; hooks, 1990, 1992) and gender (Bordo, 1993; Laberge & Sankoff, 1988, Markula, 1993a, 1993b, 1995). For Bordo (1993), an analysis of the body’s position in society is crucial because it holds culturally situated and shared meanings and it is under a constant process of being “historically and politically ‘inscribed’ and shaped” (p. 288).

Drawing on the multiplicity of dimensions governing body image definitions, Pruzinsky and Cash (1990) outlined seven major themes associated with research in this area. Along with perceptions of the body, the authors defined body image to be a reactive and developmental
phenomenon which can be associated with behaviour, attitudes, spatiality, self-worth, information processing and social relations. Indeed, ‘body image’ is more of “an increasingly conventional linguistic term” (Thompson & Hirschman, 1995, p. 150) than a definitive explanation of what writings and research on the body might entail. Pruzinsky and Cash (1990) suggested the term body experience may be more appropriate in addressing the myriad of approaches. I agree that the term ‘experience’ is instrumental in conveying an individual’s multi-dimensional relationship to her or his body; one that cuts across social/cultural, affective, behavioural and cognitive components. However, I added the term ‘image’ to my definition because it connotes a personal conception of one’s self and it is typically associated with evaluations of appearance, a major focus in the present study. My inclusion of the term body image experience will suggest that experiences associated with one’s body appearance reach farther than perception (image) to include affect, cognition, behaviour and, most important to the direction of this paper, culture. In short, discussion of the ‘body image experience’ will be based on the definitions provided by Reber (1985), Bordo (1993) and Pruzinsky and Cash (1990).

Feminist Cultural Studies

As mentioned above, many researchers consider socio-cultural factors as central to the study of body image and are specifically committed to understanding women’s body image experiences as they relate to the female role in contemporary Western culture (cf. Bordo, 1993; Chernin, 1981; Haravon, 1995; Hesse-Biber 1991, 1996; Spitzack, 1990; White et al., 1995). According to Bordo (1993), the application of a feminist standpoint contributes to an understanding of “culture’s grip on the body” (p. 17).
In general, "feminists seek to understand and eliminate the oppression of women through theoretical development and practices directed at social change" (Costa & Guthrie, 1994, p. 235). Although feminism represents a basis for women's shared beliefs and goals, there are a number of perspectives within the feminist movement. The present paper is informed by a branch of feminism identified as Feminist Cultural Studies. According to Theberge and Birrell (1994), the goal of cultural studies is to "emphasize the complexity of social life" in the process of producing and presenting "an interpretation of how culture works and what it means" (p. 326). Feminist cultural studies then, applies this project specifically to women's interpretation of culture and what it means to them in the context of societal representations of gender. Theberge and Birrell (1994) adopted this perspective in their analysis of women in sport; the dynamics of women's sport cannot be separated from the dynamics of everyday life. Like sport, women's body practices (exercise and other methods aimed at beautification) are best understood as cultural expressions "embedded in and constituent of sociopolitical forces of culture" (Theberge & Birrell, 1994, p. 326). Understanding women's attitudes towards their bodies requires an understanding of how the female body is represented through cultural norms and practices. A more detailed examination of this relationship is presented in Chapter Two.

Women, Body Image Experiences and Fitness: An Overview

Within the multiple frameworks of body image research, the majority of studies focus on subjects' feelings or perceptions of satisfaction and dissatisfaction regarding their bodies (cf. Crawford & Eklund, 1994; Davis & Cowles, 1991; Eklund & Crawford, 1994; Hesse-Biber, 1991; Markula, 1993a, 1993b, 1995; Secord & Jourard, 1953; Zion, 1965). General findings reveal that women consistently report greater dissatisfaction with their current body shapes than
do men (Ben-Tovim & Walker, 1991; Cash 1990; Freedman, 1984). For example, in an exposé about body and appearance obsession, Nemeth (1994) reported 90% of Canadian women dislike some aspect of their bodies. Most often, this dislike is expressed by the desire to lose weight (Ben-Tovim & Walker, 1991; Davis & Cowles, 1991; Kissling, 1991). A study by Hesse-Biber (1991) showed how body image preferences differed for male and female subjects. She presented them with a series of images representing various body shapes. Subjects were asked to choose their ideal figure and results were compared to medical models of recommended weight according to height and body build. Hesse-Biber found that women’s average desired weight severely gravitated towards a culturally-defined, slender silhouette. Conversely, for men, “the medical and cultural ... charts [were] so similar, the deviation between actual and desired weight so minimal, comparisons [were] difficult to make” (p. 183).

In North America, the diet industry - which constitutes diet pills, formulas and weight loss centres - is estimated to collect $40 billion annually (Poulton, 1996) and most consumers of this industry are female (Freedman, 1986). With technological advances in cosmetic surgery, and the growing popularity of fitness clubs and equipment, societal pressure to be slender expands to include ‘perfection’ of all aspects of the female form. Spitzack (1990) interviewed a woman who noted, today, women are expected to appear healthy, and that means “tanned and toned, not just thin anymore” (p. 36). To achieve this look, the media encourages consumers to purchase their desired physical identity (Featherstone, 1991; Firt, 1994; McCracken, 1988). According to Featherstone,

*the tendency within consumer culture is for ascribed bodily qualities to become regarded as plastic - with effort and 'body work' individuals are persuaded that they can achieve a certain desired appearance. Advertising, feature articles and advice columns in magazines and newspapers ask individuals to assume self-responsibility for the way they look* (1991, p. 178).
White et al. (1995) recognized that beauty and health are "visible units of currency" in a society that closely links self-identity and physical appearance (p. 161).

Recently, growing numbers of women have turned to ubiquitous sources of physical fitness in order to achieve their desired physique. Canadians spent $11.7 billion on fitness-related and basic sport expenditures in 1991 (Minister's Task Force, 1992). In 1995, the average active Canadian adult spent $700 a year to participate in physical activity (Burns, 1997). Similar estimates mark American fitness expenditures at $42.9 billion with approximately 30 million people registered at a fitness club (Hesse-Biber, 1996). Millar (1991) reported that Canadians greatly increased their level of physical activity from 1985 to 1991. In total, 32% of the adult population in Canada (6.7 million people) described themselves as "physically very active" (p. 366). Millar's statistics also show a steady increase in physical activity among women of all ages (from 23% in 1985 to 26% in 1991); clearly women make up a substantial portion of the exercising population. According to Shape (Doheny, 1996a), a popular women's fitness publication in North America, the incidence of women using stairclimbing machines has increased by 1,396% from 1987 to 1995. Women exercising on treadmills has also risen by 711% in the same eight year period. Likewise, since its inception in 1990, STEP aerobics - a form of exercise incorporating a flat bench apparatus - has attracted 11.4 million Americans, most of whom are women. According to Kagan and Morse (1988), 90% of 25 million aerobics participants in the United States are female. Women's involvement in aerobics was a central component of the present study and will be addressed in greater detail later in this chapter.

Coinciding with the recent popularity in exercise among women, sport and fitness psychologists and sociologists have continued their investigation of women's body image and its relationship to physical activity. Some researchers found female exercisers were just as
dissatisfied with their bodies as sedentary women in previous studies (Davis & Cowles, 1991; Hallinan, Pierce, Evans & DeGrenier, 1991; Skrinar, Bullen & Cheek, 1986). The 1988 Campbell's Survey of Well-being of Canadians revealed female respondents considered weight control the most important reason for engaging in physical fitness (White et al., 1995). Other studies also found an association between weight loss and women’s attendance at aerobics (Frederick & Shaw, 1995; Redican & Hadley, 1988; Warrick & Tinning, 1989a, 1989b). In their study on body image and female aerobics participants, Frederick and Shaw (1995) discovered that

> even when the women were specific about not participating in aerobics for the singular purpose of weight loss, the main reason for participation was still associated with body image and the 'need' to improve physical appearance (p. 68).

Haravon (1995) also noted that the “effect of aerobics on personal appearance” is often an important incentive for many female exercisers (p. 25).

The relationship between women’s body images and their participation in exercise is significant because the fitness industry typically promotes ‘working out’ as an avenue to lose weight and attain physical perfection (elusive as it may be). This can be especially detrimental to women’s well-being because an excessive concern with body image, dieting and exercising can lead to dangerous weight control practices such as exercise-induced eating disorders. Often a preoccupation with weight and shape can lead to increased physical activity and decreased caloric consumption. Some researchers believe this combination can place individuals at risk to develop anorexia and/or bulimia (Eisler & le Grange, 1990; Epling & Pierce, 1988; Epling, Pierce & Stefan, 1983). Although further discussion of exercise and disordered eating is beyond the scope of this paper, research towards its prevention holds tremendous value. An examination of the ways in which women perceive their bodies in the exercise setting can contribute to an understanding of this phenomenon.
Gaps in the Literature

The above findings warrant a closer look at the literature on women’s body image experiences and their participation in fitness, particularly aerobics. In general one major shortcoming can be identified in the literature to date: researchers who study body image in the aerobics setting often lack regard for its distinct quality as an exercise site (Kenen, 1987; McInman & Berger, 1993; Redican & Hadley, 1988).

**Aerobics as a distinct social setting.** Often the term aerobics implies any form of cardiovascular activity utilizing oxygen (Cooper & Cooper, 1988). In the present study, aerobics refers to a *type* of exercise session where a group of people follow the cues and movements of an instructor. Usually, aerobics entails an exercise-to-music format whereby participants engage in a standard set of patterned movements either on the floor or using a STEP apparatus.

Warrick and Tinning (1989a) noted that aerobics has developed to become its own culture because it differs from other forms of recreational exercise by incorporating an instructor, music, choreography, mirrors and a group of people exercising in unison. Crawford and Eklund (1994) and Eklund and Crawford (1994) have drawn on some of these distinct qualities in their laboratory experiments. They designed several studies to examine the ways in which typical, revealing aerobics fashions affect body image satisfaction. Unfortunately, these studies did not take place in a natural setting. Instead, subjects were shown videos in a laboratory and asked to complete questionnaires based on this exposure. Such a set up is removed from real life experience; similar studies that take place in the actual exercise field must be undertaken in order to avoid artificiality.
Like other studies conducted in an aerobics setting (McInman & Berger, 1993; Warrick & Tinning, 1989a, 1989b), Crawford and Eklund failed to address a key element specific to the aerobics class: the fitness instructor. In general, the instructor assumes the role of leader in aerobics. Although some participants express resistance to, and disapproval of the messages and actions of their instructors (Bain, Wilson & Chaikind, 1989; Haravon, 1995), other researchers suggest the values, beliefs and assumptions that instructors communicate to participants may be particularly influential (Gates, 1991; Kagan & Morse, 1988). For example, the instructor’s attention to matters of body image and weight loss, his or her appearance and his or her interaction with the class can potentially shape the body image experiences and attitudes of participants. Despite this fact, researchers have not examined how participants interpret the instructor’s role in aerobics. Warrick and Tinning (1989a, 1989b) conducted field observations and interviews with female participants in order to determine the meanings these women placed on their attendance at aerobics. Although the authors described the principal researcher in their study as both an aerobics participant and an instructor, they did not elaborate on how the research participants might interpret the role of fitness leader or how this role relates to their experiences in aerobics as a whole.

Kenen (1987) conducted a similar study to that of Warrick and Tinning. Although she claimed instructors comprised almost 50% of her interview sample, the content of her research report focused exclusively on participants. She did mention that instructors employed with non-profit fitness organizations usually paid more attention to personal growth and physical prowess than the “doll-like” instructors at fitness franchises (p. 77). However, this observation, and other critical evaluations of instructors’ appearances and protocol, appear to be the author’s viewpoint rather than opinions expressed by the research participants.
Markula (1995) and Haravon (1995) are among the only researchers to write about participants' reactions to the demonstrators (instructors in classes, on video and in magazines) of exercise. Their attention to this matter, albeit brief, provides an excellent starting point for further research on participants' attitudes towards the role and appearance of their instructors. In regards to appearance and body type, Markula (1995) discovered that many women expressed a preference for average-looking instructors. Likewise, Haravon (1995) cited a woman who expressed her pleasure when she noticed the instructor was a "real person" rather than an instructor who fit the stereotype of a "bubble-brained blonde" (p. 38). However, for other women, media representations of a stereotypical-looking instructor provided a positive incentive for exercising (Markula, 1995). An investigation of this topic would contribute to an understanding of how participants resist and accept the appearances and body image messages of instructors.

Documentation concerning the body image attitudes of instructors is also scarce. Although there are no formal studies on this topic to date, writings by Gates (1991), Markula (1995) and Valdés (1995) confirm that instructors are not immune to societal expectations of the "perfect" female body. Valdés recalled her own obsession with appearance during the time she was employed as an instructor. Markula, a feminist academic researcher and instructor candidly wrote: "I ... am petrified that I will become fat regardless of my knowledge that the ideal thinness is an unrealistic goal" (pp. 445-446). Gates acknowledged that instructors often regard themselves as "fat" even when they are below average measurements of body fat: "If 22 percent fat is optimum, 18 percent is better" (p. 28). Although the role of the instructor can vary greatly from situation and individual, one assumes that she or he plays a considerable part in the dynamics of an aerobics class (after all, the instructor chooses the aerobics moves, the exercises to be
performed and the music that participants listen to in the class). Yet, little is known about what potential she or he has in influencing the attitudes and experiences of participants. Evidence of how participants regard the role of the instructor and how this role impacts their body image experiences is absent in current research. Empirical research about how instructors regard their role is equally missing from the literature.

Feminist and Qualitative Research: An Application to Body Image Experiences and Aerobics

As mentioned, the proposed study was informed by feminist cultural studies. In the realm of research, feminist theory and feminist methodology complement one another. According to Hall (1988), to engage in feminist methodology, or feminist scholarship, is to “apply a fundamentally political concept - feminism - to the world of academic research” (p. 337). Cook and Fonow (1990) described feminist methodology as focused on the interrelations between epistemological ideas of feminist scholarship and methodological practices which take a feminist paradigm into account. For example, qualitative research - the approach taken in the present study - is considered part of a feminist methodology because it actively addresses the individual as subject and thus works to “avoid the complete objectification of women [or men] as data ... [which is] so commonly found in the research process” (Cook & Fonow, 1990, p. 89).

However, not all studies employing qualitative methodology are exempt from traces of subject “objectification.” Kenen (1987) conducted participant observations, structured and unstructured interviews with four instructors and five aerobics participants in seven different exercise programs over a three year period. Unfortunately, she revealed her participants’ views only through her own interpretations by excluding any actual quotations from these interactions. In addition, she assigned aerobics participants to one of two psycho-social orientations -
committed/trendy and medicinal/enjoyer - meant to correspond with their exercise behaviour. It is unknown however whether women in Kenen's study would agree with her categories. Warrick and Tinning (1989a, 1989b) used qualitative methodology to explore the meanings women give to their own participation in aerobics. Although they included insightful interview quotations, they also categorized 'types' of aerobics participants into six distinct groups: Natural; Compulsive; Functionalist; Social Mum; Cheated; and Resigned. Again, it is unknown whether the women in their study would have described themselves by these labels. This type of rigid categorization ignores natural diversity among women and does not account for multiple meanings in each woman's experience. Although other qualitative studies on aerobics and women's body image experiences offer a more balanced, less rigid combination of researcher interpretation and direct participant expression (cf. Frederick & Shaw, 1995; Haravon, 1995; Markula, 1993a, 1993b, 1995; Redican & Hadley, 1988), there is certainly room for continued improvement.

Many feminist scholars and researchers have offered guidelines for employing feminist, qualitative methodologies (Cole, 1991; Cook & Fonow, 1990; Mies, 1983; Vickers, 1989). Reinharz (1992) cited three goals that are frequently mentioned as critical elements of feminist methodologies and best suited the direction and purposes of this study:

• To document the lives and activities of women. As mentioned aerobics classes are popular gathering places for women (Crawford & Eklund, 1994; Eklund & Crawford, 1994; Kagan & Morse, 1988; Martin, 1997; White, 1993).

• To understand the experiences of women from their own viewpoint. This study went beyond the researcher's 'armchair' speculation about what body image and fitness mean to women.
• To conceptualize women's behaviour as an expression of social contexts. This study considered how individual perceptions and attitudes about the body and aerobics are culturally structured.

Purpose

The purpose of this study was to examine how female aerobics participants and female fitness instructors interpreted the role of the instructor and how this role related to the body image experiences of participants. To this end, several research questions were posed.

Research Questions

1. In the context of body image experience, how do female aerobics participants interpret the role of the female fitness instructor in aerobics (for example, the instructor’s appearance, her discourse about weight loss and body image and her capacity as a role model and fitness expert)?

2. In the context of the body image experiences of aerobics participants, how do female fitness instructors interpret their role in aerobics (for example, their appearance, their discourse about weight loss and body image and their capacity as role models and fitness experts)?

3. In the context of body image experience, how do female aerobics participants and female fitness instructors interpret the aerobics environment (for example, the space participants occupy at aerobics, the clothes instructors and participants wear and the extent to which participants look at themselves in the mirror)?

4. How do female aerobics participants and female fitness instructors conceptualize a fit female body?
Feminist Cultural Studies

In her article *Resisting the Canon: Feminist Cultural Studies, Sport, and Technologies of the Body*, Cole (1993) located feminist cultural studies at an intersection between socialist-feminist theory, British cultural studies and the work of Michel Foucault. For Cole, the agenda facing a feminist cultural studies framework is to rethink the relationships among constructs such as gender, race, the body, sport and nature (Cole, 1993) in order to arrive at a “truly radical, gendered (and nonracist) theory of sport” (Hall, 1993, p. 99).

Despite its title, Cole’s article does not provide a comprehensive overview of feminist cultural studies per se since the author only outlines her interpretations of this theory’s roots. In fact, Greendorfer and Bruce (1993) warned that “Cole’s suggested strategy does not purport to be the only direction for developing feminist cultural studies” (p. 106). Likewise, Hall (1993) claimed it is not entirely possible to declare, in unequivocal terms, what constitutes feminist cultural studies. For Hall, “there is an uneasy alliance between cultural studies and some feminisms”; a tension that Cole failed to address (p. 100).

*Cultural studies depends on an unexamined use of the concept of ‘everyday’ to ground its approach ... in feminism, the everyday has been useful for an important oppositional critique, one site in which to locate difference, and to expose the racial homogenization that continues within a gender analysis.... Yet the ‘culture’ of cultural studies means a whole way of life, that which is ordinary and located in the everyday, a homogenizing version of culture that denies difference* (Hall, 1993, p. 100; underline replaces italics in the original).

On the one hand, such an effacement of difference is problematic for feminism. On the other hand, hooks (1990) asserted that cultural studies, as a contemporary location in the
academy, “most invites and encourages” an analysis of the political implications of work on cultural pluralism or ‘difference’ (p. 124).

Clearly there is contention about what informs feminist cultural studies. This research project was informed by selected interpretations taken from Bordo (1993), Cole (1993), Theberge and Birrell (1994), Markula (1993a, 1993b, 1995) and Haravon (1995). First, writings by both Bordo and Cole suggest a Foucauldian influence. For them, the body is historically situated and culturally codified, specifically, to the point of body normalization. According to Cole, “exercise and aerobics tend to be normalizing technologies that produce fashionable ‘dress for success’ bodies embedded in promises of material gains” (p. 87). In other words, activities that represent and reproduce feminine bodies are rewarded since an enhanced appearance, particularly for women, ensures a “more marketable self” (Featherstone, 1991, p. 171). Cole believed that women’s involvement in body normalizing technologies such as aerobics does not allow for transgressive or resistive agency on the part of the exercising women in question. I agree with Hall (1993) that Cole’s latter point is a drawback of her work. A wholehearted acceptance of Cole’s perspective falls short as an analysis concerned with diversity in women’s experiences and backgrounds. Contrary to Cole’s stance, Theberge and Birrell (1994) suggested sport can play a powerful and resistive role in the lives of women. Addressing women’s experiences in aerobics, Markula (1993a) (adopting a postmodern perspective) claimed that women create their own meanings associated with their involvement in physical activity. However, these meanings are ultimately framed and constructed by dominant social structures.
Like Markula, Haravon (1995) analyzed aerobics in the framework of cultural studies. For her, the study of aerobics, as an aspect of popular culture, is an important and significant area of cultural studies scholarship because it leads to a better understanding of societal values and it can "encourage feelings of empowerment and social change on a personal level" (Haravon, 1995, p. 25). For example, the aerobics class setting is often viewed as an arena where women focus on weight loss, appearance enhancement and/or social comparison (cf. Frederick & Shaw, 1995; Frederick, Havitz & Shaw, 1994; MacNeill, 1990; Markula, 1993a, 1993b, 1995; Valdés, 1995). Haravon (1995) asserted that "any move toward social change, for women in particular, must include an improvement in the relationship that women have to their bodies" (p. 26). As a feminist fitness instructor, she is committed to "creating practical and structural changes" in aerobics (p. 28). This means encouraging an exercise atmosphere that cultivates a sense of comfort and personal expression for aerobics participants and an interaction between the instructor and participants. The present research project was based on the premise that the fitness instructor plays an instrumental role in the study of aerobics. In her research, Haravon (1995) encouraged instructors to "de-emphasize the boundary between instructor and student" (p. 36). However, there is a "boundary" between the fitness instructor and aerobics participants because the fitness instructor is the designated leader of the class. Instructors invest their time and money in certification and ongoing education costs; this process sets them apart from most aerobics participants. In addition, some instructors epitomize participants' concept of a physically fit ideal (Lenskyj, 1986). A study of aerobics, as it relates to a cultural framework, must incorporate participants' insights about the fitness instructor's role. Thus, the objective of the present study was to
examine how women interpret their body image experiences and the role of the fitness instructor within a framework of popular culture (aerobics) that represents stereotypical, social ideologies of femininity and ideal beauty.

The Cultural Body

The symbolic meaning of social control and self-identity through the discipline of the body has been a popular topic among sociological, philosophical and feminist theorists for some time (cf. Bordo, 1993; Featherstone, 1991; Foucault, 1979; Spitzack, 1990). Michel Foucault (1979) argued that the body is a site of disciplinary discourse which works to regulate and control the self. In his view, individuals internalize the forces of social and institutional control through the practices of body discipline.

Although Foucault has been extremely influential in establishing a core focus on the social body, he remained ‘gender-blind’ in his analyses because he treated the gendered body as neutral or undifferentiated (Bordo, 1993; Cole, 1993; Duncan, 1994; Hall, 1993). Many feminist theorists agree that an examination of women’s cultural experiences must be central to interpretations of body experiences (cf. Bordo, 1993; Duncan, 1994; Grosz, 1987; Hall, 1993; Hesse-Biber, 1991, 1996; Theberge, 1991).

Drawing on a similar concept of bodily regulation to that of Foucault, White, Young and Gillett (1995) situated women’s cultural experiences as separate from men’s. They claimed the contemporary fear of social upheaval in Western culture adds to the impulse to gain stability through individual body discipline. Body discipline, in this case, means committing oneself to the “moral obligation” of healthful living which is reflected by a fit, lean body (p. 160). An understanding that the individual body mirrors the larger
social body promotes the concept that proper maintenance of one's physical self will in
turn repair a crumbling social corps (White et al., 1995). With growing public discourse
about the health risks of excess body fat, a sedentary lifestyle and poor dietary practices,
there becomes a clear urgency in contemporary Western culture to establish a preference
for the body beautiful: fit, healthy and slender. Women, in particular, are expected to
conform to these physical attributes (Bordo, 1993; Featherstone, 1991; White et al.,
1995).

The gendered body. The body is the quintessential source of difference between
men and women (White et al., 1995); in society, there exists a gender hierarchy where the
female body is considered ‘less than’ (Kane & Greendorfer, 1994), or the ‘other’ (Bordo,
1993). The male body represents strength and power, and the female body symbolizes
weakness and frailty (Kane & Greendorfer, 1994; Theberge, 1989). Such categorization
derives from the Western, philosophical conceptions of dichotomous thought:
public/private, culture/nature, mind/body, for example (Firat, 1994). The legacy of
dichotomization becomes especially clear when one considers the notion of the individual
body beautiful as a reflection of social ideals. That is, in general, ideological terms, a lean,
muscular body is associated with power/active/male, and a soft, fat body is linked with
submission/passive/female. According to Seid (1988), the present day “fashion industry
and advertisers [the transmitters, and makers in part, of cultural preferences] have decreed
that slim and fit are beautiful and that fat and flabby are worse than ugly” (p. 15).
Testimonies from male and female interview participants in a study by Thompson and
Hirschman (1995) underscored this point. For many, “the ‘soft’ overweight body betrays
a failure to discipline and control one’s life” (p. 145). The naturalness of women’s bodies
as fleshier than their male counterparts, becomes a symbol of their ‘natural’ social inferiority to men.

To overcome this condition, women, more than men, must assume the responsibility of self-creation (shaping of the body and general appearance) in order to achieve “power/control” (Bordo, 1993, p. 126) and a sense of identity (Featherstone, 1991). In her book *Beauty Secrets*, Chapkis (1986) described ‘the politics of appearance’ - the cultivation of beauty practices by women - as one of the main ways that gender differences are created and maintained in Western culture. Similarly, Vertinsky (1987) believed the endless “pursuit of beauty (of face and physical form) has constituted a key element in women’s separate experience of life” (p. 257). A dichotomy exists between the ways in which men and women are expected to present their bodies in society.

This is not to suggest that men do not experience feelings of body insecurity and social pressure to appear attractive. In fact, according to Firat (1994), “[t]he historically completed commodification and objectification of the female body ... is being extended to images of the male body as well” (p. 216). Thompson and Hirschman (1995) observed that some male interviewees shared feelings of dissatisfaction about their physiques similar to those disclosed by their female counterparts. Cash (1990) found men feel pressure to be attractive as 82% of surveyed males admitted to being appearance-oriented.

Nonetheless, in a broad social context, at this point in time, men are not evaluated as often as women on a physical scale.

With respect to the aforementioned dualisms, Western culture tends to associate women with private/nature/body, and men with public/culture/mind (Hall, 1996). Consequently, it becomes natural to regard women as bodies (for the purpose of
reproduction, sexuality and aesthetics), and men as minds (agents of scholarship, business and politics). Women are evaluated as bodies in a culture that promises social control if individual body control can be achieved. In her description of sociological theory and women’s beauty practices, Davis (1995) succinctly relayed how controlling one’s appearance through body maintenance is a means of creating a (post)modern identity: “Through cultivation of the body, individuals enact and display their desire for control” (p. 47). Thus, with the right appearance, women can gain control over their personal and political lives, hardly an easy task. Fallon’s (1990) essay on female body ideals from late 19th century to the 1980s revealed that although women have always been expected to conform to beauty standards, the female body shape of late has become more unrealistic. For example, by the late 1960s, during the first wave of the feminist movement, the average height of Miss America winners rose by an inch while their weight dropped by five pounds (Fallon, 1990). Similarly, ten years after her introduction as a fashion model in 1966, Twiggy weighed 91 pounds and was enjoying number one status in her field (Fallon, 1990). In more recent times, women with surgically sculpted bodies have become the latest models of beauty and femininity in the media. In an age of increasing body obsession (Kissling, 1991), the ideal moves farther from the realistic contours of a natural female form.

Normalization of the female body. Western, patriarchal discourse around the body insists on a dualistic understanding of male versus female. At the same time, this philosophy works to deny the existence of variation among women as a group. The regulation of female body maintenance does not allow for deviation from the narrow mold of the ideal standard. In other words, although fashionable beauty ideals change, “the
discourse of feminine beauty works to erase differences between women under the homogenizing banner that any body will do (as long as it is different than the one you have)” (Davis, 1995, p. 55). Various writers have alluded to the pursuit of beauty as a process of normalization (Bordo, 1993; Davis, 1995; Freedman, 1986; Spitzack, 1990; Thompson & Hirschman, 1995). Normalization of the female body refers to the assimilation of women’s appearances in order to create one, standard beauty ideal. For example, Davis (1995) conducted a study of Dutch women who elected to undergo cosmetic surgery. The author discovered that the women’s common desire to present themselves as ordinary - to resemble other women - was a primary reason for surgically altering the body.

Thompson and Hirschman (1995) discussed the media-constructed “normatively acceptable body” as “far from any sense of the average body” since most women do not look like fashion models (p. 147). Bordo (1993) acknowledged how the media’s normalizing imagery attempts to erase and problematize cultural and ethnic differences among women by suggesting that anything other than a young, white, tall, slim woman is not beautiful:

Even as we are all normalized to the requirements of appropriate feminine insecurity and preoccupation with appearance, more specific requirements emerge in different cultural and historical contexts, and for different groups.... [There exists] racial as well as gender normalization, normalization not only to “femininity,” but to the Caucasian standards of beauty that still dominate on television, in movies, in popular magazines (p. 113-114).

Black feminist writer Buchanan (1993) asserted that, to a large extent, the process of beauty normalization simply does not include women of colour: “African women are subject to the same pressures to attain an ideal of beauty as are white women in North American society, but efforts to approach the blonde, thin, young, white ideal are made at
even greater cost for Black women” (p. 37). Australian feminist philosopher, Grosz (1987) called for a move away from the normalization and homogenization of the body: “No one body can be the model for all others; there must be a plurality of body types ... and one cannot function as the representative of another” (p. 52).

In the most recent generation, Western women relied mainly on food regulation to shape the body. Today, cosmetic surgeons and the fitness industry present their respective practices to women as means of body maintenance (Davis, 1995; Hargreaves, 1994; Thompson & Hirschman, 1995). Clearly, such “solutions” do not ease the pressure to achieve standards of normalization:

Athleticism has been superimposed onto a superthin beauty ideal that requires dieting to trim down plus exercise to firm up.... Fitness defines the newest shape within which women are expected to normalize themselves. It has special appeal, for it seems intrinsically healthy. However, Jane Fonda’s beauty formula is a high hurdle to sweat over (Freedman, 1986, p. 163, 168).

Similarly, Spitzack (1990) warned that “[e]ach new diet or product, promising freedom from self-scrutiny, works to cement an unending monitoring of the body” (p. 33).

The Fit Body Aesthetic

In many cases, exercisers tend to workout the body without regard for the importance of mental health (Ross, 1988). This type of training method can be especially detrimental to female exercisers, many of whom admit to exercising solely for external body maintenance (Davis & Cowles, 1991; Frederick & Shaw, 1995; Laberge & Sankoff, 1988; Markula, 1993a, 1993b, 1995; Redican & Hadley, 1988; White, 1993). In an ethnographic study of female aerobics participants, Markula (1993b) recognized that participants’ dissociation of mental and physical health rendered aerobics “a field of contradictory and incomplete meanings” (p. 93). She discovered that, for many women in
her study, participating in aerobics created a fragmented relationship with the self; although they enjoyed the experience of physical movement, these participants were ultimately engaged in beauty maintenance. Several women conceded to working out entirely for the purpose of achieving the body beautiful, their labour of exercise was designed to produce nothing more than the body itself (Kagan & Morse, 1988; Willis, 1990):

> Everyday I go to aerobics and it’s painful, but then the other 12 hours a day I feel really confident in my jeans because they are looser ... you look better, you feel better ... you look skinnier, you feel more confident about your body, like you work and you deserve to look good in this dress (Markula, 1993b, p. 95).

A distinction is made between exercise as an end in itself, and exercise as a means to an end (Lenskyj, 1993) since the promotion of physical activity for the sake of enjoyment, health and lifestyle is often overshadowed by an emphasis on looking good (Duncan, 1994; Kenen, 1987). A case in point is the ubiquitous advertising themes put forth by the Canadian fitness industry. For example, Ron Zalko, a Vancouver co-ed fitness club, promotes itself as “the beautiful body maker.” Another fitness centre’s slogan also encourages appearance-oriented fitness: “Look Good, Feel Great.” In light of the above testimonial, one wonders whether ‘feeling great’ refers to health, or confidence in a loose pair of jeans.

Exercising to reduce body size is linked to a general misconception that an ultra thin body is synonymous with a fit body. Although this is not the case, the fitness industry and media tend to imply that being thin is a necessary criterion for being fit (White, 1993). White et al. (1995) described a “body-image-equals-health” stereotype which assumes that “slim and muscular people are ... healthier than other less culturally valued body types” (p. 173). MacNeill (1990) believed that, although proper body composition is considered an important aspect of overall wellness, it is overemphasized in the media. Duncan (1994) noticed that in Shape, a women’s fitness magazine, “the theme of health is de-emphasized
while the theme of beauty is foregrounded" (p. 55). *Shape* 's inclusion of "Success Stories," a monthly feature about readers who have embraced fitness as a part of their lives, consistently highlights women’s weight loss and diminished body measurements (Duncan, 1994).

A variety of research studies confirm the belief among the general population of female exercisers that fit and thin go hand in hand. For example, in their study of 112 women and 88 men, all of whom identified themselves as regular exercisers, Davis and Cowles (1991) discovered women placed significant importance on exercise as a means to lose weight. The researchers concluded their report by suggesting that the concepts of beautiful and healthy are "inextricably interwoven in our culture, and their separate roles in the determination of body image and weight ideals are, perhaps, impossible to establish" (p. 43). Several other researchers, in conducting qualitative research, have also discovered this phenomenon. Shaw (1989) organized focus groups comprised of young women to investigate their attitudes on fitness. Her findings included the following responses:

- "We don't think being physically fit is as important as looking fit"; and,
- "Skinny = Fit so that girls can be attractive to men. Society says that women should have perfect bodies, no fat. Fitness means getting slim" (p. 36).

In a more recent study, Frederick and Shaw (1995) reported that the primary reasons for women in their research to participate in aerobics were "weight loss, body toning, or other aesthetic body improvement" (p. 67). Redican and Hadley (1988) and Warrick and Tinning (1989a, 1989b) conducted participant observation studies in a British health club and Australian recreation centre, respectively. Redican and Hadley reported widespread agreement among their subjects that exercise was a way to improve appearance rather than health and wellness. For most women in their study, the primary motive for attending the health club was to "keep up with the image" put forth by the media (p. 55). In fact, some of their responses were shockingly appearance-oriented and seem superficial:
• "Through exercise I don't want to gain muscle but just lose inches."
• "The benefits I've found in exercise are that I'm fitter, slimmer, and have a smaller appetite. I hate fat unfit people."
• "You are more successful in everything if you are thin."
• "You are more popular if you are thin and beautiful" (p. 55).

Warrick and Tinning (1989b) also found “[s]ome women use exercise as an avenue towards their shape and weight goals” (p. 23).

The boundaries between fitness, health and beauty are blurred (White et al., 1995). It could be argued that as long as the exerciser is improving her health in the process of attempting to shape her body, there is no harm in being motivated by weight loss alone. On the contrary, Spitzack (1990) argued that “health as the standard for attractiveness heightens a concern with outward appearance and mandates increased discipline” (p. 36).

In fact, researchers have shown that, despite engaging in regular physical activity, many women report feeling dissatisfied with the appearance of their bodies. For instance, Davis and Cowles (1991) discovered young active women were more dissatisfied than young active men with their bodies. In a study comparing athletes and nonathletes, Hallinan et al. (1991) asked subjects to identify their current and ideal images from a nine-figure body-silhouette scale. Regardless of athletic participation, female respondents showed significant differences between perceptions of their current and desired shape. A different group of female subjects, engaged in an intensive, progressive running program for six to eight weeks, rated public body consciousness scores - the degree to which one perceives an improvement of bodily appearance - the same from pre- to post- testing (Skrinar et al., 1986). Warrick and Tinning (1989b) proposed that “the socio-cultural stereotype of female physique and desire for slenderness can have a deep effect even on active women” in counteracting the benefits of exercise on enhanced self-esteem and positive body image (p. 22).

Whether or not women feel satisfied with their physique as a result of exercise, one must question why their mood states and self-perceptions are contingent on appearance of
the body. In her essay on the socio-cultural determinants of body image, Fallon (1990) explained “women are more likely than men to equate self-worth with what they think they look like and what they believe other people think they look like” (p. 81). Research confirms appearance and self-esteem are interrelated in girls and women. Zion (1965) was one of the first researchers to deal with the concept of one’s body in relation to the concept of one’s self. In an experiment with 200 college women, she found a significant linear relationship between: self-description and body description; ideal self and ideal body; and self-description-ideal discrepancy and body-description-ideal discrepancy. She concluded that “the security that one has in one’s body is related to the security with which one faces one’s self and the world” (p. 494). Based on a number of studies of adolescents, body image and self-esteem, Freedman (1984) concluded that, for females, “good looks are stereotypically associated with personal worth” (p. 34). Further, girls who reported low personal adjustment also rated themselves low in attractiveness. Davis and Cowles (1991) questioned subjects about Body Focus: the importance they place on the way they feel about their bodies in connection with the way they feel about themselves in general. A single question with a 6-point Likert scale measured subjects’ responses (1=very important to 6=not at all important). The mean score for women under 25 years old was 1.52 with a maximum range of 3.00; no subject in this group (n=75) rated perceptions of the body as unrelated to self-image. For women over 25 years of age (n=37), mean Body Focus scores were similarly low at 1.73.

One area where these pressures are especially salient is in the context of the aerobics class. Frederick and Shaw (1995) postulated that women’s body image concerns are highlighted in aerobics because “skimpy clothing is worn” and “the purpose of participation is to lose weight or improve appearance” (p. 58). In order to understand more about body image experiences and exercise, this discussion will now turn to an examination of aerobics.
Aerobics

Warrick and Tinning (1989b) conceptualized aerobics as representing “part of a continuum between two poles of liberation and conformity” (p. 23). Many women enjoy the experience of being active, yet they often feel fragmented in an attempt to achieve an ideal body (Markula, 1993a, 1993b, 1995). In this way, participation in aerobics is multifaceted, holding a different personal meaning for each woman (Frederick & Shaw, 1995; Markula, 1993a, 1993b, 1995; Redican & Hadley, 1988). MacNeill (1990) suggested that aerobics can be identified by three distinct categories, or what she calls ‘F motifs’: 1) Fitness, 2) Fear of Fatness, and 3) Fantasy and Fashion. Empirical findings in the literature also pinpoint the aerobics studio as a place to engage in gender-appropriate activity (Markula, 1993b), and as a place to socialize (Redican & Hadley, 1988; Warrick and Tinning, 1989). These relationships warrant addition to MacNeill’s list of F motifs: Femininity and Friendships. Although each theme is organized below in a categorical fashion, none are mutually exclusive; their application to women’s participation in aerobics classes are interrelated and multi-dimensional.

**Fitness.** MacNeill (1990) claimed that aerobics, as a form of physical fitness, is co-opted by its association with dance forms rather than athletics. To the contrary, Markula (1993a) argued that the boundaries between sport and aerobics are blurred because the “movements borrowed from sports are used to increase the fitness benefits of aerobics and inspire the participants to ... reach new spheres of physical condition” (p. 96). Based on her observations of female exercisers, Kenen (1987) identified women who attended aerobics classes simply for the pleasure of gaining and maintaining a certain degree of physical fitness. In other studies, researchers also determined aerobics to be an opportunity for women to enjoy fitness, increased energy and good health (Markula, 1993b; Redican & Hadley, 1988; Warrick & Tinning, 1989a, 1989b). Markula (1995) found some women build strong muscles in aerobics for reasons of functionality and “to
excel in the sports they love" (p. 438). Other women employed exercise as way to integrate mental and physical wellness (Markula, 1993b). Markula referred to the connection between the mind and body as the ‘felt body’: “The improved knowledge of oneself through the ‘felt body’ can promote the discovery of one’s full physical capacity and as such embody empowering qualities” (1993b, p. 97). Jeanette, a participant in a study by Haravon (1995), wrote in a journal about how aerobics was improving her fitness level: “Overall, I feel pretty strong today. I can tell a difference in my legs as far as muscle tone goes - that’s pretty exciting” (p. 38).

Several researchers have suggested a focus on the enjoyment of fitness rather than the body beautiful is a function of where the aerobics class is located. For example, Kenen (1987) claimed that nonprofit recreation centres “usually promote personal growth as well as physical prowess” while the franchise clubs focus more on getting fit in order to look seductive (p. 77). Willis (1990) agreed that, unlike community centres such as the YMCA/YWCA, “the atmosphere of the spa promotes an aura of body rivalry” (p. 7). To the contrary, Markula (1993a) conducted ethnographic fieldwork in four fitness facilities in the United States and found little difference between locations. Although she observed fitness instructors in private clubs making some subtle comments about working out to look good, the majority of the time, “they gave plenty of corrections” and offered precautions associated with the exercises being performed (p. 122). Markula (1993a) concluded that the fitness instructors “did not link … exercise with appearance in such an obvious manner as Kenen … pointed out” (p. 122). Whether participants attend fitness classes at a recreation facility, or a high-profile club, a focus on the body usually involves some discourse about weight loss measures.

Fear of fat. White (1993) described aerobics classes as “no-go areas for fatty tissue” (p. A14), while MacNeill (1990) identified aerobics as “a form of body cosmetic and weight-loss tool” (p. 7). These claims can be evidenced by certain traditional ‘toning’ exercises performed in some aerobics classes. Often toning exercises - such as straight leg
lifts - serve little strengthening function but are performed in aerobics and promoted as remedies for what the media and some fitness leaders call "problem areas" (MacNeill, 1990; Markula, 1995). However, these exercises perpetuate common myths about fitness, weight loss and the female body. For instance, fatty tissue cannot be spot reduced from a chosen area simply by performing repetitive toning exercises to exhaustion (Krepton, 1991). Continuation of these activities also relays the message that the natural contours of the female body are in fact "problem areas." In the end, the image of the active woman is fragmented into body parts rather than viewed as a whole (MacNeill, 1990; Markula, 1995). In addition, Markula (1995) argued "toning in aerobics class dissociates body parts from their functional roles" (p. 433). Kagan and Morse (1988) considered this type of body fragmentation to be a clear example of "the denial of functional training possibilities in favor of cosmetic ones" (p. 173). In many ways, the attitudes and exercises associated with the aerobics class setting fuel women’s fear of fat. Valdés (1995), herself a former fitness leader, wrote: "Like many other women who bought the fitness lie, I had been duped into believing that there was strength in, well, fat loss" (p. 15). Like weight loss, part of the cosmetic appeal of aerobics culture comes from its association with fashion.

**Fashion.** MacNeill (1990) and White (1993) both observed that, in the media, fitness for women is associated with diet food and drink, cosmetics and fashion. Spitzack (1990) cited a research participant who observed "[c]lothes really seem to be a necessary part of this health business; the jogging outfits, the short skirts, the skimpy tops - they all say you’re in shape, that you’re healthy" (p. 41). Indeed, fashion has been part of the aerobics scene since its inception (MacNeill, 1990; White 1993). In the 1970s, aerobicizers donned "high cut danskins," and by the late 1980s, exercisers had "adopted slick neon G-strings, stretchy bra tops and androgynous black lycra biking shorts" (MacNeill, 1990, p. 7). In the late 1990s, biker shorts and bra tops remain popular. Lenskyj (1986) claimed that as the aerobics industry expanded, tight-fitting fashion attire
was central to both “the coopting of dance exercise” and increased body image dissatisfaction among women (p. 130):

_The leotard’s popularity among dance exercisers was probably due to its association with legitimate dance forms rather than the need for free, visible movement; less revealing clothing - shorts or track pants - would have satisfied these requirements without contributing to the self-consciousness of women who hadn’t worn gym clothes since high school_ (p. 130).

Social psychologists Crawford and Eklund (1994) investigated the relationship between exercise attire and _Social Physique Anxiety_: the degree of concern or anxiety associated with the effects of physique related self-presentation. They showed female subjects a video of a class exercising either in “tights and thong leotards that emphasized the physique/figure,” or “contemporary style T-shirt and shorts workout gear ... to de-emphasize the salience of the physique/figure” (p. 435). The researchers found increased _Social Physique Anxiety_ was associated with increased preference for the T-shirt and shorts presentation. In other words, the more a subject reported feeling uncomfortable displaying her body in public, the more she expressed a liking for imagining herself exercising with people dressed in loose clothing. This indicated that “self-presentational concerns regarding the physique influence perceptions of exercise settings” (p. 79); in this case, the type of exercise attire worn by other women. Warrick and Tinning (1989b) described a woman whose “mood swings, self-satisfaction or depression ... affect how she dresses for aerobics” (p. 20). For example, when she feels good about herself she likes to wear a leotard and tights to exercise class. However, when she is depressed and “feels fat,” she wears a tracksuit or a T-shirt over her leotard. Frederick and Shaw (1995) conducted a study on body image and aerobics and discovered that women who felt uncomfortable in tight exercise wear had increased intimidation over participating in aerobics classes where other women would be clad in these revealing styles. One woman disclosed that although she always wore spandex to aerobics, she concealed her outfit with a T-shirt because she was not entirely comfortable wearing these tight clothes in public.
Typically, a focus on fashion renders exercise a commodity people buy and wear rather than do (Willis, 1990). For example, Hargreaves (1994) described how, in teen magazines for girls, sportswear is modeled for fashion, not for practical use. Willis (1990) believed part of the ritual at the gym is to “check out who’s wearing the hottest leotard” (p. 7). Several authors have also drawn attention to the fact that aerobics leotards are no longer worn just for exercise, as women frequently don them outside the club (Willis, 1990; Lenskyj, 1986).

I have seen women in dazzling workout costumes on the line at McDonald’s, getting cash at the bank’s instant teller, ... and on the city streets from coast to coast. Most women who appear in public à la exercise choose not to cover up their luminescent body socks with blouse, skirt or dungarees. In doing so they unabashedly define themselves as workout women (Willis, 1990, p. 7).

According to Willis (1990), the workout woman uses fashion rather than exercise to make a public statement about herself as “someone who has seized control over the making and shaping of her body” (p. 7). Thus, the workout image becomes part of the fantasy (real or imagined) of belonging to the exercise culture.

**Fantasy (& Fonda).** MacNeill (1990) described how Hollywood actresses create fantasy body types and faux expertise by manufacturing their own fitness videos and how-to books. The best sellers are those made by celebrities such as Jane Fonda (MacNeill, 1990). Lenskyj (1986) noted that an “association between dance exercise and heterosexual glamour was firmly established in 1982 when Jane Fonda headed a long line of celebrities who produced glossy, expensive fitness manuals” (p. 131). Although much of the fitness advice Fonda has given over the years has been questioned by exercise physiologists (Ross, 1988), her videos collect approximately $45,000 a day in royalties (MacNeill, 1990). In her book dedicated to weight loss and exercise for women, Fonda wrote: “I have always made a point of stressing that the goal of ... becoming fit is not to form yourself to the contours of some ‘fashionable’ mold, ... but ... to affirm your own uniqueness” (Fonda, 1986, p. 11). Unfortunately, the photos of Fonda that accompany
the book's text contradict her assertion by underscoring the importance of image, fashion and attaining the ideal body (cf. Fonda, 1986). The actress also admitted to having used diuretics, bulimic practices and starvation diets in the past to achieve a body she perceived as ideal (Fonda, 1986; Kagan & Morse, 1988; Ross, 1988). Although she eschewed the use of these practices in her book, the fantasy photographs of her lounging seductively in clinging exercise wear promoted her ideal shape rather than the "uniqueness" of all women. Yet, Shape magazine has just honoured her with a lifetime achievement award for the promotion of physical activity (1996). Lenskyj (1986) succinctly recognized that if a male counterpart to Jane Fonda, say Robert Redford, produced an exercise book, it would hold little credibility. Public recognition and acclaim of actresses as fitness gurus delegitimizes the knowledge of fitness professionals (MacNeill, 1990), and devalues women in physical fitness (Lenskyj, 1986).

In the early 1980s, when television aerobics was typically led by male instructors like Jack LaLanne, Fonda committed herself to 'womanizing' exercise (Willis, 1990). Today, she has contributed to the focus of aerobics as a feminine, gender-appropriate form of physical activity for women.

Femininity. According to Mansfield and McGinn (1993), aerobics is a "feminine process of altering the body image" (p. 58). MacNeill (1988) believed that "the feminine 'self' is learned, developed, and personified in aerobics" and that aerobics is a gender-appropriate leisure activity because it is nonaggressive, noncompetitive and graceful (p. 208). Similarly, Markula (1993b) wrote: "Aerobics serves to brand the ideal feminine shape on women by adding proper muscle tone and removing undesired fat layers from their bodies" (p. 95). Traditionally, aerobics has been an activity that encourages feminine behaviour, and at the same time ensures the exercising body will develop into a feminine form.

For this reason, some women feel more comfortable working out in an aerobics class than playing a team sport. A participant in Warrick and Tinning's (1989b) study
recalled how, during her adolescence, she felt self-conscious and awkward while playing sports or exercising. She was unsure about how a woman should act in these types of situations. For her, aerobics provided a good opportunity to enjoy being active in an environment that was primarily female-centred.

Friendships. Warrick and Tinning (1989b) found that, despite cultural pressure to appear physically attractive, certain women considered exercise to be principally a “sociable experience” rather than an avenue for “calorie output” (p. 23). For some participants, the company and social interaction they experienced in aerobics were as important as the exercise itself (Warrick & Tinning, 1989a, 1989b). Kenen described how the camaraderie in one aerobics environment provided a social milieu for participants.

_When the aerobics teacher gives a set of particularly strenuous exercises, the students groan a lot and a sense of ‘we-ness’ is fostered. People look at each other, make half-mocking grimaces, and smile at each other - furthering social cohesion_ (Kenen, 1987, p. 77).

Willis (1990) believed this type of atmosphere is most indicative of community recreation centres where women bond in a social network that “cut[s] across the generations and socio-economic strata” (p. 6). However, Redican and Hadley (1988) discovered socializing was an important part of women’s experiences at a city health and leisure club as well. They found members used the club not only for physical fitness, but as a place to “mill” with other successful women, and as a place to communicate and express their emotions with sympathetic others. Typical interview comments included:

- “I like the atmosphere and the people. In fact, I wouldn’t enjoy it if there was no social side.”
- “The people are very friendly - I come for a social event, have a drink. In the exercises you are not alone, all the other people are suffering around you.”
- “I know everyone at the club and get on well with them. We talk in the coffee bar after training for hours” (Redican and Hadley, 1988, p. 59).

Conversely, Frederick and Shaw (1995) reported “few participants stated that they participated in aerobics to have fun or for social reasons” (pp. 67-68). Accordingly, their
primary concerns were to lose weight, tone muscles and shape their bodies to meet culturally-aesthetic norms of female beauty and fitness.

In summary, MacNeill’s (1990) conceptualization of the F motifs offers an analytical overview of aerobics. However, a general shortcoming in much of the literature presented thus far is a lack of attention to the fitness instructor. The importance of his or her role in aerobics classes is currently undeveloped. Although some authors have included the fitness leader in their general observations of aerobics (Haravon, 1995; Kenen, 1987; Markula, 1995), no one has committed to detailing how aerobics participants interpret her or his presence and role in the aerobics class. Information which addresses the viewpoints and body image experiences of instructors is equally underdeveloped.

The Fitness Instructor

The fitness instructor’s appearance, actions and his or her attention to matters of body image and weight loss in aerobics may influence the body image experiences and attitudes of aerobics participants. For instance, some researchers believe there is a possibility for instructors to counteract mainstream assumptions and foster a sense of personal empowerment in female participants (Frederick & Shaw, 1995; Havaron, 1995; Kagan & Morse, 1988; Lenskyj, 1993; Shaw, 1989). Lenskyj (1993) imparted upon fitness leaders to focus on “health and fun, not competitiveness and weight loss” (p. 107). Haravon (1995) advised instructors to teach from an area of the aerobics studio where there are no mirrors and to introduce more complex patterns so the participants focus on learning the movements rather than on their reflections in the mirror. Kagan and Morse (1988) also reinforced this line of thought:
Many individual instructors can and do transcend the limitations [of appearance-oriented aerobics] ... by freeing the class to some extent from the mirror, emphasizing the felt body and pleasure in the music, and furthering creativity and initiative in movement (p. 174).

On one hand, fitness instructors can work on focusing attention away from body image issues by resisting the assumption that all aerobics participants attend aerobics classes for the purpose of weight loss (Haravon, 1995).

On the other hand, Valdés (1995), a fitness leader, believed that even instructors who are conscious about focusing attention away from body image in aerobics tend to perpetuate women’s concerns over their appearance:

*I knew better than to encourage women’s obsession with their appearance, including my own. I knew better than to freak out at my own cellulite, staying late after work to pump iron to make it go away. I knew better than to stand skinny in front of a room full of self-doubting women and actually say to them, ‘Okay, let’s tone up’* (p. 15).

Valdés could not justify aerobics as a form of exercise that empowered women. Eventually she quit her job as an instructor because she felt the aim of the fitness industry (to create a demand for such a service by perpetuating women’s body insecurity) was at odds with her feminist convictions.

Gates (1991) recognized that although instructors are “significant role models” in aerobics and society in general, they do not always live up to this responsibility (p. 29). She suggested that instructors who exercise primarily for appearance enhancement send a negative message to participants about the supposed purpose of aerobics. She also verified that it is not uncommon for fitness instructors to struggle with compulsive eating, ‘yo-yo’ dieting or dangerous weight control practices: “Aerobics instructors who have dozens of hidden spaces filled with laxatives and diuretics are not uncommon today” (p.
A study by Olson, Williford, Richards, Brown and Pugh (1996) indicated that 40% of instructors in their sample (n=30) reported a history with disordered eating.

According to Olson et al. (1996), instructors, in many cases, “view themselves as role models of the desirable physical attributes generally found in the aesthetic ideal of a trim and slender body” (p. 1052). Media representations also portray instructors as role models of a fit ideal (cf. Fonda, 1986; Markula, 1995). As a result, participants may be particularly likely to formulate expectations about the instructor’s appearance.

The instructor’s appearance: *Expectations and preferences.* Some researchers have briefly touched on participants’ (and their own) interpretations of the instructor’s appearance (Haravon, 1995; Kenen, 1987; Lenskyj, 1986; MacNeill, 1988; Markula, 1995). Generally, these interpretations offer insight into participants’ expectations about the instructor’s body and how cultural stereotypes fuel such expectations.

Lenskyj (1986) speculated that, until proper certification standards were enforced, fitness instructors were hired based on their physical attributes rather than their credentials. As a result, the fitness instructor served as both an example of “the fitness ideal” and a “feminine ideal” (Lenskyj, 1986, p. 129 & 130) and often looked as if she had “stepped straight out of a commercial” (Kenen, 1987, p. 75).

Perceptions of the instructor as a stereotypical fit ideal are largely influenced by media representations of fitness leaders. For example, MacNeill (1988) analyzed the television exercise program *The 20 Minute Workout.* She concluded that camera angles maximizing cleavage and crotch shots promoted a sexualized image of the fitness instructor. Subsequently, MacNeill speculated that these close-up angles limited participation by legitimate exercisers. One woman in Markula’s (1995) study on aerobics
and body image was particularly aware of the media instructor’s perfect image: “I expect that anyone demonstrating any exercise in any magazine is going to have to be close to that ideal body” (Markula, 1995, p. 445). Other, participants admitted that perfect-looking instructors provided them with a “positive incentive” to keep exercising (Markula, 1995, p. 445).

However, Markula (1995) also pointed out that many women in her study preferred a ‘normal’ looking instructor over someone with a Jane Fonda appearance:

*There is this picture in our minds like Jane Fonda, perfect body, [but] like [our teachers], they’ve got nice bodies, but are not beautiful, but as long as they can keep up with us, lead us, that’s fine* (p. 445).

Some participants in Markula’s study encouraged the presence of larger-sized leaders because they seemed “more human and easier to relate to” (p. 445). One woman claimed her only requirements for instructors are that “they can do the routines … and … they’ve got energy” (p. 445). A novice exerciser in another study was relieved that her instructor did not match her expectations of a stereotypical fitness leader: “I’m … thrilled that [the aerobics class] is being taught by a real person instead of some bubble-brained blonde in matching leotards who yells ‘C’mon girls!’” (Haravon, 1995, p. 38).

Clearly, not all instructors represent the media’s stereotypical image. Valdés (1995) was adamant about setting herself apart from mainstream expectations of instructors: “I made it a goal to battle the common misconception about aerobics instructors - that we are nothing but airheads in thongs” (p. 16). However, Markula believed that even women who disapprove of the stereotypical media images regard them, to some degree, as role models for their own desired bodily appearance. Other
researchers have also speculated that the instructor poses as a fit ideal and participants compare their bodies to the instructor’s (Kagan & Morse, 1988; Olson et al., 1996).

Mirroring the instructor’s image. Frederick, Havitz and Shaw (1994) offered an insightful exploration of Social Comparison Theory - the tendency to compare oneself with others - and its application to the social dynamics of the aerobics class setting. One proposition suggested by Frederick et al. (1994) has particular significance with regard to the role of the fitness instructor:

*Exercise classes provide opportunities for comparison with similar but slightly superior others (i.e., self-improvement) with respect to physical appearance and physical ability* (p. 164).

The authors suggested that these “upward comparisons facilitate self-improvement by allowing people to observe more accomplished others and learn from them ... or be motivated by their examples” (Frederick et al., 1994, p. 164). In aerobics, the instructor is a logic figure with which to compare. First, instructors tend to exhibit a low percentage of body fat and high cardiovascular conditioning (Olson et al., 1996). Second, she or he is the leader of the group and typically participants focus their attention on following the instructor. Third, the instructor often stands on a stage in front of the class which contributes to the impression that he or she is a “superior other” in terms of fitness level and appearance (Frederick et al., 1994, p. 164).

For Kagan and Morse (1988), the image of the instructor acts as a mirror against which participants are meant to model themselves: “Borrowing the image of the leader means that her body and her movement are models which shape the perception ... of the followers” (p. 172). These authors believed that the instructor, as a cultural prototype of femininity and fitness, greatly impacts the body image experiences of participants. As a
result, when participants mirror the instructor, they lose sight of their potential to extend beyond their focus on the outer body.

In addition, Kagan and Morse (1988) regarded the instructor’s voice as the “voice of a cultural ideal” (p. 171). They asserted that, fitness instructors, or the leaders featured in exercise videos, are engaged in a one-way, hierarchical relationship with the participants; the cues given by the instructor are intended as commands and the participants are meant to comply. Other researchers have also suggested that the instructor’s discourse about body image and weight loss influences the body image experiences of participants (Frederick & Shaw, 1995; Haravon, 1995; Kenen, 1987; Lenskyj, 1993; Shaw, 1989).

“Bathing suit season is coming.” The types of comments a fitness instructor makes during an aerobics class can reveal whether she or he emphasizes fitness for fun and health, or for weight loss and body perfection. If the instructor tends to focus on the “problem areas” typically associated with women’s bodies, he or she conveys a message that reinforces societal ideology about how the female body is expected to look. Markula (1995) questioned an instructor in her study about why she regarded women’s hips, thighs, buttocks and abdominals as “problematic” (p. 435). The instructor replied that women store most of their fat in the lower body so she devotes particular attention to these ‘problem areas’ in aerobics. In her study, Kenen (1987) questioned the techniques employed by certain instructors to motivate participants. She felt that comments such as “bathing suit season is coming” were demeaning and she disapproved of instructors who conveyed the message that exercise is penance for eating food high in calories (p. 75).
Some researchers acknowledged that, through their discourse in aerobics classes, instructors can encourage positive change in the body image attitudes of participants by focusing attention away from a stereotypical, image-oriented aerobics (Haravon, 1995; Kagan & Morse, 1988; Lenskyj, 1993; Shaw, 1989). When she was instructing aerobics, Haravon (1995) frequently reminded participants that “aerobics is not about appearance, but about sweating” (p. 35). Shaw (1989) advised fitness leaders to “avoid initiating talk about weight loss in their classes. Instead, they could encourage women to be accepting of their own bodies, and to think in terms of health and fitness rather than physical appearance” (p. 37). Frederick and Shaw (1995) recommended that fitness instructors “refrain from discussions about weight loss and other matters relating to body weight throughout their contact with participants” (p. 72). Gates (1991) suggested that instructors focus their comments on aspects of fitness that are more constructive than appearance and calories:

*We can refrain from justifying bingelike behavior by avoiding encouraging people to come to class to ‘work off calories.’ We can stop complaining in our classes about our own bodies and put more emphasis on the ‘feel-good’ aspects of a workout* (Gates, 1991, p. 29).

Often, participants seek out the instructor as a source of information about how to lose unwanted pounds or tone-up flabby arms. Gates (1991) appealed to instructors to educate participants about setting realistic goals in aerobics based on women’s different body types. The fitness leader’s advice about body image and weight loss can also have an impact on the body image experiences of participants.

**Educating in aerobics:** *Instructor qualifications.* In the mid 1980s, fitness associations in the United States began to develop standards for the certification of instructors (Markula, 1993a). As a result, holding fitness instructor status in both the
United States and Canada has become increasingly associated with standards of safety and fitness knowledge. However, sometimes participants do not trust the knowledge of their instructors. For example, participants in a study on exercise programs for overweight women expressed skepticism about the expertise and training of instructors they had come in contact with in the past (Bain, Wilson, & Chaikind, 1989). One woman claimed she was unsure about instructors’ qualifications because she was exposed to “so many conflicting opinions” (Bain et al., 1989, p. 139). Aerobics participants in another study expressed doubt about the knowledge of fitness instructors who appear in the media; the general sentiment was that “these ‘models’ are there because of their looks, not because they know something about exercise” (Markula, 1995, p. 444).

Ongoing certification procedures have caused a shift in the purpose and knowledge-base of the instructor, placing a greater emphasis on her or his role as educator in aerobics. Perhaps as instructor certification continues to develop and the fitness industry begins to demand more education from fitness leaders, the traditional focus on the instructor’s appearance and aerobics as a “form of body cosmetic” will diminish (MacNeill, 1990, p. 7).

Conclusion

Leaders of aerobics classes can be particularly influential in either reinforcing cultural standards of the ideal female body (Kenen, 1987; Valdés, 1995) or encouraging a heightened sense of bodily satisfaction among aerobics participants (Haravon, 1995). For example, certain female aerobics participants prefer an instructor who is average-looking, while other evidence suggests media images of the flawless ideal also appeal to some
exercising women (Markula, 1995). On one hand, one could argue that participants’ internalization of a “follow-the-leader” style in aerobics renders the instructor’s appearance and discourse about body image issues all the more salient (MacNeill, 1988, p. 205). On the other hand, some empirical evidence suggests aerobics participants express resistance to, and disapproval of the messages and actions of their fitness instructors (Bain et al., 1989; Haravon, 1995; Valdés, 1995). Valdés (1995) reported that when she tried to promote positive body image in her classes, the participants dismissed her intentions and met her with “blank, nearly hostile eyes” (p. 12).

The role of the instructor is multi-dimensional, as are the body image experiences of participants. Some existing research suggests that participants and instructors construct personal meanings for their own involvement in aerobics (Markula, 1993a, 1993b, 1995; Valdés, 1995). This research project was conducted to determine how both participants and instructors interpret the role of the instructor and how this role impacts the body image experiences of participants.
Chapter III
Methodology

According to Marshall and Rossman (1995), reporting qualitative research should include a discussion of the following topics: site and sample selection; data collection methods; data management; data analysis strategy; and trustworthiness features. In this chapter, I will outline each of these categories as they relate to the observations and interviews I conducted for this project. I will also address how considerations of reciprocity and ethics contributed to the present research.

Site and Sample Selection

Site. Body image research in the aerobics class setting is obviously site-specific. Marshall and Rossman (1995) defined one component of the ideal site as a location where “data quality and credibility of the study are reasonably assured” (p. 51). Based on a number of criteria (see below), I conducted my research at a private fitness club in the Lower Mainland. This facility was part of a well-known, well-established commercial fitness enterprise and was named Vancouver’s finest fitness organization in a recent newspaper poll (*The Georgia Strait*, September 11-18, 1997).

Several criteria informed my decision to select the Lower Mainland club as a research site. First, the facility offered an aerobics program with a variety of scheduled class levels, types and times (for example, low impact, high impact and STEP differentially designed for beginners to advanced participants at various times of the day). This schedule ensured that the program targeted exercisers with a variety of exercise/time


preferences and skills. It also added to selection diversity - “variation in phenomenon, settings, or people under study” - which, in turn, lent itself to heightened credibility and trustworthiness of findings (Marshall & Rossman, 1995, p. 51). Kenen (1987) observed women who attended morning classes generally did not work outside the home and were mothers of toddler-aged children. Conversely, afternoon and evening classes catered to employed single and newlywed women without children. I discovered that the interview subjects who attended aerobics in the morning were retired, worked in the home or held a professional job outside the home. Most often these women had children ranging in age from toddlers to adults. Similar to Kenen’s observations, the women in this study who frequented aerobics in the evening were usually single with no children.

Second, the aerobics studio included typical equipment found in the aerobics environment (e.g., a sound system, mirrors along the walls) which ensured that the research site represented a typical aerobics settings.

Third, the facility consisted of the type of members and employees typically found at the average fitness centre in North America. As mentioned in previous chapters, the majority of aerobics participants are women (Crawford & Eklund, 1994; Eklund & Crawford, 1994; Haravon, 1995; Kagan & Morse, 1988; White, 1993). In addition, according to Kagan and Morse (1988), 94% of fitness instructors are women. The chosen research site was representative of the above proportions.

Marshall and Rossman (1995) professed successful entry into the site and the ability to build relationships with research participants as two additional considerations necessary in selecting the ideal research location. The facility where I conducted this
study is part of a fitness franchise. I am a fitness instructor employed within the organization (but not the research site), and this position facilitated my ability to achieve the goals described by Marshall and Rossman. Wolcott (1985) purported that personal experience can be advantageous in the research process since “insiders best understand the total complexity of a system” (p. 199). The fact that I am employed by this fitness organization helped me gain entry into the research site because I was an ‘insider.’ I contacted the Aerobics Director of the club and negotiated the possibility of conducting research at the site. I presented her with a written document outlining my intended methodological approach, research expectations, ethical considerations and an approximate timeline of the research schedule. She was receptive and welcomed me to use the facility as a research setting. She also issued a written announcement about my study in a newsletter which circulated to instructors at the facility.

My position as a fitness instructor also helped me to build a rapport with other instructors at the research site. During the course of this research, I approached several instructors about volunteering in my study and, like the Aerobics Director, they were very open and willing. Throughout the data collection process, our common experiences as fitness leaders often became the topic of casual conversation. I also spent time with one instructor sharing exercise ideas and aerobics patterns. My role as an insider, or instructor, in addition to my role as a researcher, emphasizes the complexity of the relationship between researcher and subject. According to Reinharz (1992),

*researchers inevitably have different types of relationships with different individuals or groups in any particular field setting, and as long as the researcher is self-aware, whatever happens is useful data* (p. 68).
Refer to the Confirmability section of this chapter for further discussion on the multiplicity of researcher positionings in this study.

Sample selection. After I had spent about one week becoming familiar with the club and its aerobics program, I selected three ‘target’ classes on which to focus the majority of my observations and from which to recruit research volunteers. Each class had a different instructor, was scheduled at a different time of the day and week, and catered to different fitness levels and exercise preferences. For example, the first was a morning, beginner level STEP class; the second, an advanced level high impact class held weekday evenings during the club’s “peak hours” and the third, a mid-day, intermediate-to-advanced STEP class on the weekend. Refer to Table 2 (in the Results chapter) for a detailed description of the three target classes.

From these three classes, I interviewed two specific groups of exercisers: regular participants in aerobics classes (sample size: 10), and fitness instructors (sample size: 4). According to Goetz and LeCompte (1984), “a clear definition of the special criteria for selection [of subjects] is critical” (p. 67).

Aerobics Participants. In a fieldwork study conducted by Markula (1995), the “typical aerobicizer” was consistent with nationwide (U.S.) surveys outlining demographic norms of the aerobics population: “white, well-educated, 18- to 45-year-old female[s]” (p. 430). Martin (1997) observed that, apart from white participants, women of Asian descent also made up a substantial portion of aerobics classes in California. My observations of aerobics in the Lower Mainland coincide with Martin’s assertion.
Generally, however, qualitative research on female aerobics participants and body image experience does not offer sample diversity outside age-range (Kenen, 1987; Markula, 1995; Warrick & Tinning, 1989a, 1989b). During the present investigation, I hoped to collect data from a greater variety of participants. In actuality however, I interviewed a similar demographic profile to Markula’s (1995) description of the “typical aerobicizer” (p. 430). Out of 14 subjects in the two samples, 13 were white and one woman was Asian-Canadian. Their ages ranged from 23- to 68-years old with the majority in their twenties and early thirties. With this in mind, I carried out my research with the understanding that theoretical and experiential reflections of body image were rooted in a Western (predominantly North American), white, middle-class cultural discourse. I recognize that other cultures, both within North America and other parts of the world, do not necessarily share Western sentiments and perceptions about what constitutes the ‘body beautiful’ (Al-Shaykh, 1994; Buchanan, 1993; hooks, 1992).

My main goal for selecting subjects was to differentiate between regular aerobics participants and infrequent or novice participants. That is, principles of sample selection were based on frequency of attendance and the length of time participants had been exercising in aerobics. Specifically, female participants attended aerobics classes at least two times a week on average and had done so for three or more previous months. This criterion ensured that participants were familiar with the aerobics setting, various instructors and aerobics choreography. In addition, participants were not new to exercise and/or the aerobics setting; novice participants may feel discomfort or embarrassment over lack of co-ordination or physical conditioning which could negatively influence their
interpretations of the instructor and/or aerobics in general. Although one could argue that a novice group may offer insightful observations about the unfamiliar setting, it was important to establish a population that could be identified as regular aerobics participants.

Subjects from this population were solicited by verbal announcements. Once I had recruited the three instructors whom I would interview (see below for details), I made announcements calling for volunteers in each instructor’s class (this process lasted about three weeks and was concurrent with part of the interview phase). The instructors also helped in this procedure by emphasizing the importance of my study and encouraging participants to take part. At the end of the class, I waited in the aerobics studio for interested volunteers. Although I had originally planned to interview nine aerobics participants, 10 women volunteered. I was hesitant to turn down someone who was interested enough to volunteer her time. Considering that “design flexibility,” represents “a hallmark of qualitative methods” (Marshall & Rossman, 1995, p. 38), I altered my original sample size.

**Fitness Instructors.** Other criteria called for female instructors of any age with at least one year’s experience teaching aerobics classes (leading, on average, at least one class a week), and registered with a recognized fitness association such as the *British Columbia Recreation and Parks Association* (BCRPA). At least one year’s experience ensured instructors were familiar with general instructing protocol and they had led a variety of exercisers through many aerobics sessions. Registration with a recognized fitness association (BCRPA) provided an operational definition for the term *fitness*
instructor: certification and registration with a provincial body is one way that fitness associations, clubs and centres recognize an individual as a qualified instructor.

Selection of instructors as interview subjects was carried out as follows: towards the completion of the observational phase, I individually approached the instructors who led the three target classes. I informed each woman of my research and asked if I could interview her for my study (I also explained in full detail what the study entailed and how long the interview would take). All three instructors were receptive and agreed to be interviewed. In the event that one or more instructors declined to volunteer, I would have chosen an alternate target class. As another example of “design flexibility,” I decided to interview the Aerobics Director since her position as manager of the aerobics program would help facilitate an understanding of the role of the fitness instructor.

Data Collection Methods

Marshall and Rossman (1995) listed participation, observation and interviewing as “fundamental methods relied on by qualitative researchers for gathering information” (p. 78). Although Bruce and Greendorfer (1994) pointed out “each interpretative community ... has its own methods and criteria for good science or good research” (p. 263), in many circumstances, “the most desirable design involves an amalgamation of two or more ... models in the process of triangulation” (Goetz & LeCompte, 1984, p. 48). Many researchers who employ qualitative techniques express a preference for multi-modal methods of data collection, or triangulation (cf. Adler & Adler, 1994; Cook & Fonow, 1990; Marshall & Rossman, 1995). This research project included a variety of data
collection strategies in order to present a rich description of body image experiences in aerobics. The entire data collection process lasted approximately three months.

**Participant in the setting: casual participant observation.** I have been participating, both as a class member and an instructor, in aerobics for seven years. As a result, I have engaged in casual observation and developed tacit theories that have impacted the study's design, the types of inquiries I developed and my interpretations of data. Cole (1991) asserted that “the possibilities for reflexiveness and experiments in theory revision are opened” when the researcher abandons the process of distancing him or herself from the data (p. 41). Based on my role as a researcher and fitness instructor, as well as my familiarity with the nuances of the research site, I kept a regular journal of my research experiences and assumptions (Richardson, 1994). I referred to these journal entries during the data analysis process in order to reveal relevant self-reflections and challenge my existing assumptions (Richardson, 1994, p. 526). Some of my assumptions included the following: aerobics emphasizes body image concerns; despite exercise, most women are dissatisfied with their bodies; instructors offend certain participants with comments about body image and weight loss; participants would be impressed to see an instructor who was heavier than the stereotypical image. As was revealed in the interviews, some of these assumptions were challenged by the interview subjects' responses (see the Results chapter).

**Observation.** I engaged in a series of unobtrusive observational sessions of aerobics classes as the first stage of my research project. Observation holds merit as a
technique which captures the quality of the 'real world.' According to Adler and Adler (1994),

*qualitative observation is fundamentally naturalistic in essence; it occurs in the natural context of occurrence, among the actors who would naturally be participating in the interaction, and follows the natural stream of everyday life* (p. 378).

The identification of "trends, patterns, and styles of behavior" (Adler & Adler, 1994, p. 378) which became apparent through observation provided a forum for discussion during the interview phase of my research (Markula, 1995; Warrick & Tinning, 1989a; Wolcott, 1985). In addition, I selected the three target classes based on my observations. By watching the aerobics classes, I was able to determine which classes were typically well-attended by a variety of participants and which instructors were the most popular. The observations were also effective as a technique to interpret the interview data. For instance, when participants mentioned the appearance of certain instructors at the club, I had an understanding of the body shape and size of these instructors.

The research site was organized in a manner which lent to unobtrusive observation. This particular fitness facility had a series of stairclimbing exercise machines positioned in such a way as to allow for a clear vantage point (visual and audible) of the aerobics studio located one level below. Thus, observations of aerobics classes were accomplished without infringing on the natural setting of these sessions. I observed the aerobics classes from a stairclimbing machine, wrote occasional scratch notes to keep a record of events, and after each session created a detailed account of my observations in the form of field notes (Sanjek, 1990; Warrick & Tinning, 1989a). I made six one-hour
observations per week for two weeks (12 sessions in total). I kept in mind that “[o]bservational data gathering continues until researchers achieve theoretical saturation ... that is, when the generic features of their new findings consistently replicate earlier ones” (Adler & Adler, 1994, p. 381). Based on the aforementioned guideline, I was confident that the length and frequency of observations were appropriate. Refer to Appendix A for an outline of what I was observing.

Observed subjects were not identified in any way. Nonetheless, this observational approach brings up some important elements regarding informed consent and ethical considerations; a discussion of such implications will be addressed in the Ethics section of this chapter.

**Interviews.** “*The interview is a critical tool for developing new frameworks and theories based on women's lives and women's formulations*” (Anderson & Jack, 1991, p. 8).

The second phase of this study involved conducting individual interviews with volunteers from both aerobics participant and fitness instructor populations. Interviews were *semi-structured:* a format whereby the interviewer “maintains discretion to follow leads, but the interview guide is a set of clear instructions” (Bernard, 1994, p. 210). I developed the interview questions based on the existing literature review, my own casual observations of the aerobics setting and my tacit theories about the relationship between the instructor and the body image experiences of participants (refer to Appendix B for a list of the interview questions for participants, instructors and the Aerobics Director).
The course of each interview did not remain exactly the same. In a study on consumer behaviour and the body, Thompson and Hirschman (1995) frequently modified their planned interview format in order to avoid redundancy since interviewees' discussions often touched on several integrated issues at once. In a study on aerobics participants and their body image experiences, Markula (1995) introduced a series of topics during each interview but “the conversation could also follow a particular concern of the interviewee” (p. 430). Redican and Hadley (1988) adopted a focused interview technique which permitted “ongoing revision of emerging perceptions by both researcher and interviewee during the interview” (p. 54). Similarly, I approached each interview with the understanding that subjects were free to guide the discussion in a direction that was relevant for them. Sometimes their responses closely followed the interview guide and other times they used certain questions as starting points from which to bring up other related issues.

Due to the similarity between Markula's (1995) topic of research and my own, I followed her lead in regards to the pragmatics of interview methodology. She interviewed 35 exercisers over a two year period. Considering the duration of data analysis in my study was only a fraction of this time, I set my goal at 12 interviews and later modified this plan to include 14 women (this included 10 aerobics participants, three instructors and the Aerobics Director). The length of each interview varied between 35 minutes to an hour and a half. I interviewed participants once in person and spoke to them briefly on the telephone several weeks after each interview (see Validation Calls below).
Interviews were held in several locations depending on the availability of each subject, most took place at the fitness facility. I scheduled as many interviews as possible during the day because the club was quiet at this time and the management had allowed me to conduct interviews in the daycare centre when it was not in use (from 1:30pm to 4pm). In some situations, I interviewed the women at tables on the club’s indoor pool deck but this was not an ideal location because the noise from a nearby weight room and the Public Announcement system sometimes interrupted conversation. For subjects who could only meet with me during the noisy, peak hours at the gym, I reserved a nearby conference room. In two cases, I interviewed women in their homes, and for two other interviews, I met with subjects in a café.

Validation calls. This was the final phase of data collection. Before each interview, I asked the women if they would mind receiving a follow-up telephone call in the next several weeks. In all cases, the women agreed. Once I had transcribed an interview, I reflected on my perceptions of the subjects’ viewpoints and interpretations. The validation calls were designed as a clarification tool; by verifying my perceptions of subjects’ responses, I was able to clarify meanings and avoid misinterpretation of the data. In addition, these validity checks provided subjects with the occasion to address my representations of their experiences at aerobics. The telephone calls (which lasted, on average, fifteen minutes) also gave me the opportunity to pose additional questions of clarification pertaining to the interview content. All the telephone conversations were recorded (with permission) and transcribed. Conducting the validation calls proved to be
very useful because often the women offered additional comments, insights and reflections to their original interpretations.

Data Management

All interviews and validation calls were audiotaped with the permission of research participants (Bernard, 1994) and transcribed (by me) without editing. I also transcribed all observational field notes.

Any means of identifying research participants, or the research site, were kept separate from the data in order to protect anonymity and confidentiality. All the names of participants and instructors have been changed (including those instructors who were not in the study but were mentioned by participants in the interviews).

Data Analysis Strategies

Marshall and Rossman (1995) noted several strategies for data analysis: organizing the data; generating categories, themes and patterns; testing emergent hypotheses; and searching for alternative explanations.

I engaged in these types of analytic procedures using the NUD.IST (Non-numerical unstructured data indexing, searching and theorizing) software package, described by Miles and Weitzman (1994) to be one of the most comprehensive data organization systems. NUD.IST was available to me through the School of Human Kinetics at the University of British Columbia.

According to Marshall and Rossman (1995), data analysis is the “process of bringing order, structure, and meaning to the mass of collected data” (p. 111). Employing
the NUD.IST software allowed for organization and flexibility in analyzing the research material. Based on my readings of the data, I drafted a preliminary index tree of emergent main themes and sub-themes. For the most part, emergent main themes were a function of the major interview topics. Sub-themes were based on subjects’ common responses and attention to certain interview questions. Once I began working with NUD.IST, new emergent themes were developed and other, less apparent ones, were abandoned. With each section of an interview, the data were assorted into one or more ‘working’ themes. Once all the interviews, field notes, journal entries and validation call transcripts had been organized in the index trees (one for aerobics participants and one for fitness instructors), I began to interpret theme development, test emergent hypotheses and search for alternative explanations (Marshall & Rossman, 1995). For instance, the data analysis program permitted me to focus specifically on the portions of interviews, field notes and validation calls that emerged in a particular theme. This system allowed for rigorous hypothesis testing because all data in a given theme were organized together, rendering “negative instances of the patterns” more identifiable (Marshall & Rossman, 1995, p. 116). Refer to Appendices C and D for the final versions of the participant and instructor Data Analysis Index Trees.

Reinharz (1992) reminded feminist researchers to distinguish between “drawing on feminist theory” during data analysis and “imposing feminist theory” (p. 72). Her guidance proved useful in the process of elucidating my assumptions and searching for alternative explanations to interpretations of data. For instance, as mentioned, before the collection of data, I had assumed that most participants would be offended by the
instructor's remarks about weight loss and body perfection in aerobics. As will be revealed in the Results chapter, some women were not bothered by these comments at all. Keeping a research journal allowed me to self-reflect on my role as a feminist researcher and, as a result, keep my assumptions in perspective.

Trustworthiness Features

In the context of qualitative inquiry, traditional criteria for judging research soundness - reliability, replicability, validity and generalizability - are "impossible aims" (Bruce & Greendorfer, 1994, p. 262). Marshall and Rossman (1995) outlined four alternative features - credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability - which help ensure the "truth value" of qualitative inquiry (p. 143).

**Credibility.** The goal of credibility is to demonstrate that meanings portrayed by the research subjects are accurately identified and described. Credibility was fostered by confirming, during the interview process and the validation calls, that I understood subjects' intentions, attitudes and viewpoints. The inclusion of subjects' voices in analyzing data and reporting results also adds to the credibility of this study. Further, I provided a "detailed description of the methods used to organize and interpret qualitative data" since "[t]his process increases the credibility of a study and indicates that the researchers took necessary precautionary measures for providing results that best describe the phenomena under study" (Côté, Salmela, Baria & Russell, 1993, p. 136).

**Transferability.** Transferability is the application of one set of findings to a different, but similar context. The process of maintaining selection criteria that generally
reflects the demographics of the average aerobics participant and fitness instructor contributed to dimensions of transferability.

**Dependability.** Dependability is based on the responsibility of the researcher to account for any changes in conditions of the research phenomenon. The amount of time I spent collecting data did not extend over a long period of time (three months). Therefore, the research environment did not alter during the course of this research project.

**Confirmability.** Confirmability responds to a concern that the “natural subjectivity of the researcher will shape the research” (Marshall & Rossman, 1995, p. 145). I recognize that my positions as a woman, instructor, aerobics class member, researcher and insider at the research site all had a bearing on the final outcome of this thesis. As mentioned, I kept a research journal in order to identify some of the explicit assumptions and experiences that may have shaped my readings of the data. Although my “natural subjectivity” can never be entirely separate from the research material, I reinforced confirmability by “sharing textual authority with ... subjects” (Cole, 1991, p. 40):

*Dispersed authority challenges the illusions of single textual authority by representing other authoritative voices. The ethnographic question in feminism requires not only a feminist theory and insight but narrative strategies which are open-ended dialogic works that can hold multiple negotiated realities and knowledges* (Cole, 1991, p. 45).

Incorporating subjects’ direct quotations in the Results chapter, guided the data interpretation process and demonstrated Cole’s conceptualization of “dispersed authority.”
Reciprocity

Marshall and Rossman (1995) encouraged the researcher to consider issues of reciprocity as part of the data collection process. In this study, I ensured that I ‘gave back’ to the subjects. First, before the interview began, I offered to buy each woman a snack and/or drink from the fitness facility’s juice bar. Second, once I had completed all the interviews and validation calls, I mailed each woman (with permission) a brief summary of my research findings and a thank you letter. For the instructors, I also included some of the participants’ positive comments about their classes and teaching styles. Finally, I arranged with the Aerobics Director to discuss my findings at an upcoming instructors’ staff meeting and published an article about my research in a newsletter for BCRPA registered instructors.

Ethics

All methodological procedures were approved by the University of British Columbia’s Ethical Review Committee before research proceeded (see Appendix E). The nature of informed consent was explained to research subjects prior to each interview. Informed consent sheets were signed by each interview subject and, on behalf of the facility, by the Aerobics Director (see Appendices F and G). As part of the informed consent process, I identified myself as an instructor at other fitness facilities associated with the research site. I emphasized that although I was employed by this fitness chain, the research was not associated with its staff, management or owners. I assured subjects
that any comments pertaining to the research site, the organization or its employees would remain strictly confidential.

As stated in the UBC Ethical Review application for research on human subjects, deception undermines informed consent. In the case of observational data collection, informed consent was not required. However, I was deceiving participants about my true role in the fitness facility. Although I did not identify myself as a researcher conducting observations, deception in this case did not harm or exploit those being observed because the observations took place in an openly public setting. Warrick and Tinning (1989a) conducted observations of aerobics classes in a setting where “[s]pectators outside the [aerobics] room were a common and accepted occurrence for the participants” (p. 9). Likewise, aerobics participants in this study would have been aware that they were in full view of exercisers on the stairclimbing machines.
Chapter IV
Results

Semi-formal interview questions informed the four main themes associated with participant and instructor responses: Exercise Goals, Aerobics Environment, Body Image and the Fitness Instructor. The Exercise Goals theme lends insight into the reasons why participants and instructors exercise and what inspires participants, in particular, to attend aerobics classes. The Aerobics Environment theme focuses on body image issues as they apply to women’s experiences in the aerobics setting. For example, sub-themes in this category address where participants stand on the aerobics floor, what participants and instructors feel most comfortable wearing while exercising and the degree to which participants look at themselves in the aerobics mirrors. The Body Image theme addresses participants’ and instructors’ feelings about their appearance and their concepts of a fit female body. Finally, the Fitness Instructor theme focuses on body image experience as it relates specifically to the role of the fitness instructor. First, participants cited certain qualities that made them feel comfortable with a fitness instructor. Second, participants and instructors discussed the relationship between participants’ body image experiences and the instructor’s appearance, actions and knowledge. Influence of the instructor was categorized into five sub-themes: expectations about an instructor’s appearance, making comparisons with her body, image-conscious comments made by the instructor, interpretations of the instructor as a role model and perceptions of the instructor as a fitness expert. For a more detailed outline of specific main themes and sub-themes, refer to the Data Analysis Index Trees for both participants and instructors (Appendices C and D).
The Research Setting. The fitness facility where the aerobics classes took place was larger than most other clubs I have visited in the Lower Mainland. Rather than expanding over one large area, this club was built on varying levels. The decor seemed to promote a night club or beach setting: in some areas, flashing neon colours offset the otherwise dim lighting and, by a swimming pool, fake palm trees were placed below expansive skylights. The facility had several large areas equipped with a variety of stationary exercise machines. In addition, there was one area designed for weight stacks and strength training machines, another location for heavy dumbbells and barbells, and a third “Ladies Only” section with more weights and exercise equipment. In the centre of the club, there was a small pool where members could swim at their leisure or attend scheduled aquatic fitness classes. There was also a nearby whirlpool, and, located in both the men’s and women’s change rooms, a sauna and steam room. Recently, the club constructed an addition where members paid for extra services such as massage therapy, aromatherapy, facials, luxury baths and make-up consultations. Other services included a child care centre, a juicebar, personal training and wellness counseling.

The aerobics studio could be accessed by either walking along the pool deck and climbing a flight of stairs to the studio level, or entering the “Ladies Only” section and descending one of two staircases. The studio itself was enclosed from the pool and one of the nearby weight rooms by glass. However, members in the “Ladies Only” section were not closed off from this area; they could see and hear all activity on the studio floor below. The aerobics room had an elevated stage where the instructor usually stood. Directly behind the instructor, and to her/his right and left were mirrors that covered the entire
wall. The size of the room could accommodate approximately 40-45 people without steps and 30 people with steps.

Aerobics Participants

The participants in this study ranged in age from 23- to 68-years-old, with the majority of women being in their mid-to-late twenties or early thirties. Of the ten participants, nine were Caucasian and one woman was of Asian-Canadian descent. Although the three oldest women in the sample (ages 47, 52 and 68) described their employment status as ‘Retired’ or ‘Homemaker,’ all of them held professional jobs in the past. All the other women were currently employed outside the home. The three oldest women were also the only participants who were married and had children (interestingly, there was a mother-daughter connection in this sample). Although one participant had only been attending aerobics for three months - the minimum criterion for subject participation in this study - most of the women reported several year’s experience as an aerobics regular (the average number of years was six). Half the participants usually attended aerobics on weekday mornings while the other half frequented the gym in the evening. Several women also participated in aerobics on the weekend. Refer to Table 1 for a detailed summary of participant profiles and Table 2 for a description of the three target classes that these participants frequented.

Exercise Goals

This theme was related to participants’ motivations for exercising in general and, specifically, what inspired them to participate in aerobics.
# Table 1

## DESCRIPTIONS OF 10 AEROBICS PARTICIPANTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participants</th>
<th>Angela</th>
<th>Pat</th>
<th>Miranda</th>
<th>Heidi</th>
<th>Erica</th>
<th>Trina</th>
<th>Barbara</th>
<th>Madeleine</th>
<th>Veronica</th>
<th>Deirdre</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Age</strong></td>
<td>24</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>68</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>30</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Marital Status</strong></td>
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<td>Married</td>
<td>Single</td>
<td>Single</td>
<td>Single</td>
<td>Single</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>Single</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>Single</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Children</strong></td>
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<td>3</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
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<td>0</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Occupation</strong></td>
<td>Banker</td>
<td>Homemaker</td>
<td>Design Assistant</td>
<td>Youth Counselor</td>
<td>Print Shop Manager</td>
<td>Salesperson</td>
<td>Retired</td>
<td>Self-employed</td>
<td>Retired</td>
<td>Registered Nurse</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>How long doing aerobics?</strong></td>
<td>2 years</td>
<td>3 years</td>
<td>1.5 years</td>
<td>10 years</td>
<td>6 years</td>
<td>.6 years</td>
<td>7 years</td>
<td>3 months</td>
<td>15 years</td>
<td>6 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>How long at this facility?</strong></td>
<td>2 years</td>
<td>8 months</td>
<td>1.5 years</td>
<td>7 months</td>
<td>2 months</td>
<td>5 years</td>
<td>7 years</td>
<td>3 years</td>
<td>15 years</td>
<td>2 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Time of regular classes.</strong></td>
<td>weekday evenings, weekends</td>
<td>weekday evenings</td>
<td>weekday evenings</td>
<td>weekday evenings</td>
<td>weekday evenings</td>
<td>weekday morning, weekends</td>
<td>weekday mornings, weekends</td>
<td>weekday mornings, weekends</td>
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<td>weekday mornings</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### Table 2

**DESCRIPTIONS OF THREE TARGET CLASSES**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TARGET CLASSES</th>
<th>ONE</th>
<th>TWO</th>
<th>THREE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>INSTRUCTOR</strong></td>
<td>Marilyn</td>
<td>Samantha</td>
<td>Kate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>DAY</strong></td>
<td>Weekday</td>
<td>Weekday</td>
<td>Weekend</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>TIME</strong></td>
<td>10:30 am</td>
<td>5:30 pm</td>
<td>12:00 pm</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>CLASS TYPE</strong></td>
<td>STEP 1</td>
<td>Hi Lo 3</td>
<td>STEP 2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>PARTICIPANTS</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>AVERAGE AGE</strong></td>
<td>40-50</td>
<td>30-40</td>
<td>25-40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>GENDER DISTRIBUTION IN CLASSES</strong></td>
<td>99% women, 1% men</td>
<td>65% women, 35% men</td>
<td>85% women, 15% men</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>AVERAGE FITNESS LEVEL</strong></td>
<td>Beginner - Intermediate</td>
<td>Advanced</td>
<td>Intermediate - Advanced</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Weight Loss

All participants identified weight loss or weight maintenance as a partial or primary goal for exercising. Barbara, Heidi and Erica mentioned that aerobics allows them to enjoy food without dieting to control their weight. Angela, Erica, and Veronica had each lost about 20 pounds since they began their exercise regimens. Miranda also spoke of an “extra 10 or 15 pounds” that she would not mind “getting rid of.” Heidi revealed that she went to aerobics “for the way [her] body looks, and then … health.” Based on a recent fitness test, Madeleine set a goal to reduce her body fat ratio. Similarly, Trina attended aerobics to relieve stress but she also emphasized the fact that she wanted to “burn all the fat.” Pat described losing weight as her “number one goal” when she first started going to aerobics. However, she soon discovered that other factors were motivating her to continue working out.

“One [goal] is to lose weight and I have lost fat since I’ve started. I think probably my goals have changed a little bit too because … I just want to feel good. I’m surprised at how good it makes me feel…. Once I was really into it, I just wanted to keep going. I think you get hooked on it.”

Pat, age 52.

Health

All participants actively talked about physical and/or mental health as important motivators for attending aerobics. Barbara and Veronica, in particular, underscored the importance of exercise as a means to gain and maintain health. In the past, both women underwent rehabilitation after being injured in unrelated car accidents. As a result, Veronica felt that she had a better perspective on her exercise goals; after the accident, pursuing improved health took precedence over her concerns about body image.
“Specifically my goals in exercise now are as a result of the accident, so it’s truly health as… primary. It really puts you in a different perspective, the whole fitness thing changes. Like when I was exercising before [the injury], … the body image was certainly there. But all of a sudden that saying … ‘You’ve got nothing if you don’t have your health’ really is true.” Veronica, age 47.

As a senior citizen, Barbara identified exercise as a crucial factor in allowing her to prolong healthful living.

“I want to stay as healthy as I can … for as long as I can. And I want to do this not for me but for my children. I want to feel good physically and I want to have energy. And I’ve got more energy now than I did 10 years ago. I really do.” Barbara, age 68.

Similarly, Erica began exercising to improve the quality of her health and pursue an active lifestyle.

“I can actually tell you the exact moment why [I started aerobics]. I went out with some friends and we went to a theatre, … it probably had about 50 steps that you had to climb to get there… I was probably about 22, 23 … and I got to the top of these stairs and I couldn’t breathe…. I was just like gasping for breath…. I just didn’t like the feeling of not being comfortable in my body doing simple things like climbing stairs. So that’s when I joined my first gym.” Erica, age 29.

Clearly, for these participants, the benefits of exercise exceed appearance enhancement.

Aerobics

Apart from their general exercise goals, participants felt inspired to participate specifically in aerobics because they enjoyed socializing with others, hearing the music and taking guidance from the instructors.

Social. My observations confirmed that socializing is a prevalent part of the aerobics setting. Groups of regular participants, especially in the morning classes,
gathered on the aerobics floor and appeared to be quite familiar with one another. These women talked and laughed together, especially during breaks in the class format.

Many of the participants commented on the social aspect of aerobics, working out in a group helped motivate them to come to the gym.

“[Aerobics] is very social. Not that I have gotten to know a lot of other fellow class mates but there’s always kind of conversations between different instructors and students.”  
- Madeleine, age 31.

“I like going to the same classes [and] seeing the same people…. It’s like a social thing. Just to say ‘hi’ and you know the teacher and that kind of human relation that starts. I think it’s really beautiful.”  
- Trina, age 27.

“I like the idea of being in a group thing…. Just knowing there’s someone out there suffering like me, you know!”  
- Veronica, age 47.

“The fact that we’re all doing it together. I think that’s the greatest benefit … I think I get the best workout in a group. It is easier to do when there’s everybody doing it together…. After a while you see people that you know and it becomes almost a social thing…. Familiar faces, and you stop and have a chat. I like that, that makes it nice to come.”  
- Pat, age 52.

I also noted that some instructors (including the three interviewed) fostered a more social atmosphere in their classes than others. Some instructors tended to interact much more frequently with participants, engaging in casual conversation before and after class as well as during the various segments of the group workout.

“[Aerobics] is very social. Not that I have gotten to know a lot of other fellow class mates but there’s always kind of conversations between different instructors and students.”  
- Madeleine, age 31.

Music. Almost all the participants mentioned music as an important reason why they enjoy exercising in aerobics classes. Madeleine described the music in her classes as “always different and always motivating.” Angela found that playing music in aerobics makes her workout seem more interesting because she can “have a good time with it.” Miranda recognized the motivating influence of aerobics music but she enjoyed only certain songs.
"Music has so much to do with ... participation and being in the class and having it be a good class.... Like some classes that I’ve been to, they’ll play ... aerobics mixes of ‘80s songs or just these old songs. And as soon as I hear this old music, I start to feel like I’m doing an old routine and I’m with this old instructor.... Even if she’s young and perky ... I would still feel like ‘Get some music or ... I’m NOT coming back to your class.’” Miranda, age 23.

Erica also found inspiration from aerobics music but, unlike Miranda, she preferred to hear older songs.

“I love 70s music.... So I love going to these classes where they play all this old stuff. I go, ‘All right!!’ and get all into it. And there are some people going ‘God, what are they playing this crap for?’” Erica, age 29.

Heidi enjoyed similar music and was emphatic about the fact that she “absolutely cannot stand” the “dancey-techno music.” The participants’ diverse preferences represent one way in which multiple experiences arise at aerobics.

The instructor’s guidance. The presence of a fitness leader was also a motivating factor for aerobics participants. Miranda liked the fact that she could turn her mind off at aerobics and just “follow whatever the instructor’s doing.” Others also appreciated the guidance they received:

“You have more motivation ... because you have a teacher. You have somebody guiding you to get familiar with your body and with your heart rate.” Trina, age 27.

“Aerobics makes you have to think less. [You] don’t have to think, ‘Okay, what have I exercised? What muscles do I have to deal with?’ I mean, you can just follow someone else.” Angela, age 24.

Socializing, music and the ability to follow an instructor’s guidance inspired participants to specifically attend aerobics. Other distinctive aspects of the aerobics environment lend insight into the body image experiences of participants.
Aerobics Environment

Space

This sub-theme is related to the location where participants stood in the aerobics studio (at the front near the instructor, in the middle of the group or at the back of the room). The location, or space, a participant occupies in the aerobics studio can be habitual. All the aerobics participants admitted that they usually gravitated towards the same space every aerobics class. Sometimes there was a pragmatic reason for choosing a particular location on the aerobics floor. For instance, Veronica, who was rehabilitating from a back injury, preferred to be in a position where she did not have to turn her neck to see the fitness instructor. Other women were unsure as to why they formed this habit but acknowledged that they were territorial about their space. For some, it meant ‘competing’ for their familiar place:

“There was a spot that me and a girl were fighting to get. So we used to ... run and put the [water] bottle there and just try and keep it. It was terrible, it was very frustrating because I feel like I am unable to perform as well if I don’t have my spot.” Trina, age 27.

Some women revealed that a preference for standing at the back of the aerobics class was associated with self-consciousness about the coordination and appearance of their bodies.

“I don’t want someone behind me noticing if I mess up.... It took me a long time to get to the point where I was comfortable enough with my appearance that I could go and not be completely preoccupied with, ‘Is everyone noticing that I’m missing a step or not keeping up?’ Now I don’t care so much but it took a long time ‘cause it’s so appearance-conscious.” Deirdre, age 30.

“If somebody else is already in your spot do you have any kind of reaction?”

“Initially, the first time it happened I had tons of anxiety, sure. I wanted to be back there, I didn’t want anybody behind me.... That would be totally related to body image.”

“You don’t want people looking at you?”
"Yeah, at how uncoordinated I am or what's jiggling around."

Heidi, age 30.

A connection between self-consciousness about one's body and a preference for standing in the back of the aerobics studio was evident during my observations. For instance, participants who stood at the front of the class near the instructor often displayed their bodies by wearing revealing exercise attire. Although wearing clothing that exhibits the body does not necessarily infer confidence in one's physical appearance, one can assume that women who sport bra tops and leotards are not overtly shy about their physiques.

During the course of my observations, I noted more than twice as many women wearing casual, loose clothing that did not distinctly reveal their body shapes than women wearing tight clothing. However, of the 55 women I observed wearing revealing exercise attire (bra tops or body forming leotards), the majority tended to occupy the space in the front of the class more often than women in looser attire. For instance, 65% of the women in revealing clothes stood in the front row of the aerobics class (closest to the instructor and the mirrors) as compared to 11% in the second or middle rows and 18% in the back row. Thirty-nine percent of women in looser clothing stood in the front row and 61% positioned themselves in the middle and back rows.

Exercise Clothes

Media images of the aerobics setting usually portray participants and instructors wearing fashionable, body forming exercise clothing. As a result, revealing exercise wear has become stereotypically synonymous with the aerobics environment. However, as outlined above, I observed more women wearing loose-fitting T-shirts than women wearing bra tops and leotards. I queried participants in this study about what they felt
most comfortable wearing in aerobics. Most women said they preferred a T-shirt and shorts or workout pants. Choosing this outfit was often about practicality. For example, Trina was put off by the thought of spending a lot of money on fancy exercise clothes. However, she admitted that she also wore loose clothing partly to conceal her body.

“I … try to hide a little bit. Like I have big breasts so I try to hide it with T-shirts because I don’t feel comfortable wearing … [body-forming] kind of stuff.”  Trina, age 27.

Heidi expressed similar feelings:

“I wear long leggings and a T-shirt…. One time I just got really hot. And ordinarily I would never take off my top because of … being conscious of fat on my stomach. But … I was so hot, and took it off, and initially I was like, ‘Oh yeah, my stomach’ and then I went, ‘Oh my God, my armpits are hairy!’”  Heidi, age 30.

Even though Miranda was more comfortable exercising in a bra top than a T-shirt, she remained self-conscious about displaying certain parts of her body.

“If I’m wearing a sports bra and shorts and I have a bare midriff, I will always tie something around my waist…. Because I hate my waist, that’s just where I collect my weight.”

“So it’s sort of like a cover up mechanism?”

“Yup.”  Miranda, age 23.

Although Angela wore a body forming leotard at aerobics, she always put a T-shirt over it. She was emphatic about the fact that she did not feel comfortable removing her T-shirt, “no matter how hot [she gets].” Until recently, Madeleine shared Angela’s sentiments. She described the process of beginning to wear exercise clothes that reveal her midriff as having “graduated.”

“A year ago there’s no way … I would … have [worn] like a bra top type of thing … unless I happened to be really hot.”

“Was it self-consciousness that made you feel you didn’t want to wear that?”

“Yeah … It’s not even a matter of you feel fine about your stomach but it’s more about wanting to feel yourself … move, stretch, turn, that
kind of thing.” ➥ Madeleine, age 31.

Many women expressed negative opinions about the body-forming exercise wear that is traditionally associated with aerobics and several participants brought up their distaste specifically for thongs and spandex. For example, Veronica considered thongs to be symbolic of an appearance-oriented aerobics and Deirdre regarded the “spandex routine” to be associated with “too much focus on body consciousness.”

“I put off [going to aerobics] for a long time because the idea of going to a gym scared the hell out of me. And the whole spandex thing just freaked me out…. People who wear spandex, I mock … [and] these people who wear thongs, those really bug me because I think they’re stupid…. I think it’s an unfortunate trend ’cause the people who could most use improving their health, are probably the least able to go around in tights and little numbers.” ➥ Deirdre, age 30.

“I don’t like that thong stuff; … I think it’s really unattractive…. I guess at some point in time women felt that it was sexy or something like that. … I really think at this time it kind of dates the sort of aerobic wear. … That thong, cutesy sort of stuff is not trendy anymore.”
➥ Veronica, age 47.

Based on my observations, most women who wore revealing aerobics attire donned athletic-style bra tops, shorts or leggings. In general, there was less evidence of shiny spandex and thongs worn over shorts or tights. However, for some women, the image of the thong-clad aerobics participant of the 1980s Jane Fonda era persists. Participants’ expressions of distaste for this style of dress exemplified a rejection of aerobics as a stereotypically image-conscious activity.

Mirrors

Most of the participants considered the mirror useful for checking their body alignment during certain exercises. Many participants felt anxious about seeing their own reflections in the mirror while doing aerobics. However, these women admitted that their
apprehension was strongest when they first started aerobics and were uncomfortable in the new environment.

"When you are in the aerobics class do you find that you look at yourself in the mirror at all?"

"I do now.... At first I didn’t want to. I felt a bit uncomfortable looking at myself. Seeing not just my body shape but how I was doing the various movements. But now I’ve got over that and I can look at myself.”

Pat, age 52.

“I managed to do an entire aerobics class ... without seeing myself in the mirror, although I was surrounded by them, because I was that not into seeing myself. But now I’m ... fine with it.... Actually it’s cool - I’ve finally gotten to the point where I so enjoy what I’m doing and I’m so happy that my body is strong enough to do everything that I like looking.”

Deirdre, age 30.

For Pat and Deirdre, coming to appreciate the mirrored image of their bodies exemplified a growing sense of confidence in their physicality at aerobics.

Body Image

This theme pertained to participants’ feelings of satisfaction and dissatisfaction towards their appearance, as well as their interpretations of a fit female body. Participants cited holistic (an integration of psychological, spiritual and physical factors) and appearance-oriented concepts of a fit body.

Satisfaction/Dissatisfaction

I asked women about their level of satisfaction with their appearance because I wanted to examine whether body image satisfaction and dissatisfaction influenced participants’ interpretations of aerobics and the role of the instructor. As it turned out, participants’ feelings about their bodies were constantly vacillating. There were, however, some notable differences and similarities in the way that body image dissatisfaction and
satisfaction manifested itself in participants’ interpretations of the role of the instructor.

Angela and Pat both felt generally dissatisfied with their appearances. Even though they perceived their participation in aerobics to be beneficial for a more heightened sense of body image satisfaction, they felt that the process of accepting their bodies was, as Pat described, “an ongoing battle.”

“Although I have lost some body fat, I haven’t really lost enough to my way of thinking…. I still have too much flab that I need to get rid of…. Although I am pleased in some respects that I got some off, I know I still have a long way to go and I just generally don’t like the way I look.”

Pat, age 52.

“I’ve lost 20 pounds and everyone else has said, ‘Oh my God, you look terrific!’ I still look in the mirror and I say, ‘This is still not ... where I want to be.’ I’m still not happy and I don’t see a difference.”

Angela, age 24.

Both these women shared similar feelings of body image dissatisfaction but they held different interpretations of their ideal instructor. Angela wanted the instructor to represent a young, ideal image that she could emulate while Pat sometimes felt uneasy in the presence of such an instructor.

Most women felt generally satisfied with their bodies. Some admitted that their body image experiences were rarely definitive, sometimes they felt satisfied with their appearance and other times they felt discouraged. Deirdre said her positive and negative feelings towards her body were divided:

“I’d say it’s a real split…. I’m 6’1” and I really like that because I have great posture and I like being tall. And then there are times when ... my leg is the size of my friend’s waist. Sometimes I love being ... big and then other times I wish I could be petite for like 5 minutes. So it goes back and forth.”

Deirdre, age 30.

Other women reported body image satisfaction but cited instances that could disrupt this satisfaction.
“Basically I am satisfied but I could get to be dissatisfied if I didn’t eat properly…. Like right now, I would like a couple of pounds off the middle but I’m not gonna agonize about it, you know.”  

Barbara, age 68.

“It depends on what kind of day I am having. Generally speaking, I would say probably 80% of the time, … I’m okay with my body. If I’m in situations where it’s brought to my attention in one way or another then it bothers me. … Like I had to buy an outfit for a wedding and everything catered to like size three…. It’s moments like that when it’s really tough.”  

Erica, age 29.

“When I am at the gym, I am pretty satisfied. When I see other women and the stereotypes that we have nowadays - of how we are supposed to look - I feel very dissatisfied.”  

Trina, age 27.

Interestingly, those women who felt more dissatisfied when they were confronted with stereotypical images of female attractiveness, tended to reject the typical image of the instructor. Erica was impressed by an instructor with a large body-build and Trina liked the idea of an instructor as “a normal woman,” who does not wear “too much make-up.”

The Fit Body

**Appearance.** Although all participants believed an idealized, fit female body was lean (but not necessarily stereotypically thin) and toned, only Angela frankly described her impression of a fit body as strictly appearance-oriented.

“When I think specifically of a fit body I think of someone who is thin. And … of course you want the kind of Linda Hamilton, Terminator 2 body. That’s what it is. Who cares if I can run 10 miles if I don’t have that look. So to me it’s more of the image than the actual fitness level.”  

Angela, age 24.

Other women had a similar concept of a visually fit female body, but they considered this image to be only part of what being physically fit entails. Madeleine’s emphasis on muscular strength as an important component of physical fitness attracted her to a photograph of a female runner in a Reebok advertisement. She brought this photograph to the interview in order to better share ideas on body image and exercise.
"Somebody like this [indicating magazine photo] epitomizes my idea of strength. I mean that’s somebody obviously with very little body fat because she’s pretty carved but she’s not slim, she’s strong.”

Madeleine, age 31.

Some participants recognized that although they associated fitness primarily with one’s ability to perform athletic activities and overall physical health, the visual image of a fit body was still present in their minds.

“A fit body means somebody who can go for a run, go for a bike ride … and not be dying afterwards…. If I didn’t see somebody doing that, if I saw someone on the street who was well muscle-toned, I would call that person fit. Although, that doesn’t fit at all the description I just said.”

Heidi, age 30.

“A fit body is someone whose heart is strong…. someone who has a fair amount of energy…. I guess I am caught up in the visual thing too. Someone who is toned [and] they don’t have extra flab - not too much anyway.”

Pat, age 52.

“The first thing would be healthy…. Good muscle flexibility, good heart all that kind of stuff. But having said that, I mean obviously toning, being in control of body fat and that kind of stuff is important to me but not extensively so and not primary.”

Veronica, age 47.

Most participants reflected on their ideal fit body by discussing societal norms but Miranda associated her concept of a fit body directly with her own appearance and feelings about her body weight and muscle definition.

“Fit for me would be muscle tone. Like I know how much I should weigh, … I know what I should feel like. I know when I feel good and when I don’t.”

Do you feel like you have a fit body at this time?

“I’m not unfit…. I know that I’m strong and I know that I’ve got muscles, it’s just that I think I need to be toning them. I want to get through the excess body matter and find where the muscles are.”

Miranda, age 23.

Holistic. I selected the term ‘holistic’ to describe participants’ interpretations of an overall, well-balanced fit body. Participants who adopted a holistic approach to the concept of a fit body, emphasized an integration of mind, body and spirit. Although many
participants identified appearance as important in their definition of a fit body, almost all responses reflected a holistic perspective as well. For example, Barbara was adamant about the connection between a positive outlook on life and being fit.

"What does a fit body mean to you?"

"Energy. Mentally, mentally, mentally, mentally. I don’t care how much you exercise, I think it’s mental attitude. You have to be able to laugh at life, that’s every bit as important. In fact, I think it has to start from there. Mentally, and take care of yourself and then the physical part of it. It’s a whole thing.”  BARBARA, AGE 68.

For Erica, a fit body represented an individual’s sense of mental, spiritual, physical and emotional balance. Miranda emphasized the importance of having fun. She mentioned enjoying the experience of roller blading rather than sweating on a stair climbing machine at the gym. Deirdre considered a fit body to be one that can accommodate an active lifestyle.

"[A fit body means] having the strength to do whatever you want. I don’t have the body I would perceive as great but I am really happy with the way it functions in anything I put my mind to. That’s what fit is to me…. The ability to run up four flights of stairs and not be dead from that. Or chase a little kid around all day and not be totally exhausted.”  DEIDRE, AGE 30.

Although the majority of participants considered a balance of physical and psychological wellness to be imperative components of a fit body, many women’s interpretations of the instructor as a fit body prototype were largely associated with appearance.

The Fitness Instructor

This theme reflects the major purpose of this study: to examine participants’ body image experiences within the context of the instructor’s role in aerobics. The first major sub-theme - qualities of the instructor - pertained to participants’ preferences for an instructor with a personable demeanor and an ability to interact positively with the class.
The second major sub-theme - influence of the instructor - referred specifically to the instructor’s impact on participants’ body image experiences.

Qualities of the Instructor

“If I’ve gone to the class and I don’t like the instructor, I probably won’t go back to the class. The instructor is a big, big part of it for me.” ^» Miranda, age 23.

Most participants reiterated Miranda’s sentiments to one degree or another. Feeling comfortable with the instructor was an integral part of their positive experiences at aerobics. Further, as will be shown, a regard for the instructor reinforced the extent to which participants were influenced by her role in aerobics. Participants collectively cited seven qualities that they considered most valuable in an instructor. These themes reflected participants’ preference for a leader who was caring, created a fun environment, was easy to follow, demonstrated a commitment to exercise safety, educated the class about fitness, was physically fit and was familiar to the participants.

Caring. Participants were encouraged by an instructor who showed a high level of regard for the members of her class. Trina favoured instructors who “try to understand the participants and try to have some interest about what they’re doing.” Barbara and Heidi had similar stipulations:

“What I like about most instructors [is that] they really care. Kind of like Marilyn, she really cares about the class. And Sue, ... you feel she’s really interested in what’s going on in her class.... It’s nicer to have somebody you can really connect with.... You can tell if somebody doesn’t really give a damn.” ^» Barbara, age 68.

“The ideal instructor [is] somebody who tells me at the beginning of class that ... I am welcome there no matter what I do. For me that blankets: I don’t care what you look like, I don’t care what you’re wearing, I don’t care what you look like when you’re doing this exercise, you’re just
welcome here to get what you need out of this class.” — Heidi, age 30.

Pat was impressed by instructors who did not “set ... themselves apart” from the group.

“I want somebody up there for me and the other participants. Not to show us how well they can do.... I think for the most part, the ones that I’ve come across ... have a pretty good attitude and make people feel comfortable. I think that’s what it’s all about really.” — Pat, age 52.

Miranda recounted a scenario that prevented her from attending future classes taught by Alana, an instructor at the research site. During a particular workout, a member of the class requested that the music volume be turned down. According to Miranda, Alana refused to oblige. Although Miranda enjoyed this instructor’s style of teaching, she was appalled by her level of disrespect for a participant.

Promotes fun. Some participants sought instructors who created a fun atmosphere in the aerobics setting. For them, having fun was motivation to continue attending aerobics.

“There’s an instructor at -----, who is incredibly perky and energetic and just lovin’ what she’s doing.... I ... laugh my way through the class ‘cause I think it’s really funny that she’s having that much fun at work.” — Deirdre, age 30.

“Every instructor that I’ve ever had has been incredibly upbeat.... If they feel up and good then it transfers to everybody else in the room.... I find a lot of them have a sense of humour and that’s really important too.” — Madeleine, age 31.

Easy to follow. Although participants enjoyed the choreographed exercises in aerobics, they found it frustrating when instructors presented routines that were confusing and difficult to follow.

“It frustrates me that there’s some instructors who - even though the class is clearly not able to do what the instructor is doing - keep forging ahead anyway.... If someone continues doing something the majority of the class can’t do, it’s kind of the equivalent of
giving us all the finger. Like, ‘Yeah, … I’m the instructor, I’m gonna do what I’m gonna do and to hell with you.’”
\( ^{\wedge} \text{Deirdre, age 30.} \)

“[One instructor] kept going from one move to the next move and then to another one and I’ll bet I had to stop 15 times during the class. … I was really disappointed and was extremely frustrated…. I had to take the class after that just to get a workout.” \( ^{\wedge} \text{Erica, age 29.} \)

A number of participants mentioned instructors who were able to accommodate a variety of fitness levels in one class. Madeleine felt that it took a “special person” to handle a diverse group of people and still “keep everybody happy.” Instructors who provided the class with more than one option for certain exercises, ensured that most participants followed along at their own comfort level.

“Marilyn [is] easy to follow and she paces it well…. They’ve gotta teach people who are just new in the class and then people who are coming all the time…. They don’t want the new ones to get discouraged and they don’t want the other ones to get bored. Now, a good teacher can handle all that.” \( ^{\wedge} \text{Barbara, age 68.} \)

“I have noticed … they’re really giving you alternatives to the STEP. Like … a lot of times they’re not only giving you one alternative, but they’re giving you two or even three…. I’ve got an injury … so I really like that. \( ^{\wedge} \text{Veronica, age 47.} \)

Safety-conscious. Madeleine was impressed by the care some instructors took to ensure the safety of their class members. Specifically, she noticed her instructors being “very conscious about checking everybody’s STEP” and encouraging participants to exercise at their own pace. Barbara believed that “a good instructor tells you how to get up on that STEP [so] you’re not damaging your legs.”

Other participants were not as impressed by the conduct of certain instructors. Not surprisingly, these women were resistant to instructors who made them feel their safety was in jeopardy.
“I’ve certainly been in classes where I don’t think the instructor knows things about the impact on knees, or the impact on the lower back.... And I definitely walked out of a class like that because it just didn’t make sense for me to stay there.” Veronica, age 47.

“I have seen ... the instructor ... [do an exercise] incorrectly and it’s just scary sometimes. You know, because you’d just be flinging your body all over the board and it’s screaming injury.”

“You’re talking about moving around the STEP in an unsafe manner?”

“Oh yeah, oh yeah. Doing things way too fast like trying to get from one end to the other.... You could really hurt yourself.” Erica, age 29.

Heidi described her experience with a male instructor who singled her out and encouraged her to keep exercising. However, he was oblivious to the fact that she was rehabilitating from a back injury and his intentions to motivate her were more harmful than inspirational.

“[The instructor] made me feel like I had to push myself. He was somebody who said, ‘Now you do what you want to do’ and then [he] singled me out. I was flat on my back the next day. I just shouldn’t have been doing it. He pointed me out and made me feel like I should really continue doing this.” Heidi, age 30.

**Ability to educate.** Connected to the issue of safety is the instructor’s ability to educate participants about fitness. Angela asserted that a quality fitness instructor “should have the knowledge and the background” to provide proper instruction to aerobics participants. Miranda perceived education to be a vital part of the instructor’s role:

“She’s showing everyone how to do things and how to do things correctly.” Other participants appreciated the fact that instructors provided education about the exercises performed in aerobics.

“I like it when they talk - physiologically - about the muscle group.... That makes it more of a physical focus as opposed to a body image focus.” Heidi, age 30.
Fitness level. Participants preferred instructors to exemplify a ‘fit’ quality. Some participants reported that they would be disappointed by an instructor who was unable to provide an adequate workout.

“It’s gonna be hard to follow an instructor if [he or she] is not in shape. That doesn’t mean superduper [fit]. There’s a [senior’s] class here and ... that woman is in excellent shape for her age and really does a lot to encourage the group.”  Veronica, age 47.

Conversely, some women felt that being in shape was not enough; they wanted the instructor to possess a stereotypically fit look as well. Angela was candid about her standards: “[The] prerequisite for being a fitness instructor is ... good-looking, young and a great body.”

Creates familiarity. Having an instructor who consistently taught their scheduled class was particularly important for some participants. Once these participants became familiar with certain instructors, they were reluctant to attend classes taught by anyone else. Miranda admitted she attended Kate’s classes exclusively. Accordingly, rather than go to another instructor’s class, she modified her schedule to correspond with Kate’s workouts. This type of favoritism was obvious during my observations. Kate, who was a popular instructor with numerous participants, arranged to have a substitute teach her classes for a few days. A crowded weekend class dropped from the usual 30 people to 18 when participants knew Kate would not be there. The following week when she returned, the class size was back around 30. In general, Kate estimated that approximately 75% of the group came because she was the instructor and the remaining 25% would go to that class no matter who was teaching. Erica and Deirdre explained their apprehension about unfamiliar instructors:
“This instructor at ------, I really look forward to those ... classes with her.... When she’s not there, ... you kind of go, ‘Oooooh, I don’t want anybody else!’ I guess you get attached.... And you know what to expect. When you go to a class where you don’t know the instructor you’re like, ‘Okay, am I gonna enjoy this?’”  Erica, age 29.

“I rarely go to different instructors classes because ... I sort of hold back and wonder, ‘How badly is this gonna suck?’... I want to workout for an hour and I know exactly who can provide what I want.... Just trusting somebody that they will deliver what you are there for and you don’t know that with an instructor you haven’t had before.”  Deirdre, age 30.

In relation to familiarity, the issue of trust became a significant theme during the interviews. Most participants indicated that their familiarity with a certain instructor greatly heightened their trust in her. Erica considered some instructors to be almost like a friend because “you see them so many times and they’re helping you to go through something.” Veronica revealed that she trusts familiar instructors because she knows they will offer exercise modifications for those with injuries. Deirdre disclosed that if she feels comfortable with an instructor, she might take off her loose T-shirt during the floorwork segment to reveal body forming exercise wear. According to Deirdre, this is an extension of her trust for the instructor: “If I feel comfortable enough to do that, it has a lot to do with ... trusting the instructor.”

For some participants, trusting a familiar instructor appeared to magnify their admiration for that individual. Although Erica resisted becoming an avid follower of any one instructor, she recognized that some people favour the instructor as the “end all and be all.”

“Most gyms have a stage so you’ve got this pedestal thing happening. Everybody’s watching ... and following this one person ... up there. This one person decides everything, the music, the volume, the steps.”  Erica, age 29.
The instructor’s influence may be reinforced if, as Erica suggested, certain participants internalize the symbolic meaning of the instructor’s image on an elevated stage. For example, Miranda described Kate as “the greatest instructor in the world” and clearly held her in high esteem: “Kate’s word is just like the Bible for me. I love her class and I just find her really inspiring. … I would trust her with my life.” Undoubtedly, earning the trust of certain participants renders the instructor’s role particularly influential.

Influence of the Instructor

Participant responses revealed that instructors have influence in the aerobics setting. In many instances, this influence was connected to the body image experiences of participants. Some women held expectations about the instructor’s appearance and some compared themselves to this image. Although not all women noticed instructors making comments about body image and weight loss, those who had, reported diverse reactions. Interestingly, women who were particularly influenced by the visual image of the fitness instructor were more resistant to comments regarding weight loss and body perfection. All participants concluded that the instructor’s influence rendered her a role model to some degree. However, despite this responsibility, few participants depended on her as an expert about health or weight loss issues.

Expectations. As indicated above, the expectations some participants had about how an instructor should look were consistent with cultural standards of what constitutes a fit body.

“When I started taking classes, … I was really surprised at the variety of body differences in the aerobics instructors. I had a thing in my head of kind of The 20 Minute Workout girls or probably more muscular than that. And some of the instructors didn’t fit into that
image… I thought, ‘God, are they teaching the class?’”
*Madeleine, age 31.*

“Well, I would expect them to be slim and toned…. To do a job like that I would think that you’d look like that to show people if you do workout … this is what you will look like.” *Pat, age 52.*

Some participants admitted that the appearance of an instructor either discredited or legitimized the quality of her instruction.

“If I see a fit teacher and I have never tried this teacher I think it’s a good teacher. Once we had a girl … and she had a big tummy and she didn’t look like a teacher. I thought maybe she [wouldn’t be] good.” *Trina, age 27.*

“Somebody … who’s really sort of flabby and doesn’t look like they’re healthy … makes me question why I’m there. If they haven’t achieved my overall goal then what are they teaching me exactly?… Like that instructor that I didn’t like, … her redeeming quality to me is the fact that she has this incredible muscle definition all over the place and that somehow legitimized her as an instructor although her actual instructing skills seemed quite weak.” *Deirdre, age 30.*

“You look at someone with an incredible body … and it makes you take heed more in what they say…. If you see a fitness instructor up there who is still a little heavier or is maybe older or whatever … then you’re like, ‘Well if they’re an instructor, they do this like how many times and they still look like that.’ Why would I follow what they’re telling me?” *Angela, age 24.*

Not all participants equated a toned, slender body with the instructor’s ability to teach a quality aerobics class. For Veronica, the appearance of an ultra-slim instructor informed her expectations about how she might enjoy a particular class:

“[If there is a stereotypical-looking young, thin instructor teaching a class], I will go in thinking this isn’t gonna work and if it works it’s great and if I come away feeling great then I don’t care beyond that. But if it doesn’t work then I will be opinionated about that sort of look.” *Veronica, age 47.*
Although an instructor with an attractive body was viewed as a more competent leader by participants like Trina, Deirdre and Angela, Veronica regarded this image with apprehension about the instructor’s capabilities and teaching style.

Several women attributed their expectations to media images of a stereotypical, fit body: toned and thin. Madeleine brought an issue of *Fitness* magazine to the interview in order to illustrate her initial impression of instructors. As she held up the cover photo she exclaimed, “This is what you picture your instructors to look like. Sure she looks great but is she strong, is she healthy?”

Others linked expectations to their own preference for a particular appearance. Angela wanted to “see someone up there who is ... epitomizing what you eventually want to become.” Deirdre, Pat and Miranda were also inspired by the physique of certain instructors.

However, not all participants expected or even wanted the instructor to have a stereotypically ideal physique. For example, Erica was “impressed” to see an instructor who “had a potbelly and wasn’t anything great to look at.” Although aerobics is set within a societal framework that promotes the image of an ideal, fit body, some participants resisted this image by constructing their own definitions of a fit-looking instructor:

“There’s an instructor at ----, ... she’s built big. Big bones. She’s not the ... typical aerobics instructor as far as looks and everything. And yet she’s totally physically fit and she’s toned and she’s got big thighs and I love that. I think that’s great. I think athletic women are far more attractive than these skinny little things.” "Erica, age 29.

“[Being taught by heavier instructors at the club] doesn’t bother me.... They’ve got a ... body build which no matter what they do, that’s their
body build. But they’re firm and very fit and very, very good instructors.”

Barbara, age 68.

When I queried participants about their reactions to an instructor who was heavier than the ‘typical’ physique, many women admitted that they would have initial reservations about being led by such an instructor. Angela asserted that she would altogether avoid an aerobics class if the instructor is overweight. In order to clarify what participants considered a “heavier” instructor, I asked them to correspond their images with a well-known public figure. Participants (and instructors) cited actresses Cybill Shepherd, Roseanne Barr, Marilyn Monroe and talk show hosts Ricki Lake and Oprah Winfrey.

“[If a heavier instructor was teaching aerobics], I think I would probably initially judge it … and then I would think that was really cool that this isn’t just about … having to look a certain way or [aerobics] makes you look a certain way. Because it’s obviously not three or even four classes a week that make these people look this way.” Heidi, age 30.

“She would have to work harder than somebody who … had a hard body in order to win over the loyalty.” Deirdre, age 30.

“If someone like Roseanne’s size came in teaching a STEP 2 class then I’d probably think, ‘What the hell is this?’ But … if she’s just going great guns … I’d be highly impressed. It’s more the ability to do the class and the overall health as opposed to the outward appearance.” Veronica, age 47.

Although Pat had expectations about how an instructor was supposed to look, she was ambivalent about being led by a heavier-than-normal instructor.

“I wouldn’t automatically say, ‘Oh well we’re not going to have a very good workout because here’s someone who’s overweight.’ I’ve heard people say that you can be fit and you can still be overweight. I mean, I’m fit and I’m overweight!” Pat, age 52.

Comparisons. The expectations participants hold about the appearance of their instructors do not remain detached from their own body image experiences. Participants
who regarded the fitness instructor’s appearance and body shape as exemplary of what could be achieved through aerobics made comparisons between their own bodies and that of their fitness instructor. Although some women found these comparisons inspirational, others were more discouraged by them. Conversely, some of the participants felt they did not have enough in common with any of their instructors to warrant comparison.

Deirdre experienced the feeling of “body image by association” when she attended a class taught by a slim, fit instructor: “It’s like ... there’s no way I will ever have a body remotely close to that, but right now I’m kind of thinking I do.” Others also found making comparisons with the instructor a useful motivational tool.

“I’ve never looked at [a fitness instructor] and said, ‘Ugh, I feel so dowdy or ugly or whatever.’... For me they’re more of an inspiration to get to that point. It’s like ‘yes,’ if I have the determination, if I have the willpower, if I have the commitment ... I can achieve.” *Angela, age 24.*

“Yeah, I often make comparisons.... But then again I do that to everybody in the class: ‘She’s got a great stomach, how do I do that?’... I think I am trying to find an image that I can relate to sometimes.” *Madeleine, age 31.*

Other participants admitted they made comparisons with the instructor, but they did not experience these comparisons as particularly motivating. For instance, Trina revealed that she measured herself against the instructor when she was already having a bad day and feeling dissatisfied with her appearance. Pat felt compelled to compare the part of her body with which she was most dissatisfied:

“I try not to [compare]. I mean I think it’s a foregone conclusion that one is going to.... In my case it’s always legs because I’m so conscious of my legs. I just think it’s silly to try and compare too much. You’ve got to be worried about you and not ... the person who’s teaching.” *Pat, age 52.*

For Erica, making comparisons seemed to fuel discouragement about her body.
“Sure. I think, ‘Okay, I’m working as hard as her, how come I don’t look like this?’”  Erica, age 29.

Some participants preferred to compare themselves to an instructor who did not match a culturally defined aesthetic ideal. For example, Heidi admitted that she compared her body to her instructors’ bodies but she liked to “see someone who looks a little more normal as opposed to really, really fit.” For her, encountering an instructor who looked “really, really fit” created a sense of anxiety about her own fitness level and her abilities to keep up in the class. In addition, Heidi’s preference for a “normal” looking instructor was an expression of resistance against the “fashion show” appearance and “Barbie Doll quality” she noticed in some instructors.

Certain participants revealed that they did not compare their bodies to the instructor. Barbara felt satisfied enough with her own image to resist making comparisons with instructors, almost all of whom were much younger than her.

“I think you do the best you can with what you’ve got. The instructors - shoot are they fit! Muscular, you know. But, no, I don’t relate to that much.”  Barbara, age 68.

Veronica confided that she did not make comparisons, as the majority of instructors were younger and had a different body type: “Even when I was a teenager or young adult I never had that really slim body image which a lot of the instructors have, I was never there, so I have nothing to compare.” Similarly, Miranda claimed she did not make comparisons because she never saw an instructor whom she physically resembled.

Image-conscious comments. Fitness instructors appear to be influential not only as visual role models but also by what they communicate to participants about body image and the purpose of aerobics. The day I began my research, I attended an aerobics class
where the instructor said, "Summer’s coming, let’s work our inner thighs." Subsequently, I sought participants’ reactions to instructors who encouraged body perfection. Some participants had not heard these types of comments. Others, like Pat, recalled hearing them “quite often.” Trina indicated that she regarded instructors who make image-conscious comments to be focused on “the way you look and not so much on health and fitness.” Several other participants also expressed disapproval of an instructor who addressed the aerobics class in this manner:

“I remember lying on the floor doing butt exercises once and [the instructor said], ‘I bet the girls on Melrose Place don’t have to do this.’ And then she said, ‘In fact, you can do this while you’re watching Melrose Place.’ And I just thought, ‘You insult me.’” Heidi, age 30.

“Some people can look at it as a motivation thing ... or some people could be like, ‘Yeah right, like that’s ever gonna be a motivating factor for me.’ ... So I think in general, ... comments like that would be more detrimental than good.” Angela, age 24.

Although Pat was not offended by image-conscious comments, she suspected other participants might consider them insulting.

“Well, I can understand that they’re trying to get you motivated to concentrate on things like that but I think we’re all very aware of our weak spots.... I don’t need to be reminded how ugly my legs look in a swimsuit. I know that already.” Pat, age 52.

Other women confirmed hearing these comments but were not offended or bothered by them. Instead they perceived remarks like this to be primarily motivational.

“[When the instructor makes those comments] I laugh. I agree with that. ... The light bulb goes on and sort of this, ‘Oh yes!’, you’d like to look a little better in your summer clothes.” Barbara, age 68.

“Oh I hear those comments but it’s always kind of on an occasional basis ... ‘It’s summertime and don’t forget the bathing suit’ or ‘It is coming up Christmas time and don’t forget the holiday eating.’ ... I mean it’s the truth. ... I think it doesn’t hurt to say those kinds of things.... I just sort of take it
in the innocence that it’s given. And if anything that would then challenge
yourself a bit more to do this one more repetition or whatever the case may
be.” Veronica, age 47.

On one hand, Heidi and Angela both admitted that they attended aerobics, in part,
for appearance enhancement and Angela expressed a distinct preference for a
stereotypical-looking instructor. Yet, both women showed distaste for the instructor’s
discourse about weight loss and appearance. On the other hand, Barbara and Veronica,
who were far less concerned about body image (for themselves and their instructors),
considered image-conscious comments to be innocuous. Clearly, the meanings women
attribute to their involvement in aerobics are multi-dimensional.

Role models. All the participants agreed that the fitness instructor is a role model
to some degree or another. For instance, although Angela perceived role-modeling to be
part of an instructor’s job, she believed instructors often do not fulfill this responsibility.
According to her, instructors are not consistently accountable for educating participants
about exercise. At 68-years-old, Barbara said that she “was not role-modeling anymore.”
However, she suspected that younger participants would perceive the instructor in this
way. Others believed that the instructor’s disposition has a significant effect on how
participants experience the class and how much influence instructors have over
participants.

“I think when you walk into [the aerobics] room, ... you’re vulnerable
in a way because you’re following this person.... And if you don’t like
them or they have ... an attitude, ... you’re not gonna enjoy yourself.”
Erica, age 29.

“I think a fitness instructor does have a bit of responsibility, yes. It’s
not just ... what they look like, ... it’s the whole picture. Like how
they think, how they approach the class, what they’re doing with their
life.... But that’s a big responsibility to put on them as a role model.
You have to be careful how you, as the person taking the class, emphasize the importance of that instructor.” — Veronica, age 47.

“I think [instructors] hold a lot of weight when they come into the room. I really like Marilyn’s class, I like her upbeatness and the attitude she brings to class. I see her as very strong person. I definitely think the instructor has influence…. That is why it’s important for them to be very educated because I think people, especially if they don’t have a lot of experience, will take what they’re telling them as what they should do.” — Madeleine, age 31.

Expertise. As Madeleine suggested above, it is important for instructors to be educated (refer to the following section on Fitness Instructors for an overview of the education and training standards typical of the instructors in this study). I questioned participants about their perceptions of the instructor as an expert. Miranda affirmed that the instructor was the person with the “most expertise” she encountered on a daily basis. Trina considered the instructor to be an expert about fitness but not weight loss. Deirdre expected her instructors to be experts about kinetics - “show[ing] great exercise moves” - but not weight loss or health. Erica summed up the sentiments of most participants: “I expect them to be good at aerobics.” When it came to health and weight loss issues, the majority of women preferred to seek advice from their doctors, nutritionist or personal trainers at the fitness facility.
Fitness Instructors

Apart from the leaders of the three target classes, I also interviewed Sue, the Aerobics Director of the facility. As an employer of fitness instructors, her perspective provided unique insight into the role of the fitness instructor and its relationship to the body image experiences of participants. Considering the fact that Sue is also an instructor at the research site, I have included her responses when relevant.

The instructors ranged in age from 28- to 44-years-old. Three of the women were married and the fourth, Samantha, was engaged. Only Kate, the youngest of the instructors, did not have children. All of the women were white. Kate and Marilyn held occupations outside the fitness industry while Sue and Samantha considered their professional jobs to revolve around fitness.

All four instructors were registered with the British Columbia Recreation and Parks Association (BCRPA), Kate, Samantha and Marilyn as Basic Fitness Leaders and Sue as a Trainer of Leaders. Instructors who are registered with this provincial organization must stay current on fitness education by attending eight hours of approved workshops per year. In order to renew their registration status, instructors must also teach at least 35 hours of classes per year and possess up-to-date Cardiopulmonary Resuscitation (CPR) and First Aid certificates. Apart from the usual Exercise-to-Music certification held by most instructors, Marilyn, Samantha and Sue were qualified Weight Trainers. In addition, Samantha and Sue were certified in Personal Training.

All the instructors possessed a fair amount of experience as fitness leaders. Their years teaching aerobics ranged from eight to 17 (Samantha and Sue both remembered the inception of aerobics classes in the early 1980s; at that time, such classes were considered
a passing fitness phase). The amount of time the instructors had been employed with the fitness club varied from six months to six years. Marilyn was a busy, working mother and only taught once a week at the facility. The other women taught three or four times per week. Refer to Table 3 for a descriptive summary of each instructor.

For the instructors, I followed a similar interview format to the one I used with participants; many of the questions were closely linked. My goal was to understand the instructors’ perspectives on issues that related to the body image experiences of participants. As a result, the instructors’ main themes correspond with the participants’ main themes: Exercise Goals, Aerobics Environment, Body Image and the Fitness Instructor.

**Exercise Goals**

This theme was related to instructors’ own motivations for exercising as well as their perceptions of participants’ goals in aerobics. I also questioned instructors about the extent to which they accommodated these (perceived) goals in aerobics classes.

**Instructors’ Motivations**

All the instructors identified stress reduction or well-being as major factors that motivated them to exercise.

“After a class you’re high - it’s a wonderful feeling. You just feel really good. You know your body might be stiff or sore … but you feel good and you know it’s a positive thing. I hope I can continue to do this for a lot of years.”  

*Marilyn, age 39.*

“I exercise … for stress. It alters mood…. I like the changes that I see in my body if I’ve got certain goals - which are never ending. I just like the way it makes me feel.”  

*Samantha, age 44.*
Table 3

DESCRIPTIONS OF THREE FITNESS INSTRUCTORS and AEROBICS DIRECTOR

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Instructors</th>
<th>Marilyn</th>
<th>Kate</th>
<th>Samantha</th>
<th>Sue (Aerobics Director)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marital Status</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>Engaged</td>
<td>Married</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Children</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Occupation</td>
<td>Self-employed</td>
<td>Economic Consultant</td>
<td>Fitness Instructor</td>
<td>Fitness Professional</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How long teaching aerobics?</td>
<td>8 years</td>
<td>8 years</td>
<td>15 years</td>
<td>17 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How long at this facility?</td>
<td>3.5 years</td>
<td>6 months</td>
<td>6 years</td>
<td>6 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of regular classes taught per week at facility</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Certifications and education in the fitness industry</td>
<td>BCRPA Basic Fitness Leader, Exercise-to-Music, Weight Training</td>
<td>BCRPA Basic Fitness Leader, Exercise-to-Music</td>
<td>BCRPA Basic Fitness Leader, Exercise-to-Music, Weight Training, Personal Training</td>
<td>BCRPA Trainer of Leaders, Bachelor of Physical Education, Exercise-to-Music, Weight Training, Personal Training</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Marilyn also taught aerobics to “keep [her] weight in check,” as did Kate.

Samantha acknowledged that, at times, weight loss was an issue:

“There definitely was the need to lose weight but that was ... not the sole reason. Because it was always my brain that was most affected. If I could get my brain functioning again and feel good getting back into exercise then I knew the weight would come off.”  

Samantha, age 44.

Perceptions of Participants’ Goals

Instructors perceived weight loss, health and socializing to be their participants’ principal motivations for attending aerobics.

“I think the younger group of girls tend to go because of body image reasons. To maintain their weight and to stay in shape and to generally try to have a healthier lifestyle. I think it’s pretty much the same reason for older participants ... but I think a lot of it has to do with maintaining weight. More so than it does with the younger participants.”  

Kate, age 28.

“I think probably if you were to ask them the number one reason would be to lose weight or maintain weight. Secondly, there’s the social aspect. Especially with the 10:30 ... class ... they’re very social.”  

Marilyn, age 39.

“A lot of them feel that ... they should go because it’s the healthy thing to do. Some do come to try and lose weight.... For a lot of them I think it’s a social thing.”  

Samantha, age 44.

Class preparation. I asked instructors whether they prepared classes in accordance with their interpretations of participants’ exercise goals. Sue said she attempted to divert participants’ attention away from “the body image thing” in her classes. Kate also felt that she did not always accommodate participants who wanted to learn about weight loss.

“I spend more time [on safety precautions] in the class than I do about body image ‘cause I don’t like to obsess on it.... I try to stay away from weight loss images as much as possible and ... lean towards images about staying in shape cardiovascullarly or building muscle strength. ... I try to make sure I don’t assume they’re all there to lose weight.”  

Kate, age 28.
Samantha made herself available as “a source of knowledge” for those participants who had questions about weight loss or health. Marilyn was very aware of the ways in which she tailored her class to suit participants’ expectations about weight loss.

“You have to give at least 15 minutes of cardio before there’s a fatburning process happening. So actually, ... I take it even longer. I think the guideline says about 25 minutes maximum and I know I do about 30. So I give them a little bit more. I also make sure we do some kind of body sculpt ... because that’s one way of also getting better results.” Marilyn, age 39.

My observations of the aerobics classes correspond with the above testimonials. I did not hear any instructors specifically addressing weight loss during class. I did notice that, quite often, instructors like Marilyn provided extended cardiovascular (calorie burning) training (as compared with the facility’s written guidelines).

In addition to providing a longer cardio segment, Marilyn also believed her friendly attitude fostered a social atmosphere in her class.

“I try to come in with a smile.... I know people by name: ‘Hi Barbara, how are you?’ ... I think if I whipped in and put my back to them, ... started the music, turned off the music and went, that’s giving them ... a message.” Marilyn, age 39.

Aerobics Environment

Exercise Clothes

This theme focused exclusively on the type of exercise clothes the instructors preferred to wear at aerobics. Kate felt most comfortable in “a pair of tight shorts with a tank top ... or a one piece body suit.” Samantha claimed that what she wore at aerobics “depends on how [her] body’s feeling at the time.” On the occasions that I observed her teaching, she wore lycra tights and a bra top with a shirt tied around her waist. Unlike Kate and Samantha, Marilyn did not feel comfortable in the ‘typical’ aerobics fashions:

“I’m not the g-string type of gal.... I’m just not that body type so it’s
always been a little bit ... of a challenge for me to have something fashionable. You don’t want to go in there with a baggy T-shirt so what I wear is a pair of jogging nylon pants with some stretch pants underneath. ... And then a tank top to show off my upper body.... It’s not like that tight lycra stuff so it looks better on my body form.” - Marilyn, age 39.

Like Marilyn, Sue was concerned about wearing form-fitting clothing while teaching. Even though she is “in better shape now” than years ago, she is more at ease in looser exercise outfits. Although she wore thong leotards in the past, she expressed discomfort about wearing them lately because “everyone just looks right at your butt ... and then picks it apart.”

“I don’t know how many times I’ve changed three or four times before a class thinking, ‘Oh, I don’t like the way I look in this.’... When the Jane Fonda thing came out, ... you had to wear the leg warmers and you had to wear the tight body suits ... to fit in. [Now] I think it’s getting better.” - Sue, age 42.

Considering that some instructors prefer to dress in clothes that are less revealing than the traditional attire, I questioned Sue about whether the management at this facility had expectations about how an instructor should present herself:

“Actually, it’s pretty easy going.... They don’t expect you to wear a low cut top ... or tight shorts.... Which I am really glad about because some places I know they flip out if you wear shorts and a T-shirt. They say, ‘Get your T-shirt off!’” - Sue, age 42.

Sue observed that, in some cases, the instructor’s dress influenced the style of clothes participants donned. Her example underscores the influence an instructor can have on the body image experiences of participants:

“I usually wear just running shorts and a top ... And I’ve noticed that people who used to wear the thong leotards and whatever, when they come to my classes now they’re just in shorts and T-shirts.” - Sue, age 42.
Sue speculated that dressing for comfort represents a “healthy” departure from the fashion-conscious era of Jane Fonda. Wearing looser, less fashionable clothes to workout, challenges the long-standing focus on appearance in aerobics.

Body Image

This theme pertained to how satisfied and dissatisfied instructors were with their appearance, as well as their interpretations of a fit female body. As with participants, instructors cited holistic (an integration of psychological, spiritual and physical factors) and appearance-oriented concepts of a fit body.

Satisfaction

All instructors were satisfied with their bodies. Kate noticed that her sense of satisfaction developed with age: “The older I get, the more I learn to accept my body the way it is and the more I’m happy with it.” Samantha recognized that satisfaction came from being comfortable with one’s self. However, she also believed that when it comes to body image, “everyone’s really hard on themselves.”

“I’ll go to class and someone will say, ‘How are you?’ and I’ll go, ‘Retaining’ and grab a hunk of my hip or butt ‘cause that’s where it all goes. But, you know, I’ll work it off.” – Samantha, age 44.

I questioned instructors about body image satisfaction because I was interested in understanding how their own body image perceptions impact the body image experiences of participants. Samantha recognized that body image woes were pervasive among women in aerobics and used her own displeasure over “retaining” to create a commonality between herself and her participants. Although her general attitude towards her body image was positive, she emphasized her discouragement. In this scenario, Samantha’s
interaction with aerobics participants reinforced societal expectations about women and their propensity towards body image dissatisfaction.

The Fit Body

**Appearance.** The instructors generally rejected the notion of an appearance-oriented fit body. Kate defined a fit body differently for herself than for her participants. On a personal level, she marked her ideal body, in part, by how well she fit into a pair of blue jeans. However, she considered a fit participant to be someone who was “trying to maintain a healthy existence.” For her, whether they were “skinny, plump, round, toned [or] not toned” was irrelevant.

Since Samantha had been teaching aerobics for 15 years, her concept of a fit body changed over time. She recognized that the stereotypical image of a fit body was not representative of one’s ability to actually perform physical activity. For instance, several times in her aerobics career people exclaimed over her level of fitness when she knew her cardiovascular conditioning was in need of improvement (after surgery or the birth of her daughter). The people who were complimenting her based their assessments on her appearance alone. For Samantha, a fit body must be “conditioned from the inside out.”

"Is there a visual component to a fit body?"

“No, not any more. There used to be. I’d think, ‘Boy, you must really be fit.’... [Some people] ... look good, they’re muscular, they’re well-toned, yet they wouldn’t last five minutes in a HiLo 3 class because their cardiovascular conditioning is just zero.”

*Samantha, age 44.*

According to Samantha, her perceptions of the “perfect body” were fueled by images in women’s magazines. Likewise, Marilyn cited *Shape* magazine when discussing her impression of a fit body. Although she viewed the models as visually fit, she considered
their appearance to be “unrealistic for the majority of people” because, for her, a fit body “is not necessarily skinny.”

“What images do you think are portrayed in Shape?”

“Well certainly fit bodies. But, I think a little bit on the skinny side. I mean all those models ... are very, very thin women. And you have to be thin to show off your muscles like that - the rippling abs. I don’t think I’d go so far as to say that it’s unhealthy but I do think maybe they should show a little more meat on the bones.” Marilyn, age 39.

Holistic. Instructors took a primarily integrated approach to defining a fit body.

Kate considered her own body to be fit if she possessed “relatively high lean body tissue versus fat tissue, good cardiovascular endurance ... and general toning, not bulking.” She also included the fact that she did not deprive herself of food to be an integral component of achieving her concept of a fit, healthy body. Marilyn also mentioned measures of physical ability and psychological wellness.

“[A fit body] is someone who is toned, not necessarily skinny. Someone who can do aerobics for 30 minutes at a stretch, three or four times a week. Someone who can lift a certain amount of weight.... Someone who feels good about themselves would be a fit body.” Marilyn, age 39.

Samantha also emphasized health-consciousness.

“For me, it’s very much a health thing. Being health-conscious and living my life that way.... If I didn’t live my life that way I wouldn’t have the kind of stamina to do my classes the same way week after week. [Being fit] makes you not only look better but feel better.” Samantha, age 44.

In addition, she asserted that a fit body is “a state of mind” which allows you to “live a lifestyle around being fit.”
The Fitness Instructor

As with participants, this theme focuses on the role of the fitness instructor and its relationship to the body image experiences of participants. Its one sub-theme - influence of the instructor - refers to instructors’ interpretations of how they impact the body image experiences of their participants.

Influence of the Instructor

All instructors believed that they had the potential to influence the body image experiences of aerobics participants. Samantha mentioned that participants have told her she is a “great motivator.” Recognizing her influence, she works to help participants ameliorate the negative perceptions they have about their appearance.

“If you can change ... the way they’re thinking about their body images - and they just happen to be getting fit at the same time - then that’s great. ... Losing weight doesn’t have to be such a heartache.... I’ve had quite a few people tell me, ‘If it wasn’t for you, I would have given this up a long time ago.’” Samantha, age 44.

Appearance. All the instructors agreed that a fitness leader’s appearance contributed to her influence in aerobics. Marilyn perceived the majority of instructors she worked with to be representative of the stereotypical image found in *Shape* magazine: young and very thin. She hoped that her presence influenced participants to feel comfortable in her class.

“I’m not one of those Twiggy girls who wears a g-string. Maybe, in that way, my appearance [lets] them know that whatever they wear or whatever they look like it’s okay.” Marilyn, age 39.

The other instructors also speculated that their appearances had a bearing on the body image experiences of participants. They all agreed, however, that not all participants are
influenced in the same manner. The physique of an instructor may inspire one woman and intimidate another. Samantha believed that a beginner to aerobics would be intimidated by a “stereotyped fitness instructor.” My observations suggested that instructors at the fitness facility who represented this stereotypical look wore fashionable aerobics attire, were slim, toned and generally attractive. Sue observed that some participants select an instructor based on what “they want to ... look like” while others seek out instructors who appear to be more average-looking and thus more like them.

“[If] someone who’s a little bit on the heavier side [goes] to a class where the instructor looks so good ... they can get intimidated.... They think, ‘Oh, I look like this and I don’t look like that.’ ... They’d rather go to someone who they can identify with.”  

“[If] someone who’s a little bit on the heavier side [goes] to a class where the instructor looks so good ... they can get intimidated.... They think, ‘Oh, I look like this and I don’t look like that.’ ... They’d rather go to someone who they can identify with.”  

Sue, age 42.

“We’re trying to lose weight, maybe if you go to someone’s class who’s a little bit overweight then you’ll feel more comfortable and won’t be so conscious about being in the class. Or ... people want to see someone who is in really good shape - a little thinner - because it motivates them to get to that goal too.... Inspiration.”  

Kate, age 28.

Kate suspected certain “vulnerable” participants would be particularly affected by the actions and appearance of the fitness instructor:

“The people who are most influenced ... are the people who are desperately trying to reshape their own body images.... Whether they want more muscle or they want to lose fat.... Those people are a little more consumed with their physical appearance and are sort of obsessive about it.”  

Kate, age 28.

Expectations: Participants. The instructors identified an acute awareness of participants’ expectations about an instructor’s appearance. Sue felt that because instructors are “on display,” they are often judged by their physical attributes. In turn, these judgments are directed at the instructor’s body size and/or shape.

“People think if they see someone heavy ... that they’re not going to be able to get up there and give a good workout. [They say], ‘Oh I can smoke that one’ or ‘What’s she doing up there?’”  

Marilyn, age 39.
“I definitely think there is a certain image or expectation for the instructor from the participant.... I’ve heard people say, ‘Look at her, she’s overweight and what’s she doing teaching the class?’ I’ve heard those comments from participants when I was in the locker room about someone ... who had just taught.”  Kate, age 28.

“Unfortunately how an instructor’s body looks ... greatly affects the members who go. They look up to an instructor for certain things.”  Samantha, age 44.

Both Kate and Samantha anticipated that these expectations differed according to the fitness levels of participants. Beginners to aerobics would be less critical than those who demanded an advanced workout. Kate suggested “the die-hard fitness fanatics” were the ones mostly likely to make denigrating comments about an instructor’s body: “If they’re really in good shape, they want their instructors to be in really good shape too.”  Contrary to what participants in this study revealed, Samantha assumed that advanced participants are “not looking at a particular body type.”

“The more advanced people are more knowledgeable. They’ve been in it long enough to know that if someone who was a different weight and size came in to [teach] an advanced class, [they would] be as fit, if not fitter, than [other instructors].”  Samantha, age 44.

Sue made a similar distinction between younger and older participants: “I think it’s the younger ones that talk and ... the older ones are beyond that aesthetic thing and into the health thing.”  In most cases, the instructors determined that participants perpetuated a thin-equals-fit stereotype when evaluating the appearance of a fitness leader.

**Expectations: Instructors.** When I asked the fitness instructors whether they had any expectations about how a fitness instructor’s body should look, they were quick to respond that they did not; they had seen just about every body shape and size in an
instructor. Kate emphasized that “a diversity of body types, shapes and sizes is best for any club to incorporate.” The other instructors reiterated Kate’s assertion:

“Things have changed in the last few years and it’s great … and it’s something you can communicate to your members, … that fitness is not a certain body type, shape or size. There are lots of big people out there who are incredibly strong and who are cardiovascularly fit. Don’t think for one minute they can’t out run you [or] out jump you.”

Samantha, age 44.

“I think it’s really good that people do see … instructors of all shapes and sizes … [and these instructors] get up there and just show them that you can be a little bit heavier but still really give them a good run for their money.”

Marilyn, age 39.

Although the instructors encouraged the presence of heavier-than-normal instructors, they eschewed an image that was unusually thin. Marilyn believed it was not healthy for participants to see “skin and bones people up there teaching a class.” Kate admitted that the only type of body she would not want to see in an instructor is someone who was “anorexic-looking” because “it really encourages people who have an image problem … that that [look] is okay.” Similarly, Sue declared that she would not hire an instructor who appeared anorexic because she didn’t approve of what that image portrayed to participants.

Expectations: Employers. In general, Marilyn was convinced that her employers, the Aerobics Director and the management, expected the appearance of an instructor to be consistent with cultural standards of an ideal, fit female body. Kate was more hesitant to make an assertion:

“There’s a real range of body shapes of the instructors here. Some are really muscular and athletic-looking, some are really thin - perhaps a little too thin. And then some are, you know, rounded, softer-looking. So I’d like to say no, [she has no expectations], but I’m not sure.”

Kate, age 28.
The diversity of meanings associated with body image experiences at aerobics is underscored by the fact that Marilyn considered most instructors at the research site to represent the typical media image while Kate perceived a “range of body shapes.”

Unlike years ago, Samantha was adamant about the fact that appearance no longer played a role in the hiring of instructors.

“Body type no longer [makes a difference]. Not like in the old days when they’d come up and go, ‘Hey, you’d make a perfect aerobics instructor. Look at you!’ [And you’d say], ‘Oh, I drink and smoke … does that matter?’ ‘No, not at all, you look good, you look the part.’ …. That mentality is gone. Long gone.” Samantha, age 44.

However, Sue confirmed that the fitness facility’s management team expected her to hire a certain image:

“They want the body beautiful type: in shape and … looking really fit and sculpted and lean. If they had to pick on a scale of … leanest to least lean, they’d definitely go to the leanest.” Sue, age 42.

Despite these expectations, Sue resisted hiring instructors based on appearance first and foremost.

“I think if … someone … couldn’t really get through the cardio and they weren’t really coordinated, that would be judged more than if they didn’t look body beautiful. I don’t really look at that…. Sometimes you look at instructors … and go, ‘Wow, are they ever in good shape!’ but they are a lousy instructor. And then someone who’s … a little bit overweight [is] really talented. Well, hey, they’re in.” Sue, age 42.

Comparisons. As mentioned, participants’ expectations about the instructor’s appearance were often associated with their own body image experiences in aerobics. I asked the instructors what they thought of participants comparing their bodies to the instructor’s body. Samantha consistently heard one “famous line” from participants:
"How long do I have to keep doing this to look like you?" Although she was often astounded that participants sought after an appearance similar to her own, she understood their intentions because she compared herself to others as well. From Kate and Marilyn's standpoints, perpetuation of a standard, 'fit' ideal was not encouraged.

"I don’t like it at all.... I wouldn’t like to think they compare their body to mine because every body’s different.... So I wouldn’t want people to be trying to compare, fit themselves or compartmentalize themselves into ... me."  

Kate, age 28.

"Well, I think if anything that my body would give off that it’s a strong body. And I don’t think that’s anything wrong for a woman to want to strive for that. I’m not anorexic by any means and I think I’d feel really upset if people were going home and [saying], ‘Oh my God, I’ve got to look like Marilyn, I better lose 30 pounds.’"  

Marilyn, age 39.

Role model. The instructors unanimously identified themselves as role models in the aerobics setting. Kate felt that she was regarded as a role model primarily by those participants who came to aerobics specifically to be instructed by her. Marilyn conceptualized her role-modeling responsibility as "a whole package" which included exercise demonstration, education and the creation of a social environment. Samantha was aware that her position as controller of the aerobics class rendered her a role model.

Expertise. Three out of the four instructors did not consider themselves to be experts in the fitness field, nor did they anticipate that participants perceived them to be experts. These instructors felt more comfortable being regarded as individuals who possess general knowledge about fitness and health since BCRPA registration is only designed to meet very basic educational requirements. Sue strongly rejected expertise as part of the instructor’s role:

"I’d hate to think that they see themselves as an expert [as oppose to] just a source of information on where to go and refer people to. It would
be really scary if they were the experts because they just learn little bits of this and little bits of that.”  
Sue, age 42.

Contrary to her peers’ objections, Samantha embraced the role of expert:

“Do you think participants consider you an expert about fitness and weight loss in the aerobics class setting?”

“Yes. If that’s the question, yes I think they consider me an expert. They don’t realize that you’re always learning…. You’re an expert I think if you keep up to date on everything that’s happening.”

“So are you comfortable in the role of fitness expert or weight loss expert?”

“Yes.”

**Participant concerns.** Whether or not the instructor sees herself as an expert (and whether or not this role is an appropriate one), participants consistently pursue their advice about health, fitness and particularly weight loss. Kate estimated that once a week somebody will ask her about techniques for losing weight. However, she speculated that only a small percentage of the class population are comprised of individuals who actually make the effort to inquire about weight loss. Samantha said that participants come to her “all the time” expressing concern - “always in a negative manner” - over their physical appearance:

“[They say], ‘What can I do to lose this?’ and they’ll grab a hold of their underarm. And, ‘What can I do to lose this chunk around my abdomen?’ ‘What can I do about my double chin?’ ‘What can I do about my thighs?’ ‘What’s an exercise that I can do that will get rid of all this?’ And I can’t answer that with just one direct response.”  
Samantha, age 44.

**Spot reduction.** Based on their experiences with participants seeking advice about weight loss, all the instructors noted that participants were poorly informed about which exercises would be effective and which ones would not. For the most part, participants were eager for a ‘quick fix’ to remedy their body image laments: “They want to take that exercise and go home with it and have it all be taken care of” (Samantha). When
participants come to Kate with body image concerns, she suggests “a whole lifestyle change.” However, she gets the impression that “they want a faster fix than [she] is willing to advise.”

“A lot of questions are surprisingly still referring to spot reduction. And we all know that doesn’t work…. And most of the time those people, if they’re at the point where they’re actually going to ask me about it, it’s usually [because] they’ve got a time limit. Like, ‘I’ve got a wedding to go to in two months, so how can I get this weight off as fast as I can?’ It’s usually a matter of speed as opposed to general life-style change.” — Kate, age 28.

“It seems that if people come up [to me], it’s about wanting to spot reduce. They maybe want to have a slimmer stomach…. There really isn’t such a thing as spot reducing, you kind of have to look at the whole package.” — Marilyn, age 39.

**Education.** All the instructors agreed that education was a key factor in transforming the body image experiences of participants. Generally speaking, most instructors are certified and registered with a provincial governing organization like the BCRPA and are more than qualified to provide participants with general information about exercise and the body. Sue questioned the credibility of instructors who do not share their knowledge with participants: “If you can’t educate them, then you’re not doing half the job.” Kate felt that a focus on education would help dispel participants’ misconceptions about exercise and weight loss.

“I’d like to see the aerobics participants become more informed about body image, fitness and nutrition. And what they’re doing in class besides sweating and trying to kill themselves half the time.” — Kate, age 28.

However, Kate observed that participants often “tune out” during the workout. She insisted that they must take responsibility for educating themselves: “even if you’re up
there giving them fit tips and safety precautions, they still keep making the same mistakes and assumptions they always have been.”

In short, data collected in this study underscores the extent to which both participants and instructors construct multiple meanings and interpretations of body image in aerobics.
Interpreting Body Image Experiences in Aerobics

Resisting the fit body aesthetic. This study investigated how women interpreted their body image experiences and the role of the fitness instructor in the context of a culturally inscribed physical activity: aerobics. Cole (1993) regarded aerobics as an arena where "knowledges, practices and strategies ... manufacture and normalize the feminine body" (p. 87). She also insisted that aerobics, as a normalizing practice, does not accommodate for participants' resistance to the cultural standards it typically espouses. On one hand, interview data and observations revealed that weight loss and body maintenance were part of the aerobics experience. On the other hand, some participants resisted the notion of a "manufactured" cultural ideal (Cole, 1993, p. 87). Although Erica participated in aerobics, in part, to lose weight, achieving a normalized, feminine physique was not her goal. Erica's preference for an athletic, strong female form contested Cole's assertion that there is only one aerobics aesthetic: the participant as an "aerobicized-nautilized-Jane Fonda-Slim Fast-subject" (Cole, 1993, p. 87).

Many participants considered aerobics to be more than a means to lose weight or tone muscles. Although women in a study by Redican and Hadley (1988) reported that attending aerobics for health "was not as significant a feature as the ... pursuit of the ideal image," all women in the present study underscored the importance of the former (p. 57). For Veronica and Barbara, striving for an ideal figure at aerobics was not a primary goal. Granted, they both mentioned wanting to lose a few pounds, but neither woman considered weight loss as significant as maintaining health and physical agility. Cole
(1993) did not address how women like Erica, Veronica and Barbara would fit into her description of the aerobics scene. In another article on ethnography and cultural representations, Cole (1991) addressed the importance of recognizing the multiplicity of subjects’ experiences so they are not overshadowed by the ‘authority’ of the researcher. Such an approach

challenge[s] the nature and status of theorizing, breaking through assumptions about totalizing theory; problematize[s] the universal conceptualization of ‘women’ ... and illuminate[s] the need to consider differences not only between but within women (Cole, 1991, p. 42).

It is precisely this avenue, rather than unsubstantiated theorizing about the universalization of women in aerobics, which will bring useful information to light about the body image experiences of aerobics participants and instructors.

Asserting agency in aerobics. Kagan & Morse (1988) recognized that aerobics encourages women to mirror the image of the instructor. According to their theory, fitness instructors, and particularly aerobics “superstars” like Jane Fonda, represent dominant culture’s interpretation of an ideal physique (p. 167). Participants attend aerobics or follow exercise videos in an effort to transfer this image to themselves:

Spatially, aerobics are organized by the “mirror”; that is, an actual studio mirror with which the instructor and the class orient themselves, or a virtual mirror in which the instructor in the studio or video faces the participant as if she were the participant’s own reflection. ... This mirror space inaugurates a dual space linking cultural representation with the body of the viewer. In this case the reflection determines the real, rather than vice versa, for participants attempt to embody the image of a unifying ideal in the mirror ... in their own real or three dimensional space (Kagan & Morse, 1988, pp. 169-170).

Deirdre’s explanation of “body image by association” supports this premise. Imagining that an instructor with “a great body” mirrors her appearance, allows Deirdre to aspire to a physique that she considers more socially appealing than her own. In fact, she admitted
that an instructor who is “somewhat less than perfect” makes her “hyper-critical” because the mirroring effect is no longer motivational.

Kagan and Morse (1988) suggested that participants’ individual agency is lost because they “mimic and obey” the fitness instructor (p. 171). The authors called this “do like me and you will be like me” format “the aerobics contract” (p. 167). Further, they posited that participants (sometimes unwillingly) focus on their appearance at the expense of other exercise benefits such as the joy of movement and wellness:

*The student overcomes resistance by borrowing the leader’s will and the leader’s voice to animate her body. The imperatives of the seen body and the voice of a cultural ideal overcome the resistance offered by the felt body and the flesh* (Kagan & Morse, 1988, p. 171).

Results from this study clearly contradict this postulation. First, Kagan and Morse do not consider the agency of the instructor. Despite the fact that some participants expected the instructor to represent a cultural ideal (Madeleine mentioned “The 20 Minute Workout girls”), none of the instructors viewed themselves in this manner. The above quotation suggests that instructors are part of a cultural plot to control the body image experiences of aerobics participants. To the contrary, the instructors in this study aspired to promote body image satisfaction in aerobics by focusing attention away from appearance and educating participants about weight loss myths like spot reduction. As a fitness instructor myself, I oppose Kagan and Morse’s (1988) description of the fitness leader as someone who animates the bodies of participants. Subjects’ responses in this study revealed that the instructor/participant relationship is not “one-way” or “hierarchical” as Kagan and Morse professed (p. 171). Participants were not merely led by their instructors, they constructed a multitude of interpretations about their body images and the role of the instructor. In turn, these interpretations shaped participants’ experiences in aerobics.
Second, the agency of the participants must be addressed. Although aerobics is set within a cultural framework that encourages conformity to femininity and ideal beauty, many participants expressed an aversion to this process. For example, Veronica contested the stereotypical appearance and behaviour encouraged in some aerobics classes:

“There were some instructors … dressed in this really trendy stuff and looking beautiful and all the make-up…. And they were … yelling and screaming and I left that class. I mean that class was just definitely not for me, I don’t get into that kind of thing at all.”  Veronica, age 47.

Erica explained that women who are unique from the normalized physical ideal are the ones who tend to catch her eye. She explicitly rejected culture’s definition of a beautiful woman as one who resembles the ubiquitous image put forth by fashion magazines. Her preference for this type of appearance also applied to her interpretations of the aerobics environment. Erica considered an instructor with chubby cheeks, wide shoulders, big arms or curves to her body, more appealing than someone with “a size four waist.”

Although Erica expressed resistance to a culturally-defined aesthetic ideal, it would be simplistic to assume that other women, who prefer a more stereotypical-looking instructor, are oppressed by their experiences at aerobics.

* A strong overweight woman, theoretically, would offer the most direct resistance to the patriarchal notions of femininity in this society, as her body would directly oppose the toned and thin ideal. If we define resistance only through clear binary oppositions like this, aerobics … would never offer an avenue of true resistance (Markula, 1995, p 442).

Concentrating on absolute oppression or absolute resistance in aerobics denies women’s “struggle to give different meanings to the ideal aerobicizing body” (Markula, 1995, p. 450). Based on her study, Markula (1995) concluded that “women’s relationship with the body ideal is contradictory”; although participants sought a culturally-defined physical aesthetic in aerobics, they also considered “the whole process ridiculous” (p. 450).
Similar results emerged in the present study. Deirdre was turned off by the body-conscious atmosphere she perceived at aerobics, yet she was disappointed if her instructor did not meet stereotypical ideals. Like many participants in Markula’s study (1995), Heidi was less intimidated by an instructor who was average-looking. However, despite the instructor’s appearance, she still felt pressure to attain a fit body ideal for herself. On one hand, Veronica reproached instructors who exemplified a stereotypical “sexified and bubblified” image (Valdés, 1995, p. 17). On the other hand, she was ambivalent about instructors who made image-conscious comments. Other women, like Angela, purposely selected stereotypical-looking instructors but were put off if they focused verbal attention on weight loss and body perfection. Angela considered the contradictory meanings she placed on body image and interpretations of the instructor “an emotional as opposed to a mental reaction.”

“When you start getting into things like body image and your weight and the whole acceptance thing in society, you leave what’s in your mind and you go with your emotional side.”  

Angela, age 24.

In short, subjects’ responses support Haravon’s (1995) assertion that aerobics represents “a constant struggle between dominant ideologies and resistance to it” (p. 41).

Interpreting the Aerobics Environment

Creating meaning through aerobics fashion. Participants’ reactions to the typical aerobics attire worn by women at the gym further reinforced Haravon’s concept of “a constant struggle.” Frederick and Shaw (1995) discovered that participants’ intimidation over traditional, revealing aerobics wear affected the extent to which they enjoyed aerobics. Although participants in the present study did not express similar feelings, there
were some common concerns about aerobics clothing and body-consciousness. For example, Frederick and Shaw (1995) described a participant who “wore the traditional aerobics wear, but covered her body with a baggy t-shirt to conceal the part of her body that she felt least comfortable revealing” (p. 64). The authors felt that women who wore loose clothes over tight aerobics attire were engaging in “negotiations around how to make the social setting of aerobics more comfortable, less intimidating, and less of a threat to women’s body insecurities” (Frederick & Shaw, 1995, p. 65). The majority of participants in this study admitted that they usually wore revealing exercise attire but that they covered this clothing with a loose-fitting T-shirt or shorts. The fact that these women wore the fashionable exercise wear under other clothing is of interest. What meanings did they attribute to typical aerobics attire? Madeleine talked about ‘graduating’ to a bra top when she finally started exercising without a T-shirt. Deirdre admitted that she “mocked” other participants in spandex partly out of jealousy.

Willis (1990) wrote that women at fitness clubs compete over “who’s wearing the hottest leotard” (p. 7). Conversely, interview data and my observations suggest that women do not compete over clothing at aerobics, but they are aware of what this clothing symbolizes for them. For Madeleine, wearing a bra top was not about finally achieving her desired physique, it was about allowing herself to feel unrestricted movement. My observations confirmed that many women who wore revealing exercise wear did not have bodies that would be considered culturally ideal. Even though Deirdre did not approve of the fashion-conscious gym setting, she envied women who felt comfortable enough with their bodies to “walk around in something that is like a second skin.” In a class where she has had a positive experience exercising and feels a camaraderie with the instructor,
Deirdre will take off her long T-shirt during the floorwork and abdominal exercises. Due to the fact that the participants are lying on the floor during the abdominal session of the class, it is likely that the instructor would be the only one to see Deirdre in her leotard. Deirdre considered the act of removing her T-shirt to be an expression of trust in the instructor (for making her feel comfortable in the class and “happy” with her exercise experience), as well as symbolic of feeling like “part of the crowd.”

The symbolic meaning behind traditional exercise wear for some women does not imply a competition over appearance and fashion-consciousness as Willis (1991) would suggest. For Madeleine and Deirdre, wearing revealing clothing reflected their desire to feel comfortable with their exercising bodies, a ‘negotiation’ that extended beyond aerobics fashion as exclusively appearance-oriented.

**Looking beyond the mirror.** Like Willis with fashion, MacNeill (1990) felt that the mirrors at aerobics added to the objectification and competitiveness of participants. She suggested that, in addition to the virtual reflection of the (media) instructor, women obsessively focus on themselves in the aerobics mirror: “Through the reflection in the glass, participants objectify themselves in much the same way they consume two-dimensional aerobic celebrities encased within the television screen or fitness magazine cover” (MacNeill, 1990, p. 7). She believed that participants compete with each other, and against themselves, when they are fixated on their mirrored appearance. As a result, women at aerobics “neglect the opportunity to socially interact with each other” (MacNeill, 1990, p. 7). Although data from this project suggest that some participants look to certain instructors as models for their own desired figures, there is little evidence indicating that participants objectified *themselves* in this same way. Few participants
expressed a desire to look in the mirror unless they were concerned with body form and alignment. In fact, several women disclosed that self-consciousness over their bodies made seeing their reflection an uncomfortable experience and avoided it if possible. Finally, there was no indication that the participants abdicated the opportunity to interact with others because they were too absorbed in their mirrored reflections or competing for “the perfectly fit body” (MacNeill, 1990, p. 6).

Concluding Remarks

Some women at aerobics work to normalize their body to a socially-constructed aesthetic through weight loss and body toning. Many of the same women also express resistance to certain stereotypical-looking instructors and/or comments which encourage body perfection at aerobics. A suggestion that aerobics either encourages or discourages body image satisfaction among women oversimplifies the issue. Haravon (1995) recognized that “no activity can be purely empowering, it can only be more or less so” (p. 40). This is truly the case with aerobics.

Data collected for this research project indicated that the instructor can influence the empowerment/disempowerment process. The appearance and actions of the fitness instructor have an impact on the body image experiences of some aerobics participants, some of the time. Trina saw this influence as a vital part of the instructor’s role: “I think it’s very important for the instructor to be a good model for the participants and I think [she] has to be able to not look just at the body but also … deeper than the body.” Heidi believed when instructors make image-conscious comments about “the girls on Melrose Place,” they are unaware of their responsibility as a leader of the class. As mentioned,
certain participants, like Miranda, also strongly emphasized their trust in the instructor:

“Kate’s word is just like the Bible for me.”

Research on aerobics as a form of popular culture, and Haravon’s (1995) vision to “encourage feelings of empowerment and social change on a personal level,” must focus in part on the role of the fitness instructor (p. 25). As an instructor, I found it extremely useful to consider how the instructor’s appearance and actions are interpreted by participants, particularly with respect to body image issues. Being aware that image-conscious comments offend some participants is instrumental in establishing alternative ways to motivate participants to achieve their fitness goals. Educating participants about the variety of body types associated with physical fitness may counteract certain stereotypical, mainstream expectations about how an instructor, as an example of a fit body, is supposed to look. Recommendations for the personal empowerment of aerobics participants means resisting the assumption that all participants share common beliefs about body image and weight loss goals. Erica understood the complexity of interpreting body image experiences within the context of an aerobics class: “We all move the same way for an hour but we all have different feelings on different things.” An awareness of the individual body image experiences of each class member is imperative.

Recommendations for Future Research

**Race and ethnicity.** An investigation of race, body image and aerobics would be a valuable addition to the current literature. As mentioned, in the present study, Miranda was of Asian-Canadian descent and all the other women were white. Although I did not ask Miranda directly about whether race affected her body image experiences at aerobics
or her interpretations of the role of the instructor, I hoped that the semi-structured interview format would allow subjects to feel comfortable discussing their experiences above and beyond the interview questions. However, Miranda did not mention the ways in which race may have played a role in her experiences at aerobics.

An examination of Asian-Canadian/American women in aerobics would be extremely beneficial because many Asian women participate regularly in aerobics. Martin (1997) observed that in Californian aerobics classes, the two main populations of participants were white and Asian-American. Even in hiphop aerobics - a group workout based on black dance culture - Martin noticed that the instructor was “usually the lone African-American in the room” (p. 124). My own observations of classes on both the West coast of British Columbia and San Francisco confirm Martin’s assertions: white women make up the majority of aerobics participants, followed by Asian women. Future research should compare how different racial and cultural groups interpret their experiences at aerobics and how these interpretations relate to cultural norms and practices.

Some cultural and racial groups hold values that are inconsistent with the stereotypical goal of aerobics (i.e. weight loss). For example, Buchanan (1993) stated that “[w]eight preoccupation is not a central concern for many Black women” (p. 37). She explained that the black community is more appreciative of female curves than the white community. Therefore, many black women “carry their weight with pride and style” (Buchanan, 1993, p. 47). Research which addresses racial and cultural differences in aesthetic ideals for women would be useful in determining why aerobics does not appeal to a greater diversity of women.
**Age differences.** Considering that the majority of participants were 31 years of age or younger, there was little opportunity to compare participant responses according to age differences. Most of the younger women were inclined to compare their bodies to the instructor’s. Conversely, Veronica, age 47, and Barbara, age 68, did not compare themselves to the instructor. Although Pat, age 52, made comparisons, she was aware of its negative implications: “You’ve got to be worried about you and … not the person who’s teaching.” All three participants over 45 were also far less concerned than many of their younger counterparts about being instructed by a fitness leader who did not match a cultural ideal. Angela, age 24, confirmed that her age had an effect on her preference for an attractive instructor: “Maybe if you’re older you don’t want to see some young, little 22-year-old up there running around, but for me at my age … it’s more motivating.”

Veronica was curious about how younger women responded to the interview questions. When I reiterated Angela’s sentiments cited above, she replied, “I think that probably if I was in my early 20s, that is exactly what I would have said too.”

“I think the younger [participants] are, the more they want that look. The older they are, I would assume what they want is the knowledge and the ability to do the class and it doesn’t really matter who the instructor is.”

*Veronica, age 47.*

Sue, age 42, also suspected younger women have the highest expectations about encountering an instructor with a fit body appearance. Marilyn felt instructors and fitness facilities have a responsibility to cater to all age levels, not just the younger participants.

“I think especially because of the baby boom- like we’re all getting older and I think it’s kind of unrealistic to think that we should all be really skinny like in the *Shape* magazines. So I think we have to … start … to reflect our clientele.”

*Marilyn, age 39.*
Women in their twenties and thirties, and women of the baby boomer generation represent two demographic groups that frequent aerobics (Markula, 1993a, 1993b, 1995; Redican & Hadley, 1988; Warrick & Tinning, 1989a, 1989b). Future research on body image, aerobics and the role of the fitness instructor should focus on the differences and similarities between older and younger women.

**Location of aerobics classes.** There is contention in the literature about the apparent differences between private clubs and public community centres and their impact on the body image experiences of participants. Kenen (1987) observed seven different exercise programs located on both the East and West coasts of the United States over a three year period. She concluded that non-profit centres promoted a supportive, non-competitive environment while franchise establishments targeted trendy people with a “looking good” approach to fitness (Kenen, 1987, p. 75). She also suggested that the instructors at non-profit facilities had more integrity and education than the “doll-like” instructors with “some dance background” who taught at franchise clubs (pp. 76, 77). In fact, she insinuated a distinct polarity in the nature of aerobics between the two locations:

> The nonprofit classes differ from those of the franchises in their ambiance, qualifications of the instructor, number of students admitted, types of explanations given, space allowed per participant, personal attention, and dress of the instructor (Kenen, 1987, p. 76).

Willis’ (1990) analysis of public and private fitness centres yielded similar interpretations. According to her, “the burgeoning of glitzy private clubs and spas has made the YMCA and community recreation programs appear lacklustre and oldfashioned” (p. 6). She rebuked the former for creating an atmosphere of competition over appearance and commended the latter for promoting “bonding between women” (p. 6). Willis envisioned the private club to have “mirrors everywhere” and women - who “see themselves as
bodies” - vying to achieve the proper workout look: “Several exercise costumes, special no-smudge make-up, and an artfully understated hairdo” (p. 7).

Willis (1990) seemed to have merely speculated about the differences between private clubs and community centres since she did not cite any formal empirical results. Kenen’s (1987) study is outdated as it was carried out a decade ago. Markula (1993a) followed up Kenen’s findings in her own research. She observed aerobics classes held at campus recreation, university family housing and a city health club in Illinois. In California, she made observations at Gold’s Gym, a well-established franchise in Canada and the United States. She did not notice many of the distinctions Kenen (1987) made between the two exercise sites.

As an instructor and aerobics participant, I have experienced aerobics at a variety of exercise settings in both British Columbia and California. My informal observations of aerobics in the mid-to-late 1990s, in addition to formal observations of the research site, do not correspond with those of Kenen (1987) or Willis (1990). Instructors are equally educated despite the location where they teach. As exemplified by subjects’ responses, socializing with other women was an ordinary occurrence in the private club setting. Although the mode of dress is often more fashion-conscious in private clubs, this may be a product of the class or time certain participants attend. For instance, Pat, who was a regular at a beginners’ STEP class in the morning, believed wearing trendy exercise clothes “doesn’t seem to be an issue at this particular gym.”

Whether in a private facility (Kenen, 1987; Redican & Hadley, 1988) or a community/university centre (Frederick & Shaw, 1995; Haravon, 1995; Kenen, 1987; Markula, 1993b; Warrick & Tinning, 1989a, 1989b), researchers consistently find that
participants want to lose weight and/or change the shape of their bodies. Research which explicitly investigates how these two aerobics locations impact the body image experiences of participants is in order. For instance, how does socio-economic status affect the body images of participants who attend expensive private clubs as oppose to more affordable community centres? In addition, an exploration of how these two locations differ according to the instructors’ appearance and participants’ interpretations of the instructor would be a valuable complement to the present study.

Aerobics class level. Although the participants in this study were recruited from a variety of class levels (beginner to advanced), differences and similarities in interview responses were indiscernible according to class type. Future studies should investigate the degree to which class level impacts participants’ body image experiences and interpretations of aerobics.

The male fitness instructor. Interestingly, studying female participants’ interpretations of male instructors may offer particularly relevant insight into the examination of aerobics and body image experiences. Although, public figures like Jack LaLanne and Richard Simmons have been associated with television aerobics for years (Willis, 1990), recently, more men have taken on the role of instructor in fitness centres and clubs. Atypically, there was only one male instructor, Greg, employed at the fitness site during the time that I was conducting research; Sue reported that his popularity was remarkable. My informal observations of other fitness facilities confirm that Greg’s success as a male instructor is not unique. For example, at a similar fitness club where I am employed, participants arrive at the gym two hours early to sign up for a class with
their favorite male instructor. The popularity of aerobics classes led by men is a phenomenon that deserves research attention.

I have engaged in informal discussions with male and female instructors (including Kate and Sue) about participants’ seemingly unwavering commitment to male instructors. Most instructors agree that talent isn’t necessarily the key factor. Sue confirmed that “you can be a lesser quality [male] instructor and pack a class, whereas ... there’s not the same draw ... [with] a really highly respected female instructor.” Most likely, there are a multitude of factors which render many male instructors, on average, more popular than many female instructors. Data revealed that the instructor’s appearance can be influential for participants, this may be one reason why certain female participants prefer to be instructed by a man. According to Sue, women’s body image dissatisfaction at aerobics is more likely nullified in the presence of an instructor with a fit male body rather than a fit female body.

“I wonder sometimes if that’s why male instructors are so popular because there’s not that [body image] identity thing, ... it’s not a competition with who you look like. You can’t identify with him because you’re not male.... It doesn’t matter what you look like because you don’t have to look like him - you’re never going to. So it’s not a big deal if he’s got rippling muscles, ... you can just go and look and enjoy.” ~ Sue, age 42.

As of yet, there is no literature which touches on the role of the male fitness instructor and body image. Research which moves in this direction is pertinent to an understanding of the association between instructors and the body image experiences of participants. In addition, as more men begin to frequent aerobics, a study which examines body image experience and aerobics from a male participant perspective would be beneficial.
A continuation of instructors' perspectives. For this project, I interviewed three instructors and the Aerobics Director. My main intention for including instructors in the interview process was to add context and additional insight into the dynamics of the particular club I researched. I wanted this study to consider the perspectives of the instructors along with the participants' interpretations of them. In this way, the present study has exceeded most other work on body image and aerobics (Kagan & Morse, 1988; Kenen, 1987; Lenskyj, 1986; Markula, 1995) by offering substantial data on the instructor's viewpoints and opinions. As a result of media representations and social stereotypes, instructors are often regarded by aerobics theorists (Kagan & Morse, 1988; Kenen, 1987; Lenskyj, 1986) as contributors to women's body image oppression in aerobics. Data from this study largely contested such a relationship between participants and instructors. Kate felt uneasy thinking about participants who strive to look like her. Marilyn hoped her strong body would encourage women to appreciate alternatives to the stereotypical cultural ideal. Researchers often overlook the fact that instructors experience the same social pressures to appear physically attractive as the women in their classes (perhaps to a greater degree since many participants expect them to be role models of the fit ideal). More research on the perspectives and insights of instructors, and their body image experiences, would make a worthy contribution to the existing literature on women and aerobics.
References


Appendix A
OBSERVATIONS

DESCRIPTION OF OBSERVATIONS

• During the observational sessions, I was observing the following activities, behaviours, demographics and social dynamics:

The position of participants in class (where they stand in relation to the instructor).

The type of fitness attire worn by fitness instructors and aerobics participants.

How the mirrors are laid out in the aerobics studio.

General physical appearance of the instructors.

General physical appearance of the participants.

The general ages of participants.

The general ages of instructors.

The general racial distribution in the classes.

The class size and the number of women and men in each class.

The type of exercises the class performs.

The interactions between participants.

The interactions between participants and the instructors.

The type of commands (or cues) the instructors give.

The emphasis the instructors place on health, fitness and safety issues during class (as evidenced by comments made, exercises performed).

The emphasis the instructors place on weight loss and body shaping issues during class (as evidenced by comments made, exercises performed).
Appendix B
INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

AEROBICS PARTICIPANTS

- How long have you been doing aerobics?
- How long have you been a member at this fitness facility?
- Why did you first start doing aerobics?
- What is your favorite type of aerobics class (Hi Lo, STEP)?
- At what times of the day do you usually attend aerobics classes (with what instructors)?
- Where in the aerobics studio do you usually position yourself?
- What do you feel most comfortable wearing at aerobics?

- What is it about aerobics classes in particular that inspire you to attend?
- Why do you exercise (what are your goals in exercising)?
- What do you expect from a fitness instructor (what qualities would your ideal instructor possess)?

- Do you generally feel satisfied or dissatisfied with your bodily appearance?

- Do you feel that fitness instructors have the potential to influence the way you feel about your body image and/or your attitudes about your physical appearance (by their actions and behaviour, by their appearance)?
- Do you have any expectations about how an instructor should look?
- Do you ever compare your body to an instructor's body?
- Do you consider the fitness instructor to be a role model in the aerobics class (in terms of appearance, behaviour and/or attitudes)?

- Do you ever hear your instructors make comments about weight loss and/or body image in aerobics classes (example: "Bathing suit season is coming")?
- What is your general feeling about body image/weight loss comments in aerobics?

- Do you consider the fitness instructor to be an expert about fitness and/or weight loss issues?
- Do you ever rely on the advice given by instructors with regard to matters of body shape and/or weight loss?
- If so, how often and for what?

- What does a 'fit' body mean to you?
- Do you have anything else that you would like to add or any questions you’d like to ask?
Appendix B (continued)

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

FITNESS INSTRUCTORS

• How long have you been teaching aerobics?
• How long have you been teaching at this fitness club?
• What is your training in the fitness industry?
• What are your favorite classes to teach (Hi Lo, STEP)?
• What do you feel most comfortable wearing at aerobics?
• Can you briefly describe your impressions of the participants who come to your ___ class?

• Why do you teach aerobics (what are your goals as a fitness instructor)?
• Why do you exercise in general?
• Why do you believe your participants go to aerobics?
• Do you feel that you prepare your class in accordance with your perception of participants’ goals?

• Do you have any expectations about how an instructor’s body should look?
• Do you think your employer has any expectations?
• Do you think participants have any expectations?

• Do you generally feel satisfied or dissatisfied with your bodily appearance?

• How much potential do you think you have for influencing the (body image) attitudes and perceptions of your aerobics participants (based on your actions and behaviour, based on your own appearance)?
• How does it make you feel to think that some participants may compare their bodies to your own?
• Do you consider yourself a role model in aerobics (in terms of appearance, behaviour)?

• How much attention do you spend in your aerobics classes dealing with matters of body image and/or weight loss (performing or discussing exercises to change one’s body shape, discussing or performing exercises designed to help one lose weight, discussing body acceptance)?
• Can you briefly explain why you think attention given to these matters is important or not important in aerobics classes?
• Do you think participants consider you an expert about fitness and weight loss in the aerobics class setting?
• Do you feel comfortable in the role of fitness/weight loss expert?
Appendix B (continued)

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

FITNESS INSTRUCTORS (continued)

• Do aerobics participants come to you expressing concern over their physical appearance? Is yes, what type of concerns? Do you feel these participants willingly accept the advice you give them?

• What does a ‘fit’ body mean to you?

• Do you have anything else that you would like to add or any questions you’d like to ask?

AEROBICS DIRECTOR

• How long have you been teaching aerobics?
• How long have you been the Aerobics Director at this facility?

• Why do you think most fitness instructors teach aerobics?
• Why do you believe aerobics participants go to aerobics?

• Do you have any expectations about how an instructor’s body should look?
• Do you think your employers have any expectations about how an instructor’s body should look?
• Do you think aerobics participants have any expectations about how an instructor’s body should look?

• Can you briefly describe what qualities you look for when hiring a fitness instructor (what qualities does a good instructor possess)?
• Do you think that your concept of what constitutes a good instructor is similar to aerobics participants’ understanding of a good instructor?

• Do you think the fitness instructor is a role model in the aerobics class?
• Do you think the fitness instructor is an expert about fitness and/or weight loss issues in the aerobics class?

• As the Aerobics Director, have you ever received a complaint from an aerobics participant about the physical appearance of a fitness instructor (too thin, too large, inappropriate attire)? In general, what type of complaints do you receive about fitness instructors?
• Do you have anything else that you would like to add or any questions you’d like to ask?
Appendix C

Data Analysis Index Tree
Themes & Sub-Themes: PARTICIPANTS

AEROBICS PARTICIPANTS
  ISO
  EXERCISE GOALS
  - Weight Loss
  - Health
  - Aerobics
  - Social
  - Music
  - Instructor's Guidance

AEROBICS ENVIRONMENT
  - Space
  - Exercise Clothes
  - Mirrors

BODY IMAGE
  - Satisfied/ Dissatisfied
  - The Fit Body
  - Appearance
  - Holistic

THE FITNESS INSTRUCTOR
  - Qualities
  - Promotes Fun
  - Safety-Conscious
  - Should
  - Trust
  - Fitness Level
  - Expertise
  - Role Models

Influence
  - Expectations
  - Comparisons
  - Nature
  - Heavier Instructor
  - Image-Conscious Comments

EXERCISE GOALS
  - Weight Loss
  - Health
  - Aerobics

EXERCISE CLOTHES
  - Space
  - Exercise Clothes

BODY IMAGE
  - Satisfied/ Dissatisfied
  - The Fit Body
  - Appearance
  - Holistic
Appendix D

Data Analysis Index Tree

Themes and Sub-Themes: INSTRUCTORS

FITNESS INSTRUCTORS

EXERCISE GOALS

Instructors' Motivations

Weight Loss

Well-Being

Weight Loss

Health

Social

Class Preparation

AEROBICS ENVIRONMENT

Exercise Clothes

BODY IMAGE

Satisfied

The Fit Body

Appearance

Holistic

Influence

Appearance

Expectations

Inspiration

Intimidation

Participants

Instructors

Comparisons

Employers

Role Models

Expertise

Participants' Concerns

Education

Spot Reduction
If you agree to participate in this study, please sign this letter in the space provided on the following page. A copy of this letter and consent form will be left with you for your files.

Thank you,

Amanda Vogel, MA student
Lucie Thibault, Ph.D., Assistant Professor
February 13, 1997

I have read the attached letter of consent and I understand what is required of participants in the study entitled *Body Image Experience: Women's Interpretations of Aerobics and the Role of Fitness Instructor.*

I CONSENT to participate in the study.

Signature: ___________________________ Date: ___________________________

I DO NOT CONSENT to participate in the study.

Signature: ___________________________ Date: ___________________________
February 13, 1997

Dear Agency:

I am a Master's student in the School of Human Kinetics at the University of British Columbia and I am working on a research project dealing with body image and fitness. Specifically, I will be conducting research on how aerobics participants and fitness instructors interpret body image issues in the context of the aerobics class setting. In this light, I am particularly interested in investigating how aerobics participants view the role of the fitness instructor. The title of my research project is: Body Image Experience: Women's Interpretations of Aerobics and the Role of Fitness Instructor.

In order to obtain information for this study, I will be conducting observations of the aerobics environment. This means that I will observe different aerobics classes in order to get a feeling for their social dynamics. For example, I will be interested in the type of clothing worn by members, where they stand in the class, their reactions to the fitness instructor, their interactions with other members, etc. These observations will be unobtrusive which means I will survey the classes from a location outside the aerobics studio. I will not interrupt the natural setting of the class in any way. I will observe the classes for six one-hour sessions per week for a period of two weeks.

After the observations are complete, I will conduct interviews with volunteer research participants (members and instructors at your fitness facility). I will interview fifteen women in total: five fitness instructors and ten aerobics participants. Research participants will be interviewed for approximately one hour.

The purpose of this letter is to obtain your permission to conduct my research at your fitness club. If you agree to participate, I will be contacting you by
February 13, 1997

I have read the attached letter of consent and I understand what is required of my agency and participants from my agency in the study entitled Body Image Experience: Women's Interpretations of Aerobics and the Role of Fitness Instructor.

I CONSENT to participate in the study.

Signature: ______________________  Date: ______________________

I DO NOT CONSENT to participate in the study.

Signature: ______________________