

DANCING IN A CULTURE OF DISORDERED EATING:  
A FEMINIST POSTSTRUCTURAL ANALYSIS OF YOUNG GIRLS' EXPERIENCES IN  
THE WORLD OF DANCE

by

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## **Abstract**

Eating disorders are a public health issue in Canada where between 600,000 and 990,000 Canadians currently meet the diagnostic criteria for a clinical eating disorder; 80% of these Canadians are females. Of concern are female athletes that participate in aesthetic sports, such as dance, as they are a high-risk group for developing clinical eating disorders. The purpose of this study was to explore the experiences of female dancers in the world of dance and examine how these experiences shaped their relationship with food and body. Feminist poststructuralism guided by discourse analysis was used to enable a critical understanding of this relationship. Environment, parents, coaches and peers emerged as the largest influencers in shaping the dancers' relationship with food and body. This study provides knowledge for guiding health promotion initiatives and prevention efforts aimed at supporting change in the culture of dance to reduce (ED)Bs in female dancers.

## **List of Abbreviations Used**

(ED)Bs      Eating disorders and eating disorder behaviours

## **Chapter One: Introduction**

Eating disorders are a public health issue in Canada, where as many as 600,000 to 990,000 Canadians currently meet the diagnostic criteria for a clinical eating disorder; of these Canadians, 80% are females (LeBlanc, 2015). The most commonly identified eating disorders in females are anorexia nervosa, bulimia nervosa, binge eating disorder, and eating disorders not otherwise specified (ED-NOS). Although each eating disorder has its own specific symptoms and diagnostic criteria, all forms of eating disorders are considered a serious mental illness (American Psychiatric Association, 2015; LeBlanc, 2015). All eating disorders share a complex psychopathology such as disturbed eating or eating related behaviours, extreme methods of weight control, certain concerns about shape and weight, and significant impairment in physical or psychosocial functioning (American Psychiatric Association, 2015; LeBlanc, 2015). Eating disorders can lead to serious mental and physical health consequences in females including: amenorrhea, infertility, irreversible bone loss, heart problems, digestive problems, anxiety, depression, suicide, and death (Kleposki, 2002; Ringham et al., 2006; Zoletić & Duraković-Belko, 2009). These health implications have been shown to negatively impact personal relationships, education and employment, financial security, and overall quality of life (LeBlanc, 2015).

Given the negative physical and psychosocial outcomes for females with eating disorders (Buckett & Vollmer-Conna, 2015; Johnson, Cohen, Kasen & Brook, 2002; LeBlanc, 2015), it is important to identify what influences the development and maintenance of (ED)Bs to inform prevention efforts. Female athletes that participate in aesthetic sports, such as dance, are of particular concern.



Female dancers are at the highest risk for developing clinical eating disorders because of the extreme pressures in the world of dance to be thin (Bettle, Bettle, Neumärker, & Neumärker, 1998; Francisco, Alarcão & Narciso, 2012; Herbrich, Pfeiffer, Lehmkuhl, & Schneider, 2011; Kleposki, 2002; Ringham et al., 2006; Zoletić & Duraković-Belko, 2009). The pressures to be thin are enforced through the image of an ideal dancer's body, encouragement and support of a low body weight, the use of mirrors as a teaching tool, and performing on stage to be observed and evaluated. When compared to non-dancers, female dancers are known to suffer from greater body image dissatisfaction, body image distortion, neurotic perfectionism, and disordered eating, which are all symptomatic of (ED)Bs (Herbrich et al., 2011; Ringham et al., 2006; Zoletić & Duraković-Belko, 2009). Many female dancers also suffer from the associated health issues such as amenorrhea, irreversible bone loss, digestive problems, anxiety, depression, and decreased self-esteem (Ringham et al., 2006; Zoletić & Duraković-Belko, 2009). There is a relatively high incidence of (ED)Bs among female dancers, and there is potential for female dancers to battle (ED)Bs across their lifetime (Anshel, 2004; McEwen & Young, 2011). The repercussions of the associated physical and mental health issues should be of concern not only to dancers, but to parents, dance instructors, health practitioners, and the public.

### **The World of Dance**

The world of competitive dance is inclusive of dancers, dance teachers, parents, peers and the dance environment (mirrors, ballet bars, music, dance attire, costumes, stage makeup). For this research, dancers who prepared for regular competitions and/or performances at a dance studio, dance-based school, or professional dance company were included. Dancers were also permitted to compete in several dance styles (ballet, tap, jazz, hip-hop, modern/lyrical, acro,

and/or musical theater). Often only the world of ballet and/or ballet dancers is studied. This research is looking to investigate the world of dance more broadly.

### **Rationale for Research**

I entered the world of dance when I was four years old and started competing at the age of six. At this young age, I did not realize that I was engrossed in a culture where extreme pressures and expectations were placed on me to be thin, that dance costumes and heavy stage makeup were objectifying, or that I was too young to be performing sexually charged dance routines. Not until I was diagnosed with an eating disorder at age thirteen did I start to question my relationship with food and body. It became obvious to me that my experiences in the world of dance had constituted how I thought about food and body, and in turn had shaped my practices. Several of my peers were also diagnosed and maintained (ED)Bs over the years. The complexities of how the world of dance shaped our negative relationship with food and body was never openly discussed or properly understood. Given that some dancers developed clinical eating disorders while others did not, it was seen as an individual problem rather than a product of inherent cultural and social values. As a result, awareness and/or prevention measures, in my experience, were never implemented.

It is evident from the current literature that female dancers are especially vulnerable to the development of (ED)Bs (Penniment & Egan, 2012; Zoletić & Duraković-Belko, 2009). It is also evident that (ED)Bs are often long lasting and can persist across a dancer's lifetime (Annus & Smith, 2009; Archinard & Scherer, 1995; Tiggeman & Slater, 2001). Despite the significant literature in the above areas, research surrounding prevention of (ED)Bs in dancers is only beginning (Hincapié, Cesar & Cassidy, 2010). The research remains in its infancy because it has largely focused on studying this issue as an individual psychological problem, tends to use an

objectivist lens, and has largely relied on quantitative research (Busanic & McGannon, 2010; Hincapié, et al., 2010). Most studies have also focused solely on anorexia in ballet dancers and do not consider dancers who participate in a variety of dance styles or have other (ED)Bs (Nordin-Bates, Walker, & Redding, 2011). Furthermore, there is very little literature that focuses on the female dancer's relationship with food, food choices, and nutritional intake. Unless dancers' food choices are better understood, prevention initiatives cannot be successfully implemented.

Based on the limitations of current literature a deeper qualitative analysis is needed. Qualitative analysis will contribute to a better understanding of the values, beliefs and practices that the world of dance constitutes around food and body. This will contribute to our understanding of how to design and implement prevention initiatives targeted at reducing (ED)Bs in female dancers.

### **Purpose and Research Question**

The purpose of this research was to explore the experiences of female dancers in the world of dance, and understand how these experiences shaped their relationship with food and body. Dominant and competing discourses related to food and body in the world of dance were also uncovered. Based on the rationale for this research, the following research question was developed: *How does experience in the world of dance shape the female dancer's relationship to food and body?*

### **Study Design**

Feminist poststructural discourse analysis was the qualitative theory and methodology employed to explore the values, beliefs and experiences of female dancers (Aston; 2016; Cheek,

2000; Weedon, 1987). One-on-one semi-structured interviews were conducted with twelve young female dancers to elicit their experiences (Berg, 2007; Liamputtong, 2009).

Data were analyzed through the lens of discourse analysis, which examined data for beliefs, values, practices, and power relations (Aston et al., 2014; Aston, 2016; Cheek, 2000). Interviews also uncovered how female dancers understood their relationship with food and body based on the discourse available to them (Weedon, 1987).

### **Summary**

The purpose of this chapter is to contextualize the current problem facing young women/girls in the world of dance. There are complex factors that contribute to create a dance culture where (ED)Bs are not only present but produced. The following review of the literature will outline some of the key concerns that have been cited to date.

## Chapter Two: Literature Review

This review of the literature will focus on the role of Western sociocultural values in creating the relationship between adolescent females and eating disorders. How similar forces in dance culture form the relationship between adolescent female dancers and eating disorders will also be examined. The purpose of this review is to illustrate that the problem of (ED)Bs in the world of dance is not an individual problem but a result of a complex and multi-level phenomenon. The work of feminist writers will be drawn upon to situate the literature.

### The Work of Feminist Writers

Feminist writers have long emphasized the critical role of Westernized sociocultural values in the development of (ED)Bs. Orbach (1978) presents some of the earliest work in this area, with her book *Fat is a Feminist Issue*. Orbach (1978) asserts that women's bodies come in all shapes and sizes, but this variety is systematically ignored in Western culture. This makes women feel alienated from their bodies that are "oversized" when compared to the dominating images of slimness. This culture, Orbach (1978) argues, is obsessed with thinness and defines femininity by body image. This has a severe impact on how females eat and feel towards food (Orbach, 1978; Orbach, 1982). It teaches women to be wary of food, police their eating, and that food is only meant for others. Orbach (1982) states: "Food is what she gives to others but must deprive herself of. Food is, if you like, good for others but somehow dangerous to the woman herself" (p. 25). Orbach (1982) further believes that compulsive eating, bulimia and anorexia are the psychological response to these cultural beliefs around food and body. Chernin (1981) makes similar claims in her earliest work *The Obsession: Reflections on the Tyranny of Slenderness*. Chernin (1981) believes that the females' obsession with food and weight is part of the oldest cultural issue: the body. Chernin (1981) further argues that the body holds meaning. A woman

obsessed with the size of her body, the size of her appetite or the reduction of her flesh all reveals meaning about her emotional life.

In the 1990s, there was a surge of new feminist writings on the body (Adelson, 1993; Bordo, 1994; Butler, 1993; Grosz, 1994). Bordo (1994) arguably being the most influential author of this time with her work *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture, and the Body*. Maintaining a focus on cultural influences, Bordo (1994) argues that the female body is profoundly gendered and the gendered nature of mind/body dualism is embodied in contemporary culture. Bordo (1994) denies that the body is purely physiological and recognizes that historically female bodies have been constantly in the grip of cultural practices. Female bodies are therefore extremely vulnerable to the influence of cultural forces. The body is a medium where culture is inscribed, constituted and reinforced. Bordo (1994) also addresses the fear and disgust of fat that pervades contemporary culture in all forms (advertisements, movies, music, literature), which contribute to the cultural production of eating disorders. Stating that “eating disorders, far from being “bizarre” and anomalous, are utterly continuous with a dominant element of the experience of being female in this culture” (p. 57). To be thin in this culture is more than to be aesthetically pleasing, it is to be normal and good. Bordo (1994) believes most women, regardless of age, race or ethnicity, suffer from disordered eating. According to Bordo (1994), these women fall on a continuum that ranges from dieting to clinical eating disorders.

Hesse-Biber is another contemporary feminist writer who focuses on the impact of sociocultural factors regarding women and the body. In her most recent work, *The Cult of Thinness*, Hesse-Biber (2007) is the first to present the cult analogy. She compares the intense obsession of being thin with a religious cult that is strongly devoted to their beliefs. Hesse-Biber

(2007) describes the primary membership for the cult of thinness as being female and the object of worship for the members as the perfect body: “They may not answer to a single leader, but bow instead to powerful economic, social and cultural forces that define and value females in terms of their physical attributes” (p. 15). The females of this cult engage in ritualistic behaviours of dieting, exercising, counting calories, and obsessive weighing of their bodies. Members swear total allegiance to the scale and its verdict determines self-worth, emotional state and future behaviours. These common rituals, along with the belief that being thin is sacred and the key to happiness, bring them together and keep them faithful to the cult. Hesse-Biber (2007) recognizes that most young women are believers, and the severity of their disordered eating behaviours is dependent on where they fall on the continuum of disordered eating.

Viewing food and body from a feminist lens, as the above writers do, is important in understanding how sociocultural values construct eating disorders. Using this lens facilitates critical discussion and research around eating disorders, which moves away from the traditional view of eating disorders as an individual problem. This literature is important in challenging the status quo. The review of the following literature on adolescent females and adolescent female dancers, also focuses on research that shifts away from individual blame and characteristics.

### **Adolescent Females and Eating Disorders**

There is an extensive amount of literature on the increasing number of young girls developing and suffering with (ED)Bs. As previously stated, a limitation to much of this literature is the emphasis on individual pathology (Basow, 2008; Busanic & McGannon, 2010; Hincapié, Cesar & Cassidy, 2010). As discussed above, however, feminist writers have long seen the critical role that sociocultural values play in the development of (ED)Bs.

Especially during adolescence, girls are under great pressure to conform to gendered beliefs and cultural expectations (Slater, Guthrie, & Boyd, 2001). Western society today, which reinforces that power for girls is about being sexually attractive, encourages young girls to become obsessed with their weight and appearance. This makes young girls particularly vulnerable to the development of (ED)Bs (Frost, 2001; Slater et al., 2001). Currently eating disorders are one of the most prevalent public health problems affecting young females and the onset of (ED)Bs is most likely to appear in adolescence (Latzer, Spivak-Lavi, & Ruth Katz, 2015). Once a disorder thought to only affect the white middle class is now known to affect young girls regardless of ethnicity, race, or class (Bordo, 2009; Franko, Becker, Thomas, & Herzog, 2007; Hesse-Biber, 2007). The literature that takes a feminist approach to weight preoccupation and eating disorders in young girls is concerned with cultural factors that create an environment where physical appearance is deeply valued (Bordo, 2004; Oliver, 2005). This literature tends to largely focus on the thin ideal and objectification.

**The thin ideal.** Body dissatisfaction, which is associated with a heightened risk for the development of (ED)Bs, has increased in recent decades among adolescent girls (Cash, Morrow, Hrabosky, & Perry, 2004; Smolak & Thompson, 2009). This has largely been attributed to the internalization of the thin body ideal. The socially defined ideal of attractiveness is unrealistic and fostered by the pressure to be thin (Thompson & Stice, 2001). The oppression of women and young girls by the thin ideal is a post 1960s phenomena. The blame is often placed on the influence of the fashion industry because the 1960s is when slenderness became the pinnacle of fashion (Seid, 1994). The female body has not altered for thousands of years. What has altered is the ideal, and never has this ideal been a body so “close to the bone” (Seid, 1994). Bordo (1997) notes that in Western culture, "fat is the devil, and we are continually beating him—'eliminating'



our stomachs, 'busting' our thighs, 'taming' our tummies—pummeling and purging our bodies, attempting to make them into something other than flesh" (p. 107). This contemporary “tyranny of slenderness” affects far more females than it does males, which is evidenced by women being more obsessed and less satisfied with their bodies. Women are also permitted less freedom regarding their weight, particularly when they are young (Bordo, 2004).

Adolescent girls are the most likely to buy into this ideal and engage in behaviours to produce it (Frost, 2001). Evidence suggests that body image and dissatisfaction is a principal determinant of adolescent food choices (Mooney, Farley & Strugnell, 2004). Given that many adolescent girls strive to achieve this ideal, they engage in weight loss behaviours to achieve it (Ricciardelli & McCabe, 2001). Young girls feel a great deal of conflict when their bodies cry for food. They know that the desired image is thin and good and the calories in the food are bad (Tolman & Debold, 1994). The division of food into “good” and “bad” categories is a result of food watching. Hesse-Biber (2007) found “good foods are nutritionally sound and or/low in calories. Bad foods are the ones that tempt you to overeat and gain weight. They include sweets, refined carbohydrates, and anything with the “F-word”, fat” (p. 146). Disciplined eating and restricting food intake is often maintained through calorie counting, meal skipping and dieting for the purpose of controlling weight (Hesse-Biber, 2007). These behaviours are shown to be common in young girls (Dunkley, Wertheim, & Paxton, 2001; Mooney et al., 2004). It has also been found that adolescent girls wrongly perceive dieting to mean the same thing as healthy eating (Roberts, Maxwell, Bagnall, & Bilton, 2001). This was further supported in a study by Lattimore and Halford (2003), which compared female adolescents who dieted with female adolescents who were non-dieters. It was found that female adolescents who dieted made generally healthier food choices such as an increase in fruit and vegetable consumption.

Young girls believe that their bodies and their weight is easy to access and manipulate. As a result of this belief, ED(B)s can be used as a tool for accomplishing the ideal body (Hesse-Biber, 2007). Perhaps (ED)Bs are the only tool that young girls have to satisfy the societal ideals dictated by culture (Frost, 2001; Hesse-Biber, 2007). Young girls learn that their body is as an instrument with the sole purpose of being thin and attractive for the consumption of others. Mostly for the consumption of men (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997). Hesse-Biber (2007) stresses that this concept of body and ED(B)s as a “tool” is important for understanding the prevalence and increase of (ED)Bs in young females.

The work of Ortner (1974) and Hesse-Biber (2007) discuss the role of patriarchy in this male/female dichotomy that causes women to become obsessed with the thin ideal. Women have been historically dependent on male approval for their survival and both judged and rewarded for their appearance. It is therefore not surprising that young women want to have a body that appeals to men (Basow, 2008). For young girls today, consumption of media and social media are great enforcers of the thin ideal. Media subsequently produces a drive for thinness that influence food and body choices (Bordo, 2004; Frost, 2001; Hesse-Biber, 2007).

**Media.** Westernized sociocultural values that associate thinness with beauty, popularity, happiness and success are transmitted through almost all media messages (Groesz, Levine, & Murnen, 2002). Media messages create an additional risk factor for the development of (ED)Bs in adolescent females (O’dea, 2007; Stice, 2002). Media messages that encourage thinness have been found to have more influence on the development of negative body image in female girls than any other influencer (family, friends, and peer pressure) (Blowers, Loxton, Grady-Flessler, Occhipinti, & Dawe, 2003; Crespo, Kielikowski, Jose, & Pryor, 2010). Research suggests that girls as young as seven internalize media messaging regarding their bodies (Dohnt &

Tiggemann, 2006). Young girls embody and enforce this ideal and constrain themselves within the confines of this image. They are vulnerable and powerless to the influence of advertising and unable to resist the impossible yet desirable images presented to them (Fallon, Katzman, & Wooley, 1994).

In recent years, adolescents have been affected not only by media in magazines and television but also by messaging from social media. Both American and Australian adolescents spend an average of 1.5 hours every day on social networking, specifically Facebook (Rideout, Foehr, & Roberts, 2010). It has been found that the more time adolescent females spend on Facebook, the higher their risk for development of (ED)Bs (Kim & Lennon, 2007; Morrison & Gore, 2010). In 2007, approximately 60% of adolescents aged 12-17 were on social networks. By 2009, this number grew to 75% of adolescents (Lenhart, Purcell, Smith, & Zickuhr, 2010). The increasing number of adolescents on social media is consequently increasing the vulnerability of adolescent girls to adopt negative body image and disordered eating attitudes and behaviours (Schneider et al., 2013; Wykes & Gunter, 2005).

**Objectification.** Frederickson and Roberts' (1997) Objectification Theory argues that in Western society sexual objectification of girls and women is not just in the media. Constant sexual objectification and objectifying gaze socializes girls and women to view themselves as objects to be evaluated based on appearance. This leads to self-objectification, where an observer's perspective of the physical self is embodied. Self-objectification manifests itself in the form of habitual self-monitoring/self-surveillance. This behavior has been linked to increased body shame, appearance anxiety, and a decreased awareness of internal bodily states such as hunger. Objectification Theory suggests that the four experiential consequences (shame, anxiety,

peak motivational states, and awareness of internal bodily states) combine to put young girls at an increased risk for the development of (ED)Bs (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997).

Adolescence is a critical period for the development of self-objectification because it is the onset of puberty. Puberty is the time when the female body begins to develop and becomes increasingly looked at and commented on. The body is also more likely to be evaluated by others during or after puberty (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997). Girls become the object of the male gaze when they develop more mature bodies, and it becomes evident to them that they are now an icon of sexuality for male consumption (Frost, 2001). Furthermore, young girls tend to become more concerned with their image as the pressure to achieve societal norms regarding ideal weight and shape is high (Lindberg, Hyde, & McKinley, 2006; Slater & Tiggemann, 2010).

Adolescence is when girls make the transition from a relatively androgynous body to a woman's body, which is a body often devalued in the society and culture they inhabit (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997). Adolescence with anorexia often express a fear of growing into a mature, sexually developed body because it is associated with disgusting womanly fat (Bordo, 2004). Overall, young women are likely to experience their bodies as the enemy and attempt to dissociate themselves from their bodies during adolescence. This creates a disjointed and contradictory subjectivity (Frost, 2001).

In the first few studies that examined self-objectification in adolescent girls, Slater and Tiggemann (2002) found that self-objectification and its consequences are affecting girls as young as 12 and 13 years of age. It was also found that adolescents scored higher on all measures of objectification and its proposed consequences when compared to adult women (Tiggemann & Slater, 2001). Similar to adult samples, it was found that the relationship between self-objectification and disordered eating in female adolescents was partially mediated by body

shame and appearance anxiety (Slater & Tiggemann, 2002). More recently, Slater and Tiggemann (2010) tested components of Objectification Theory in a large sample of adolescent girls and boys (383 boys and 332 girls). This sample included Australian adolescents aged 12 to 16 years, who were recruited from four secondary schools of medium socioeconomic status in Australia. Although ethnicity was not specified, it was stated that students attending these schools were over 95% Caucasian. The adolescents completed the same questionnaire that measured body surveillance, body shame, appearance anxiety and disordered eating. It was concluded that girls displayed higher levels on every measure. Although this study looked at a large sample size, the confined age range limits the findings generalizability to other ages of adolescence. The age at which consequences of self-objectification appear can also not be determined from this study. Other studies that looked at younger samples, however, have found self-objectification to begin in girls as young as 11 years and increase in older female adolescents (Grabe, Hyde, & Lindberg, 2007; Harrison & Fredrickson, 2003).

### **Eating Disorders and Adolescent Female Dancers**

In addition to societal pressures, the literature has shown that female adolescents have an even greater risk of developing (ED)Bs when they participate in certain types of sport (Hausenblas & Carron, 1999; Toro et al., 2005; Van Durme, Goosens, & Braet, 2012). In aesthetic sport, which are leanness and weight dependent, female adolescents are at the highest risk for development of (ED)Bs (Filaire, Rouveix, & Bouget, 2008; Resch, 2007; Sundgot-Borgen, 1999, 2002, 2004). A proposed reason for this is the closeness between aesthetic sport and the predominant ideal of beauty (Neumärker, Bettle, Bettle, Dudeck, & Neumärker, 1998). In aesthetic sport, there is often a link between peak performance and a thin body (Toro et al., 2005). The perception that performance can be enhanced through a low body weight also exists

(Krentz & Warschburger, 2011). Heavier athletes in aesthetic sports are expected to be less successful based on physical appearance alone (Smolak, Murnen, & Ruble, 2000). An appealing female body in aesthetic sport is very similar to the ideal presented in the media: excessively thin.

For decades, a widely studied group of aesthetic athletes has been dancers. Although the risk association between the world of dance and (ED)Bs has been well documented in the literature, only recently has research begun to examine why this risk association exists. The key elements in the world of dance that make dancers a high-risk group for (ED)Bs remains uncertain (Goodwin, Arcelus, Geach, & Meyer, 2014). Further, few studies have focused on what creates such a high risk for development and maintenance (ED)Bs in the world of dance. Existing literature has investigated objectification, competitiveness, and pressure from coaches and peers as potential contributors.

**Objectification.** Slater and Tiggemann (2002) were the first researchers to examine the components of Objectification Theory in a sample of female adolescent dancers. Recognizing that objectification does not affect all individuals equally, dancers were of interest. Dancers perform on stage where they are observed and evaluated by others, train for several hours a day in front of mirrors, and their bodies are constantly under scrutiny by themselves and by others (Slater & Tiggemann, 2002). On stage:

The dancer may be sexualized or eroticized in some way that keeps them from being wholly subjects rather than objects. Particularly because dancers do not usually speak on stage, their agency may be compromised; it is easy for the audience to ignore the "personhood" of a dancing female onstage unless she presents herself in a manner that

disrupts commonly held notions of what she should look like (i.e., graceful, pretty, petite, energetic but not too forceful)” (Oliver, 2005, p. 45).

Given the experiences that enhance a dancer’s likeliness for self-objectification, Slater and Tiggemann took an interest in the relationship between objectification and dancers.

In their study on female adolescents, Slater and Tiggemann (2002) compared two groups of participants: adolescent ballet students and adolescent non-dancers. The group of dancers included 38 girls ranging in age from 12-16, who all studied classical ballet at a recreational level. The non-dancer participants included 45 girls from a private all-girls school ranging in age from 13-15 years and these girls had no formal dance training. Both groups consisted of Caucasian females from medium to high socioeconomic status. All participants completed a questionnaire that included sections on background information, measures of self-objectification and self-monitoring, measures of the proposed consequences of self-objectification (body shame and appearance anxiety), and a measure of disordered eating. The dancers completed their questionnaire either before or after their ballet class and the non-dancers completed their questionnaire at home.

Contrary to what Slater and Tiggemann (2002) predicted, the study found that there was no difference between the adolescent dancers and non-dancers on self-objectification or any of the proposed consequences: body shame, appearance anxiety and disordered eating. These results also conflicted with the findings of Tiggemann and Slater (2001), which found that adult former recreational dancers scored higher on self-objectification and all its proposed consequences when compared to former non-dancers. Due to this contradiction in findings, Slater and Tiggemann (2002) concluded that the lack of difference between the groups was likely not a result of recreational level training. It was concluded that the lack of differences was more

likely because all adolescent girls experience exceptionally high levels of objectification and its associated consequences. A second explanation was that the adolescent dancers were significantly thinner than the non-dancer participants, and therefore closer to societal ideals. As a result of being closer to societally-prescribed ideals, adolescent dancers may be less likely to suffer from self-objectification when compared to adolescent girls who are non-dancers.

**Competitiveness.** The findings of Slater and Tiggemann (2002), which concluded that the lack of difference between dancers and non-dancers was not likely the result of recreational dance training, is contrary to other research findings. The literature generally provides evidence that competition at elite levels place individuals at greater risk for the development of (ED)Bs (Smolak et al., 2000). Regarding competitiveness and female dancers, Garner and Garfinkel (1980) found that ballet dancers at a competitive level weighed significantly less and had significantly more (ED)Bs than non-competitive ballet dancers. Thomas, Keel and Heatherton (2005) similarly found that in a sample of elite, competitive and non-competitive ballet dancers, elite dancers demonstrated significantly greater (ED)Bs than dancers in other groups.

A study that focused on adolescent female dancers also found a link between disordered eating and competition (De Bruin, Bakker, & Oudejans, 2009). This study looked at 35 female dancers with a mean age of 15.1 years. On average, the participants spent 16.7 hours a week at dance and did not participate in any other competitive sport activities (to rule out possible influence of other sport environments). A link was found between ego involvement (the emphasis on outperforming others), disordered eating, and competitiveness. Young dancers with high ego involvement were found to have a significant drive to outperform others. This made them much more likely to compare themselves with opponents and teammates and to compete in terms of thinness. These findings were similar to the findings of Drinkwater et al. (2005), who



found that competing in terms of thinness is a key risk factor for the development of (ED)Bs in athletes. Furthermore, Francisco, Alarcão, and Narciso (2012) found that young dancers had a greater frequency of competitive comparison when compared to both young gymnasts and older dancers.

In competitive dance, the judges' criteria and adjudication is an important component. Judges are a nonfactor in recreational sport. When the criteria for adjudication stresses thinness, like in dance, young dancers are more prone to engage in disordered eating behaviours (Gvion, 2008; Thompson & Sherman, 1999). Van Durme et al. (2012) found that competition state anxiety had explanatory value for the dieting behaviour of young dancers. These findings are consistent with the findings of Martinsen et al. (2010), who found that feelings of anxiety at the start of competitions may put aesthetic athletes at risk for development of (ED)Bs. It has also been found that the relationship between perfectionist tendencies, which are highly correlated with the development and maintenance of (ED)Bs (Egan, Wade, & Shafran, 2010), are especially high during times of stress such as competition season (Ruggiero, Levi, Ciuna, & Sassaroli, 2003; Sassaroli & Ruggiero, 2005). This desire to become as perfect as possible during competition season may translate into development and maintenance of (ED)Bs in young female dancers (Nordin-Bates et al., 2011).

**Pressure from coaches, parents and peers.** High expectations and pressure from parents, coaches and peers are found to be another main factor in the development of (ED)Bs (Dosil & González-Oya, 2008). Weight related pressures have specifically been found to be an important contributor to the development of (ED)Bs in aesthetic athletes, including dancers (De Bruin, Oudejans, & Bakker, 2007; Thomas et al., 2005). In studies that researched environmental pressures of ballet dancers, coaches, parents and peers were found to be great reinforcers of

(ED)Bs (Annus & Smith, 2009; Kleposki, 2002; Gvion, 2008; Sundgot-Borgen, Skårderud, & Rodgers, 2003). Kleposki (2002) found this was because coaches, parents and peers encourage and support the maintenance of a low body weight. Annus and Smith (2009) similarly found that what mediates the relationship between dance and (ED)Bs are comments from teachers and peers about the benefits of dieting. Social comparison between peers, skinfold tests/weigh-ins, and observational learning of dieting also contributed to (EB)Bs in dance (Annus & Smith, 2009). Sundgot-Borgen et al. (2003) found the most important determinant to be where, how and when the dancer is told to lose weight.

When researching adolescent female dancers, Francisco et al. (2012) found coaches to be the strongest influencers upon young dancers. Pressures from coaches to be thin produced pressure on dancers 15-17 years of age to reduce their weight. Interestingly, it was the younger dancers (<15) who reported a higher rate of emotional distress because of weight related pressures and comments. Francisco et al. (2012) concluded that older dancers (15-17) no longer felt emotional distress over weight related pressures. Older dancers accepted and respected the thinness rule without question, and therefore this pressure no longer caused emotional distress.

**Food.** There has been very little literature on food and dancer's and much of the existing literature is fairly dated. Montanari (2000) claimed that the female dancer's pursuit and desire to acquire the perfect dancer's body dictates quantity, frequency and quality of food intake. Montanari (2000), however, concluded this based on a study conducted in the early 1980's by Calabrese (1982). Calabrese (1982) examined the diets of female dancers compared to other athletes. This comparative study found that the caloric intake and quality of diet was consistently lower for dancers when compared to other athletes. Caloric intake was found to be as low as 75%

below the recommended daily allowance. This aligns with more recent literature that also found insufficient and poorly balanced food intake of classical ballet dancers (Clarkson, 1998).

Literature has concluded that exercise alone, in the absence of strict dieting, is often not enough to achieve desired weight loss or the required dancer's physique (Anshel, 2004). As a result, dancers often engage in disordered eating habits as a means of reaching and maintaining an ideal body weight (Zoletić & Duraković-Belko, 2009). Dieting and fasting for more than two days at a time are 45% more likely to occur in ballet dancers than in non-dancers (Ringham et al., 2006). Ringham et al. (2006) also found that amenorrhea occurs in 47% of ballet dancers, which in part is a result of insufficient caloric intake. Furthermore, given decrease in calcium from a low-calorie diet, ballerinas are at high risk of experiencing irreversible bone loss, stress fractures, and developing osteoporosis (Kleposki, 2002). Reduced calorie intake has also been found to impact the growth of young ballet dancers (Lopez-Varela, Montero, Chandra & Marcos, 1999).

**Ethnicity.** No academic or grey literature could be located on the role of ethnicity in (ED)Bs in young female dancers. Based on literature for female non-dancers, (ED)Bs are no longer just “a white girl's thing” (Bordo 2009). The associations between body dissatisfaction and (ED)Bs across most races/ethnicities of girls is striking (Buchhineri et al., 2016). Dance has historically consisted mainly of Caucasian females (Goldhill & Marsh, 2012), which could be why ethnicity has not been adequately considered. Several recent studies that explore (ED)Bs and female dancers do not specify ethnicity of the sample. Despite the lack of literature, ethnicity may affect how girls shape their relationship with food and body in the world of dance.

## **Summary**

This chapter reviewed the literature on adolescent females and (ED)Bs, with a focus on adolescent female dancers. Literature that focuses on confronting this problem as a cultural and societal one instead of emphasizing individual blame was drawn upon. The literature on adolescent females and eating disorders focuses on young women experiencing objectification and encountering the strength and power of the thin ideal. The literature on adolescent female dancers and eating disorders outlines that several factors may be key contributors to their high prevalence of (ED)Bs. Key influencers include objectification, competitiveness, and pressure from coaches, parents and peers. In the next chapter, the methodology and methods for the research study will be described.

## **Chapter Three: Methodology**

A qualitative approach was used for this research because it allowed an in-depth exploration of the experiences of female dancers (Creswell, 2013). A qualitative methodology also allowed the dancer's language to be captured, their feelings to be understood, and their voice to be represented, which profoundly illuminated their experiences of this complex phenomena (Creswell, 2013; Creswell 2014). A feminist poststructural approach was chosen to provide a critical lens to explore the beliefs, values and practices of female dancers (Aston, 2016; Creswell, 2013; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Weedon 1987). This methodology also aimed to provide an understanding of the dominant and competing discourses present in the world of dance and discover how these discourses are constituted and perpetuated (Aston, 2016; Cheek, 2000; Gee, 2005).

### **Philosophical Underpinnings**

Feminist poststructuralism is situated in a critical framework. This framework is built on the assumption that all "thought is mediated by power relations that are historically and socially constructed" (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 10). The goal of critical research is to go beyond uncovering the interpretation of how people understand their world and critique, challenge, transform and "empower humans to transcend the constraints placed on them by race, class and gender" (Creswell, 2013, p. 30; Fay, 1987; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Crotty (1998) describes critical research as research that goes beyond simply understanding. It challenges the status quo by studying conflict and oppression, with the goal of bringing about change.

A critical framework is associated with specific philosophical beliefs: ontological beliefs, epistemological beliefs, and axiological beliefs (Creswell, 2013). The ontological beliefs (the nature of reality) are that reality is based on power and identity struggles (Creswell, 2013, p. 37).

The epistemological beliefs (how reality is known) claim that reality is known through the study of social structures, freedom and oppression, power, and control. It is also believed that reality can be changed through research (Creswell, 2013, p. 37). The axiological beliefs (role of values) is emphasized within the standpoint of various communities (Creswell, 2013, p. 37). In the case of my research, the community of interest was the world of dance. How the values emphasized in this community shaped the reality of food and body for female dancers was of importance. This research also focused on how the female dancer's reality of food and body became known.

### **Poststructuralist Theory**

Poststructuralism is a theory of knowledge and language (Agger, 1991). This theory resulted from the work of philosophers like Foucault who presented a theory based on linguistics, discourse and power (Weedon, 1987). Poststructuralism attempts to understand how we have come to understand ourselves by questioning the legitimacy of these understandings by bringing marginalized discourses to the forefront (Burr, 1995). Poststructuralism does not have one fixed meaning, but can be applied to a range of theoretical positions. All positions, however, share certain fundamental assumptions about language, meaning and subjectivity (Weedon, 1987). There is consensus that meaning is constituted within language, and that the meaning within language is created through our everyday communication and conversations (Davies, 2000).

For poststructural theory, language is the common factor in the analysis of social organization, social meanings, power and individual consciousness (Weedon, 1987). Language is not only where social organization is defined and challenged, but also where subjectivity is constructed. Subjectivity is central to poststructuralist theory and is used to refer to individual thoughts and emotions, sense of self, and ways of understanding one's relationship to the world

(Weedon, 1987). From a poststructural perspective, a person's self is socially constructed. There is no essence, but instead we exist within the terms of available discourses (Davies, 2000; Weedon, 1987). Discourse is another central focus of poststructuralism, which can be defined as a set of beliefs that are conceived, understood and reinforced through daily practices (Barrett, 2005). These daily practices are what frame an understanding of the ways we are in the world (Barrett, 2005; Weedon, 2004). Discourse also refers to language practices, which are historically, socially, and institutionally specific narratives that shape our values and beliefs and the way we think and act (Barrett, 2005). Discourse is what gives significance to the "meanings we attach to the words we use and the rules we use to determine what makes sense or is possible" (Barrett, 2005, p. 82). Discourse is also very closely tied to the analysis of power (Weedon, 2004).

### **Feminist Poststructuralism**

Although poststructuralist theory has many similarities to feminist poststructuralism, poststructuralism alone does not account for the female experience (Weedon, 1987). This led feminists to challenge and examine poststructuralism. Feminists noted the need for a theoretical foundation that deconstructed patriarchal discourse, social institutions, and power relations that disadvantage and oppress women (Weedon, 1987). Feminist poststructuralism was developed to analyze "the ways in which women's subjectivities, experiences and desires are discursively constituted and regulated" (Malson, 1998, p. 39, Gavey 1989). The aim was to transform gender dimensions, develop new ways of understanding sexual differences, and uncover male bias (Gavey, 1989). Similar to poststructuralism, language, subjectivity and power are core components (Weedon, 1987).

Language remains the central focus of feminist poststructuralism, recognizing that one

makes sense of and gives meaning to their world through language (Flintoff & Scraton, 2001; Weedon, 1987). Feminist poststructuralism recognizes that language and discourse are powerful, and through discourse insight can be gained into the experiences of women (Gavey, 1989; Weedon, 1987). This is of importance to my research because I critically explored how the values, beliefs and practices of female dancers are constituted to gain an understanding of their personal experiences. I also explored the connection of the dancer's personal experiences to dominant and competing discourses in the world of dance. I aimed to give young female dancers a voice in this research in hopes that prevention strategies will be based on their knowledge. This is also relative to the idea of power in feminist poststructuralism, where power remains mutually dependent of knowledge.

Power generates knowledge and knowledge initiates power (Weedon, 1987). It is necessary that the voices of female dancers are brought to the forefront to generate knowledge and this can be accomplished with the use of feminist poststructuralism (Burr, 1995). Regarding subjectivity, the focus is heavily on how gender influences and shapes identities (Weedon, 1987). The subjectivities of female dancers are largely shaped by the idea of what a female dancer should look like: lean, beautiful, poised and feminine (Kleposki, 2002; Zoletić & Duraković-Belko, 2009). The literature has shown the connection between eating disorders and eating disorder behaviours in female dancers, and the social emphasis that associates a dancer's body to a thin body (Kleposki, 2002; Zoletić & Duraković-Belko, 2009).

**Foucauldian framework.** This research used a specific feminist poststructuralist approach that was informed by a Foucauldian theoretical framework. A Foucauldian framework aligns with the purpose and methodology of my work and provides an understanding of key concepts that were explored and analyzed in my research: power, body, and discourse.



Foucault was a French philosopher and historian whose major work focused on subjectivity, discourse and power (Downing, 2008). In terms of power, Foucault views power as relational, situational, shifting and always being negotiated by individuals (Foucault, 1982; Weedon, 1987). He views power relations as something that is always present in human society, and as a place where knowledge is produced (Downing, 2008; Weedon, 1987). Foucault (1982) argues that power is not something that a group or person possesses, but rather is relational. Foucault views the body as the place where the systems of discourse and power relations emerge (Weedon, 1987). He believes that without the body there is no power or subjectivity to script the discourses upon because the body is where discourses inscribe themselves (Butler, 1989). Foucault (1977) discusses this in terms of the docile body: “Something that can be made; out of a formless clay, an inapt body [from which] the machine required can be constructed” (p. 135). It is a body that is unformed and willing to be shaped. Foucault (1977) further contends that the body is “pliable, capable of being manipulated, shaped, and trained. It obeys, responds and becomes skillful” (p. 135-136). In terms of my research, I looked for how power was negotiated and what influencers in the world of dance reinforced the current distribution of power (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

To provide an example of how Foucault’s view on power is relevant, his work on the panopticon in *Discipline and Punish* (1977) can be drawn upon. The panopticon is a type of institutional building with a tower in the center. The idea is that one guard can observe all prisoners because the prisoners cannot see the guard and, therefore, are not able to tell if they are being watched or not. Although it is not possible for one guard to observe all prisoners at once, Foucault discusses how prisoners always act as if they are being observed because of this anonymous form of power. This example displays how power can cause self-regulation of the

body, and provides a useful way of understanding how unrealistic body ideals in females are constituted (Duncan, 1994). This is comparable to the discussion in the literature on dancers' sense of constantly being evaluated and consequently striving for an unrealistic body image. Dancers believe they are always being observed and publicly on display, which leads to self-regulation through unhealthy food and body behaviours (Annus & Smith, 2009; Nascimento et al., 2012; Ringham et al., 2006; Zoletić & Duraković-Belko, 2009).

Foucault recognizes that discourses are ways of constituting knowledge, and are more than ways of thinking and producing meaning. Discourses create the body, mind and emotional life of the subjects they seek to shape (Weedon, 1987). For these reasons, Foucault's theory of discourse was used to guide this research project.

### **Summary**

This chapter outlined the methodology used for this research. This research was situated within a feminist poststructural framework, and provided a critical lens to explore the beliefs, values and practices of female dancers. A Foucauldian framework further informed this research through providing an understanding of power, body, and discourse. The next chapter will discuss the methods for conducting this research using a feminist poststructural approach.

## Chapter Four: Methods

This chapter discusses the research sample and population, recruitment strategies, and ethical concerns. The methods were congruent with the feminist poststructuralism methodology discussed above (Aston, 2016; Weedon, 1987).

### Sample

The sample size for this research project was 12 participants. In qualitative research, when a phenomenon appears once it can become part of the analysis (Legard, Keegan, & Ward, 2003). Twelve interviews provided enough data to allow similarities to be analyzed and threads of discourse to emerge (Guest, Bunce, & Johnson, 2006). Twelve participants also allowed for adequate sampling across different regions in Canada, which suggested that the discourses available to young female dancers is not specific to one place.

All participants were female dancers, and ranged in age from 14-18 years. Given that this research was only looking at current competitive dancers, 14-18 years range falls within the age of current competitive dancers and reflects the age when eating disorders and eating disorder behaviours most prevalently become known (Scholtz, Hill, & Lacey, 2010). A current competitive dancer was defined as a dancer who trains in a structured learning environment, such as a dance studio or professional dance company, and participates in regular competitions and/or performances. Furthermore, a competitive dancer by this definition needed to train for a minimum of 12 hours per week, and ballet training had to account for at least 3 hours of this weekly training. Last, dancers had to be competing for five or more years. This criterion was based on previous studies which found that dancers who train in a competitive environment, where ballet is part of their dance training, are more likely to experience (ED)Bs (De Bruin et al., 2009; Gvion, 2008; Van Durme et al. 2012). Archinard and Scherer (1995) found females with

five or more years of ballet experience displayed a higher level of psychological symptoms associated with (ED)Bs when compared to females with less than five years of dance training. This was found to be a result of increased exposure to the dance environment (Archinard & Scherer, 1995). Although this research did not target dancers with (ED)Bs, it was important that dancers had spent enough time in the world of dance to speak to the influence that dance culture had on their relationship with food and body. This experience may, or may not, have influenced the development of (ED)Bs.

### **Inclusion Criteria**

All participants needed to meet specific criteria to be eligible for participation in this study. As mentioned above, all participants had to be female dancers ranging from 14-18 years of age, had to be current competitive dancers, and meet the definition for a competitive dancer that was previously outlined. This study only looked at dancers who trained at a Canadian dance site and had been competing for five or more years. Last, all participants had to agree to have their interview audio-recorded and their direct quotations used.

### **Exclusion Criteria**

Males were excluded from this study because the literature indicates their experience is different from females. Females are generally at greater risk for the development and maintenance of eating disorders because they experience greater objectification and a stronger drive for thinness when compared to males (Fairburn & Harrison, 2003; Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997; O'Dea, 2002; Slater & Tiggemann, 2010). This holds true in the world of dance as well where there has been a higher incidence of reported (ED)Bs in female dancers than in male dancers (Aimé, Craig, Pepler, Jiang, & Connolly, 2008; Button, Aldridge, & Palmer, 2008). This may be a result of more females than males in dance, or the limited literature on (ED)Bs in male

dancers (Nordin-Bates et al., 2011). Of the few studies that explored (ED)Bs in male dancers, it was found that construct of body dissatisfaction and the symptoms associated with (ED)Bs are different (Andersen, Cohn, & Holbrook, 2000). For example, female dancers are more likely to engage in vomiting and males are more likely to engage in excessive exercise. In the non-dancer population, when males begin to worry about their weight they are more concerned with increasing muscle mass where females are more concerned with being thin. This is likely to be the case in dance as well, as the psychological profile of male dancers regarding (ED)Bs have been found to be quite similar to that of non-dancing male adolescents (Neumärker, Bettle, Neumärker, & Bettle, 2000).

### **Recruitment Strategies**

Participants were recruited using purposeful and snowball sampling. Purposeful sampling was used because it allowed the researcher to select individuals and sites that met the inclusion criteria and could best inform the central phenomenon (Berg, 2007; Creswell, 2013; Liamputtong, 2009). As a former competitive dancer, I used my knowledge of the world of dance to recruit suitable participants. The recruitment message (see Appendix A) was distributed to current competitive dancers and competitive dance studios/environments via Facebook. The message was also shared by personal Facebook message.

Snowball sampling was also used to recruit participants who met the inclusion criteria. Snowball sampling is a recruitment technique where participants give referrals to people they think might fit the study criteria (Berg, 2007). Snowball sampling has been shown to be an effective sampling method in research that studies a sensitive topic area and participants may be hard to reach (Berg, 2007). This was important given that eating disorders are a sensitive topic.

When potential participants responded to my Facebook advertisement (via Facebook or

email), I thanked them for their message and answered any immediate questions and/or concerns that they had. Over electronic correspondence, I asked them to confirm they met the inclusion criteria for my study and asked them for their studio's location. If a participant's location was in Canada and provided variation to the research, based on the locations of previous participants interviewed, I proceeded with sending them the consent form via email or Facebook (see Appendix C; see Appendix D) and arranging an interview time. If the participant did not provide variation, I let them know that I unfortunately had already interviewed enough dancers from their area/studio and thanked them for their time. This was to prevent participants all dancing at the same studio with the same coaches and environmental aspects, which may have created very similar experiences among participants. Besides screening for variation in training location, participants were selected on a first response basis.

### **Ethical Concerns**

Given this research study explored a vulnerable population, ethical concerns were carefully considered. Ethical approval was obtained from the Dalhousie Health Sciences Research Ethics Board prior to undertaking this research project. This ethics application addressed informed consent, risks and benefits, confidentiality, and dissemination of results.

**Informed consent.** Informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to their participation in this study/interview. The informed consent outlined a detailed account of the study at a 9<sup>th</sup> grade reading level. This ensured that young participants were sufficiently informed before consenting (see Appendix C).

The consent form and signature page (see Appendix C; see Appendix D) was provided to participants via email or Facebook as a pdf document prior to scheduling their interview. This gave the individual time to review the consent form and decide if they would like to participate.

The parents of some of the younger participants also wanted time to review the consent documents. The signed consent form was obtained prior to the interview, and I answered any questions the participants may have had. I also confirmed that the participants had no questions or concerns regarding the consent process before beginning the interview. Given that all interviews were conducted over the phone, informed consent from participants was received prior to the interview through email exchange. Third party consent/assent was not required from parents because at age 14 females are able to speak to their own food and body choices, and it was important participants felt autonomous in consenting to do so. Some participants, however, chose to review the documents with their parents and/or guardians.

**Risks and benefits.** Although there were no direct benefits provided to participants, it was expected that participating in this study would allow participants to gain insight into their own experiences through reflective discussion. It was also anticipated that participating in this study could benefit the health and wellness of future female dancers by providing knowledge that may contribute to prevention initiatives.

Due to the vulnerable nature of the research topic, it was important that potential risks and discomforts were anticipated. There was a possibility that participants may have been suffering with an eating disorder or eating disorder behaviours, and/or was affected by someone who suffers. It was made clear, both in the informed consent and in data collection phases, that if at any time the participant felt emotional or psychological distress they could take a break or stop participation immediately without explanation. Contact information for local eating disorder/psychological supports and resources were also provided to every participant (see Appendix E).

**Confidentiality.** All interviews were conducted over the phone using the recording app *TapeACall*. I only conducted phone interviews in my private home when no one else was present. I required that participants were also in a private and quiet environment. This was to help protect the participant's confidentiality and privacy and ensure that the quality of the recording was not impeded. Participants were informed that the conversation was being recorded using *TapeACall*, which is a recording app for iPhone. All participants agreed to have their interview recorded. After the interview was completed, the recording was immediately transferred to a password protected file on a memory stick and deleted from my phone/computer.

All information provided by the participants remained private and confidential. Only I, the researcher, and my supervisor (Matthew Numer) had access to the interview data. Transcriptions and any other electronic records eliminated names to ensure anonymity of participants, coaches, and dance sites. I transcribed the interviews and removed any personally identifying information before my supervisor was given access to the transcripts. When the data are reported and/or presented, participant numbers will be used to ensure participants and dance sites are not identifiable. All records and transcriptions were kept on two memory sticks (one for backup) and all individual files were password protected. Any electronic exchange of information between my supervisor and I was password protected as well. During the study, one memory stick was kept in my private home in a private location and the backup memory stick was kept in a locked drawer in my office at the Tupper Medical Building. Upon completion of the research project, data and memory sticks will be stored in a locked drawer in my supervisor's office in Stairs House at Dalhousie University. After the five-year storage period, all files on the memory sticks will be deleted and the memory sticks will be properly destroyed.



If a participant disclosed any evidence of abuse, neglect or need for protection during the project, I was instructed to report the incident directly to the child welfare agency in the area where the child lived, as well as notify my supervisor immediately. This information was included in the consent document (see Appendix C). During this project, none of the participants reported any evidence of abuse and/or neglect.

**Incentives.** Incentives/compensation were not offered for participation in this research study.

**Dissemination of results.** I believe it is my ethical obligation to disseminate the results of this research study through publications, presentations and knowledge translation. I plan to present the results at academic conferences and create a one-page handout of my results that can be distributed across the dance community. It is important that dancers, coaches, parents and the public are aware of the results.

### **Data Collection**

Interviews were conducted in a one-on-one semi-structured interview fashion to elicit the experiences of female dancers (Berg, 2007; Liamputtong, 2009). One-on-one semi structured interviews maintained congruence with feminist poststructuralism. This interview style allows an in-depth understanding to be gained of the ways in which individual stories are connected to the discourses in the world of dance and understand how these discourses shape the dancer's relationship to food and body. The interviews aimed to discover the available discourses and explore how they constitute truths, realities and subjectivities around food and body. Furthermore, eating disorders are extremely complex. Semi-structured interviews allowed for necessary flexibility and provided comprehensive and meaningful data (Berg, 2007).

All semi-structured interviews were between 45 and 90 minutes, and with the participant's permission were audio-taped. Open-ended questions were asked to allow participants to talk in-depth about their experiences, which was necessary given a feminist poststructural methodology (Berg, 2007; Liamputtong, 2009). I also used probing questions, which allowed for extraction of detailed data and the ability to ask iterative questions (Shenton, 2004). Interviews were conducted in a non-judgmental and non-hierarchical conversational manner in keeping with methodological congruence (Aston et al., 2014). Interview questions were in relation to the world of dance, and its influence on shaping the dancer's relationship with food and body (see Appendix B).

### **Data Analysis**

Discourse analysis was applied to the data of this research. Discourse analysis is not only congruent with feminist poststructuralism, but also with the purpose of this research study: *To examine how discourses in the world of dance constitute the female dancer's relationship to food and body.* Discourse analysis is a methodology of analyzing text for the purpose of interpreting how language, at a given time and place, is used to reflect reality and construct it to be a certain way (Gee, 2005). The goal of discourse analysis "is not to ensure the methodological conditions for discovery of truth but to understand the conditions under which differing accounts are produced and how meaning is assumed to be produced from them" (Harper, 1995, p. 350). Discourse analysis is a critical and reflexive approach to analysis that moves beyond the level of common sense and challenges everyday realities (Aston 2016; Cheek, 2000).

Interviews were transcribed verbatim after each interview and all identifying information was removed at this time. Interview transcripts were analyzed using discourse analysis as outlined by Aston's (2016) guide to using feminist poststructuralism informed by discourse

analysis (see Table 1). Discourse analysis identified beliefs, values, practices, social and institutional discourses, relations of power, and moments of subjectivity and agency to uncover the experiences of participants (Aston et al., 2014; Aston, 2016; Cheek, 2000; Powers, 2011; Weedon, 1987). A variety of discourses emerged from the data, and all perspectives were openly and equitably heard and valued (Aston et al., 2014).

All transcripts were analyzed separately as well as compared to find common themes. Both my supervisor and I analyzed the first three transcripts separately and discussed the identification of emerging patterns. Coding was not used as this can potentially restrict meaning too quickly (Aston, 2016). After the first three transcripts were analyzed, I continued analyzing the remaining transcripts using discourse analysis (Aston, 2016). Analysis was reported in past tense and direct quotes were reported by participant number and age of the corresponding participant (ex. P1, 17).

*Table 1*

A guide to using FPS informed by discourse analysis

1) Identify important issues	Read the transcript and mark quotations you feel represent an important issue. Name the issue as you see it.
2) Applying beliefs, values and practices	Provide the quotation (cut and paste) and write something about the Belief, Value and Practice within the quotation.
3) Social and institutional discourses	Write about the social and institutional discourses you see informing the issue you identified. Sometimes this is clearly described in the quotation but most often you need to expand on the implied ideas. You still need to clearly connect to the evidence (words and meaning provided by participant).
4) Responding to relations of power	As you write about the discourses, you need to connect these ideas to the participant. How do the discourses affect the participant? Does he/she agree or disagree with the beliefs, values and practices? Is it an easy or positive

	fit? Or are there questions, conflicts, tensions, etc.? These are the “relations of power” that the participant is feeling/experiencing.
5) Subjectivity and agency	You can also add in the participant’s “subjectivity” (how they are positioned as a nurse, man, woman, teacher etc.) as well as their “agency” (how they choose to act in each situation by fitting in or challenging).

### **Trustworthiness**

Being able to trust research results is important in this proposed research study that aims to improve the lives of female dancers in the world of dance. This research aimed to achieve trustworthiness through careful research design and the application of the accepted approach to trustworthiness by Lincoln and Guba (1985).

The approach by Lincoln and Guba (1985) focuses on four elements: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Each of these elements will be taken into consideration. This approach was chosen as it aligns well with the use of feminist poststructuralism (Aston, 2016; Cheek, 2000).

**Credibility.** Lincoln and Guba (1985) argue that credibility is an extremely important factor in establishing trustworthiness. Credibility ensures that the findings of the study are congruent with reality and the phenomenon under exploration is accurately recorded (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). From a feminist point of view, it is argued that participants are experts about their own lived experiences, which produces credibility (Aston, 2016). To further ensure credibility in this research, certain provisions were made. Tactics included: promoting honesty by giving all participants the opportunity to refuse to participate, peer scrutiny of the research project, iterative questioning, reflective commentary of the researcher in a self-reflective journal, background qualification and experience of the researcher, and thorough review of previous research findings (Shenton, 2004).

**Transferability.** Transferability is concerned with the extent to which the findings of a study can be applied and transferred to other contexts or settings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Since the findings of this research will be specific to a small number of dancers, it is not possible to demonstrate that the findings are generalizable to a wider population. It is also not the intent of this research. Given the feminist poststructuralism methodology, the findings are based on the individual's experiences in the world of dance (Aston, 2016; Cheek, 2000). Findings are therefore not generalizable in a feminist poststructural approach or in discourse analysis. Following the position of Lincoln and Guba (1985), however, I ensured that sufficient contextual information about the participants dance environment was provided. This enables the reader to decide which findings may, or may not, be 'transferable'.

**Dependability.** Dependability means if the research were repeated in the same context with the same methods and participants, similar results would be achieved. Lincoln and Guba (1985) stress the close connection between credibility and dependability, arguing that ensuring credibility largely ensures dependability. To achieve dependability in this qualitative research, the research processes was reported in detail with the use of an audit trail. The audit trail involved a step-by-step account for all the research decisions made and all the procedures that followed. The audit trail provided enough detail so that a future researcher would be able to replicate the research. Although the research will be able to be replicated, the findings will not. The beliefs, values and practices will vary when using different participants with different personal experiences.

**Confirmability.** Confirmability is concerned with the extent to which research findings are shaped by the participants' experiences and not the researcher's bias, motivation, or interests (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). To achieve confirmability, I admitted to my own predispositions. I am

the same gender as the participants and share similar experiences. I was a former competitive dancer myself and suffered from an eating disorder. In feminist poststructuralism, my previous experiences and knowledge are a great strength if my predispositions are admitted to and I am aware of how my position and interests are imposed and restrained during the research process (Aston, 2016). I was sure to consciously acknowledge my experiences, opinions, assumptions, thoughts and feelings by keeping a self-reflective journal. This is a strategy that is accepted in feminist research to facilitate reflexivity and transparency in the research process (Denzin, 1994; Lather, 1991; MacNaughton, 2001; Ortlipp, 2008). An audit trail for this study was also used to establish confirmability of the research (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

### **Summary**

The purpose of this chapter was to outline the methods used for this research. Interviews took place with 12 female dancers to gain a better understanding of their experiences in the world of dance, specifically in relation to food and body. The data from the interviews were then transcribed and analyzed using discourse analysis to gain insight into the research question: *How does experience in the world of dance shape the female dancer's relationship to food and body?*

The following four chapters will critically analyze participants' interviews to elucidate what threads of discourse in the world of dance have come to dominance. The primary focus will be on the discourses related to food and body and how these discourses shape the experiences of female dancers, particularly in relation to body image and eating. Many factors are at play in producing young women's conceptions of food and body, but the world of dance utilizes, with great precision, a gaze that governs the body like few other experiences in girls' lives. The analysis begins with the environmental factors that come together and focus the gaze.

## Chapter Five: Environment

The world of dance is a competitive culture inclusive of several environmental elements. Some of these environmental elements include mirrors, dance attire, costumes, and the image associated with the ideal dancer's body. This chapter will focus on how these elements shape the dancer's relationship with food and body and contribute to certain discourse coming to dominance in the world of dance.

### Competitive Culture

The competitive world of dance creates considerable stress for dancers. Participants who compared the competitive dance environment to the recreational dance environment noted: "The competitive culture was more about looking good...where recreational dance was more about having fun and just doing something that you loved...it was a lot more carefree and way less stressful" (P12, 18). Due to the stress and commitment of the competitive dance environment, participants often compared dancing competitively to having a full-time job. Participants were at the studio every evening and every weekend for several hours. Even when participants were away from the dance environment, they agreed that there was never a break from worrying about food and body. One participant reflected: "When I started being competitive ...that's when I realized that it was important... it's not just two nights a week, it's almost every night, where you have to look good and eat healthy" (P1, 17). This constant pressure created a relationship with food and body that most participants believed to be negative. One participant commented: "It's just not much of a positive thing...I have thought a lot more negative about myself and food because of dance but there's not much positivity that it's brought" (P6, 17). The overpowering negativity caused participants to question how the competitive environment had changed how they felt about dance.

Although all participants claimed to love the art of dance, many participants did not love the competitive environment. One participant commented: “The actual competitive atmosphere was never something that was very encouraging, it always kind of brought me down more than it made me feel good about myself” (P12, 18). The competitive environment creates countless insecurities and pressures that dancers do not experience in recreational dance. Some participants believed that the added stress of the competitive environment diminished their love for dance: “I’ve lost my love for dance a little bit because I just want to have a break once in a while” (P9, 16). There was no break in the competitive world of dance and dancers knew this. If they were to take a break and relax on their diets or work outs they would not be competitive when it was time for stage, so they resisted this urge. This created conflict for dancers because although they needed and wanted a break they also desired to win and to achieve the ideal dancer’s body.

### **Ideal Dancer’s body**

Many dancers in this research study believed that the ideal dancer’s body was customary, important and useful. The ideal dancer’s body was described as:

The tight tight tummy, the abdomen lines, the really really small chest, no curves, no bumps on your waist line, the thin tight compact thighs, your arms don’t jiggle, when you wear a top you don’t have rolls coming off of your straps at the back...everything is just basically tight and compact and stuck together. (P2, 15)

Some participants believed that the ideal dancer’s body was starting to move away from being thin and towards being fit: “I have seen a little bit more of a switch to being more fit instead of being thin” (P5, 18). This switch, however, did not produce a different relationship with how dancers felt about their bodies. Using the word “fit” instead of “thin” did not produce less pressure or expectation. Dancers believed that to be fit they had to have minimal body fat for



their muscle definition to reveal itself. Striving to be fit actually created increased pressure for dancers. One participant noted: “It’s so hard to figure out exactly how you should look” (P1, 17). Dancers not only had to worry about their weight and body fat percentage but also about muscle development and definition. Participants also questioned if they should be aiming to achieve fitness, or thinness, or both.

**Ideal ballerinas body.** Although an ideal body existed for all forms of dance, all participants believed there was a distinguishable ideal for ballet. Participants believed that “ballerinas had the most stereotype placed on their bodies, whereas other dance styles were not as strict” (P6, 17). Dancers understood that if you did not have the ideal ballerina body, “tall, skinny, long neck, the tiny little torso, the busty back and arched feet” (P12, 18), you moved on to another style of dance. Participants did not resist this notion. One participant commented: “People that are bigger or a bit more muscular will move on to hip hop or contemporary” (P1, 17). The general messaging being signaled and received regarding the ideal ballerina’s body was different than the messaging about the ideal dancer’s body.

This messaging became known because dancers were taught if you were not born with a ballerina’s body there was nothing you could do to obtain it. Altering food and body practices could not change your height or the length of your limbs. Most participants claimed that to be successful as a ballet dancer having the ideal ballerinas body was a matter of fact:

You will be a lot more successful if you have the longer legs and the skinnier body because it actually helps you with ballet...it helps you stay on your feet and it helps your partner out a lot more...it’s just a fact rather than an opinion. (P12, 18)

Dancers knew that it was easier to take a dancer with the perfect ballet body and teach them technique rather than invest in a dancer who could never achieve the ideal:

It is easy to take someone with a perfect body and give them technique but it is not easy to take someone with gorgeous technique and make them have a nice body....they would rather have thinner girls that aren't as good as you because they can work on their technique and not have to worry about what their body is going to look like. (P2, 15)

Ballet has a stronger origin in the thin physique. Ballet companies require specific height and body proportion requirements to be met before accepting dancers into their programs. If dancers did not meet these requirements they knew it was a pointless endeavor to pursue ballet. For other styles of dance, the requirements are not as strict and participants believed that the ideal dancer's body was more realistic to obtain. Altering food and body practices to achieve the ideal dancer's body was possible and believed to be realistic. All participants in this study competed in all styles of dance including ballet. Only two participants, however, claimed that they had the ideal body for ballet. Dancers that did not meet this ideal, were still required to continue competing in ballet. These dancers experienced increased scrutiny and body image dissatisfaction as their body conflicted with the prescribed ideal.

Regardless of the ideal dancers were striving to obtain or maintain, the amount of stress and pressure felt by participants was consistently high and shaped negative body image discourse. Dancers believed that this negative body image discourse would follow them forever. One participant commented: "It has now become my permanent body image" (P1, 17). Participants believed their negative body image was something they would always internalize.

## **Mirrors**

Mirrors are a powerful teaching tool in the world of dance that draw an extraordinary amount of attention to the body. Dancers train in front of mirrors for hours each day to observe and improve their technique and skill. Mirrors provide visual feedback to dancers and coaches

regarding positioning of the body, flow, timing, and cleanliness. Participants understood that mirrors were an unavoidable and necessary component of dance. All participants, however, believed that if they had a better relationship with their bodies, mirrors would not be a such negative presence. Nevertheless, none of the participants were able to establish a positive relationship with the reflection mirrors produced. Participants consistently explained how they would look in the mirror and scrutinize every inch of their bodies because “when you see something wrong with your body you’re always going to negatively put it down” (P4, 17). This constant scrutinizing and examining would generate negative thoughts and produce hate. One participant commented:

You just start to pick on little things and you just start to really dislike those little things...we’re constantly in front of a mirror, for hours in a day...so you’re always looking at those little things...just putting hate in the back of your mind. (P9, 16)

The negative thoughts and self-talk engaged in by participants did not differ much between participants. Looking in the mirror initiated thoughts like “I need to eat less, this needs to be flatter and I hate that, hate that, hate that” (P5, 18). Participants also recognized that these negative thoughts transferred into their meals: “If I looked in the mirror and thought negative thoughts then I would keep those thoughts going into my meals” (P1, 17). Mirrors optimized the critique of the body and participants were unable to escape the image being reflected. Mirrors created an enduring need for dancers to reshape and refine the body before their next encounter. The dissonance between what the dancers saw reflected in the mirror and the ideal body they desired permeated their thoughts about food and body even when the mirror was not present.

Dancers cannot avoid mirrors, but they can learn to change the dynamic of the relationship. Some participants spoke to techniques they would engage in to balance out the

negative thoughts that the mirrors generated. One participant shared: “When I look in the mirror I’ll say wow, I look good today...that’s something I always tell myself that just helps” (P9, 16). Other participants believed that building confidence and willpower helped defend against negative thoughts. These techniques, however, were not always successful:

There are a lot of times when I can pull myself out of it and say ok it’s alright that I don’t look so good today...there are moments when I have enough strength and willpower to fight away those bad thoughts...but then there are moments when I kind of breakdown and feel bad. I think that is just part of life...and a part of a dancers’ life definitely. (P1, 17)

When dancers stand in front of the mirror they are forced to battle their negative thoughts. They enter a battle between their minds and their bodies. This disembodiment can successfully protect dancers, but it can also break them as their mind and body become increasingly disconnected. It was understood that the dominant purpose of the mirror was to be a learning tool and provide visual feedback to facilitate technical improvement and growth. This was hard, however, for participants to focus on when they were actually in front of them. Their beliefs contradicted their practices. One participant commented: “I just find it really difficult to see myself the way I used to...I just worry so much more about what I look like now” (P6, 17). What dominated for participants was the dissonance between the body they saw in the mirror and the body they either used to see or desired to see. This disconnect resulted in a variety of (ED)Bs such as negative body image, body image dysmorphia and unhealthy weight loss behaviours. Participants believed these behaviours were just simply part of a dancers’ life.

## **Dance Attire and Costumes**

Dance attire and costumes are another large part of a dancer's life that shape their relationship with food and body. Dance attire and costumes created an enormous amount of pressure for participants to obtain the ideal dancer's body. Dance attire is generally tight, revealing and exposes most of the body. Participants believed "if you want to be a good dancer you have to be able to show everything off" (P2, 15). It is a requirement for the body to be exposed both in class and at competition to be viewed, corrected, and judged. This made dance the environment where participants felt the greatest pressure to look good. One participant explained: "In my leotard and tights everything is out there and it's exposed...I guess it's more the studio that I feel pressure to look good" (P1, 17). Participants often spoke to how vulnerable they felt in their dance attire because every crevice of their body was visible.

Dance costumes and costume season also produced a sense of vulnerability and stress for participants. One participant commented: "When we do have to try on costumes there's definitely a bit of nerves coming on to make sure it fits and it's not too tight... costume season is nerve racking" (P1, 17). Costume season is a time where the body is increasingly scrutinized by dancers as they pick their bodies apart in every single costume. If dancers believed the costume was not flattering on them, it resulted in stress and negative thoughts about their bodies. This happened frequently because costumes were often not custom made to fit each individual body. One participant explained:

There are 4 sizes for 4000 different body types so some costumes could look beautiful on some dancers and then other costumes would look bad on me ...costumes made you really pick yourself apart ... really different places like your armpits or your legs...

different things that you wouldn't look at costumes really accentuated and sometimes you would get really self-conscious. (P12, 18)

In most regular clothing, you are not drawn to pay attention to every crevice of your body. Costumes, however, are often very tight in awkward and uncommon places like the armpits, inner thighs, and under the ribcage.

When dancers did not like how they looked in a costume, they were motivated to change their body before competition. One participant shared: "I would tell myself it's fine I can skip this meal and fit into my costume and look better on stage" (P8, 18). If meals were being skipped to look better in a costume the ends were believed to justify the means. When participants were unable to achieve the body they desired in time for competition, they knew they would feel insecure on stage. One participant noted:

It is better than going on stage and forgetting the choreography cause everything in my mind is like oh my god [omg] my stomach looks bad omg I can't imagine... I need to find a way to pull my shorts up without somebody noticing. (P2, 15)

Dancers often felt uncomfortable and insecure revealing their bodies on stage. These emotions were so strong that it took away from performing.

Participants stated that they felt better on stage when costumes covered more of their bodies. They believed, however, that costumes were unfortunately becoming increasingly revealing. One participant reflected on her older cousin's dance costumes, stating: "Their whole body was covered and now we are wearing these little bodysuits that barely cover anything" (P4, 17). Participants believed that revealing costumes were the trendy practice. Costumes that cover the body were not the norm and likely not the direction the world of dance was headed.

Many participants further discussed that the younger dancers were put in equally revealing costumes. This sexualization of the body from a young age shapes the values young dancers place on their bodies and teaches dancers to value thinness, beauty, and sexual attractiveness. Some participants discussed how makeup also had this effect:

I find that because we wore makeup so much when we were little and we are so used to it we just always like to wear makeup...it is just a common thing that you put on your makeup...and you get obsessed with wearing makeup....you cannot wear no makeup...or people won't notice me. (P4, 17)

Many dancers are being taught very early that to be valued they must be sexually attractive. It is hard for dancers to change the beliefs, values and practices that are instilled from such a young age. Sexualizing the body creates body image discourse that produces self-objectification and misplaced values. These values can implicate body image discourse and relationship with food and body throughout the dancer's lifetime.

**Dance vs. school.** All dancers spent a similar amount of time at school as they did at dance. Participants often compared how they felt about their bodies at dance with how they felt about their bodies at school. Participants generally claimed they were more comfortable with their bodies at school. There still, however, was no real break from thinking about the body:

I feel more comfortable (at school) because it's baggier clothing...the shirts we have aren't tight fitted and the pants are quite loose...so I do feel like I can relax a little bit about it....I don't have to suck in or eat less on a day that I have school....but there is always that thought in the back of my mind...I'm going to dance tonight how am I going to look... there is no break (P1, 17).

Similar to half of the participants, the dancer above went to a high school with a uniform requirement. The other half of participants went to a high school where they could choose their attire. Having the ability to choose clothing also contributed to the participants increased comfort at school. One participant commented:

At school you can wear something to cover it up if you are not confident about it...at competitions you don't get to choose if you wear a belly shirt...if you are on stage and you feel uncomfortable you can't do anything about it. (P2, 15)

Regardless if participants attended a school with a uniform requirement or not, the consensus among participants was the same: "At school it's easier to hide your body" (P5, 18). The choice to cover the body at school gave participants a sense of security and a relief from feeling constantly exposed and judged. Having dance every evening and weekend, however, tainted the reprieve.

Involvement in the world of dance sets dancers apart from the existing mainstream and social pressure that exists for non-dancers. Dance attire and costumes intensify the amount of sexual objectification that is experienced by young girls.

### **The World of Dance and Food**

The world of dance created a dominant food discourse that largely influenced the relationship dancers had with food and eating. Eating a low calorie and low-fat diet was reinforced as a useful tool to produce the ideal dancer's body. How food effected appearance of the body largely determined how participants felt about it. If the food item contributed positively to achieving the ideal it was constructed as "good" and if not it was constructed as "bad". Participants believed that dance alone had shaped this relationship:



It is definitely because I am a dancer. I don't want to put garbage into my body because whatever I eat it consumes into energy so I want to have a lot of energy to dance ...eating fries and a burger will just burn into trans-fat. (P7, 14)

Identifying as a dancer was believed to be the sole reason why putting "garbage" into the body was a concern. When participants ate unhealthy foods that were high calorie and high fat, they would often punish themselves to balance out calorie intake by skipping meals: "Like I say to my mom don't make me a lunch because I got to get used to not eating" (P4, 17). On the contrary, refraining from eating unhealthy foods made participants feel good about themselves and their bodies. One participant commented: "I feel like eating healthy just makes me feel better about myself because I know there's not a bunch of junk in my body" (P7, 14). Similarly, one participant explained:

When I think I have had such a good week because I haven't cheated I'm positive and I feel good about myself because I did well that week...but sometimes if I go off the rails I'm like crap maybe I shouldn't have done that and I do get hard on myself. (P3, 16)

It is stressed to dancers by parents, peers, and the media that eating healthy is a "good" behaviour and deserves to be rewarded. Eating "bad", however, is cheating and requires punishment. This is not a beneficial relationship because it creates negativity around any food that is deemed unhealthy and results in policing of food. When dancers consume foods that are high calorie, high fat, high sugar (i.e. have been labelled as "bad"), they feel guilt and shame and often engage in (ED)Bs.

Participants believed that their dance schedules were to blame for their poor relationship with food. Participants explained that after school they would go straight to dance and there was no time to eat. One participant commented: "I find that because everything is so busy and it's

run, run, run...there isn't even really time for food" (P4, 17). Since eating is not desired it is often not prioritized. When dancers arrive at dance their schedules are also very tight and eating is not encouraged either. This caused a lot of frustration:

It's really tough on our bodies...it's almost like they think we're superheroes and like we're not! We're humans, we need a break, we need a long enough break to eat something and to keep ourselves and our bodies going. (P9, 16)

Although dancers were frustrated and struggled with the lack of time to eat, they did not disrupt their schedules to do so. If breaks to eat at dance are not available it sends the message that eating is not required or necessary. This created significant conflict for dancers. The world of dance enforces healthy eating and at the same time does not provide the opportunity/time to produce healthy eating practices. The expectation to eat healthy contradicts the schedule of dancers, which does not make time to eat until after class (as late as 10pm). Dancers would then express that they were starving and would often binge eat as a result.

Participants expressed that the conflicting relationship they had with food increasingly appeared with age. One participant commented: "I definitely think about it more than I did when I was a little kid...I worry about how much I'm eating and I focus on eating a lot of healthy food" (P6, 17). Being involved in dance provoked dancers to think twice about everything they ate. Eating, which was once an ordinary practice, had become entirely measured and deliberate:

When I was younger I viewed it a lot differently...I was more lenient about how I thought about food. If I woke up and I wanted to have chocolate chip pancakes for breakfast on a Sunday I didn't really think twice about it I just did it...but now that I'm so focused on dance I definitely think more about what I'm eating and I'm like more

concerned about making sure I have a smoothie and something healthy for breakfast. (P4, 17)

Involvement in dance took away the pleasure participants were able to experience with eating and food. It also created ritualistic eating. In other words, participants would eat the same foods every day. One participant commented:

It's just easier to pick three meals that you know are good... I like it and it's good for you, so eating the same thing every day is just easier... not a lot of calories, it's healthy and it sits in my stomach well so I don't feel bloated and look bigger than I want to.... it's hard to find good meals that do that for you. (P1, 17)

Food related discourse generated categorization of food as “good” or “bad” depending on whether the food leads a dancer closer or further from the ideal. When dancers find “good” foods that make them feel good about their bodies they tend to become religious to them.

Ritualistic eating in dancers is common because dancers cherish “good” foods that are acceptable for consumption. The foods that participants would choose to eat tended to consist of lean proteins, fruits and vegetables. Participants would also avoid foods that were high in carbohydrates, sugar, and trans fats. Given that participants were trying to intake enough food to give them the energy to dance, while consuming only low-calorie food options, they experienced great conflict about what and how much to eat. For dancers, silence also shaped a harmful and confusing relationship with food. Participants were often left to interpret what healthy eating meant and found themselves internalizing a confusing and conflicting relationship with food. Dancers knew there was an expectation to eat healthy. Lack of resources, however, often led dancers to believe healthy eating required eating disorder behaviours such as calorie counting, skipping meals, and restricting food intake.

## **Summary**

The world of dance is inclusive of several environmental factors that shape the dancer's relationship with food and body. The ideal dancer's body, mirrors, dance attire and costumes generate dominant food and body discourses that dancers often find irresistible. To survive in this environment dancer's construct unhealthy food and body practices that perpetuate negative thoughts and body image discourse. Findings made evident, however, that the dance environment alone is not responsible for shaping the dancer's relationship with food and body.

In addition to environmental factors, the roles of parents, coaches and peers are central components in the world of dance. Subsequent chapters will focus on the influence of these roles.

## Chapter Six: Parents

The influence of parents on the dancer's relationship with food and body was seen by participants as being less significant than that of their environment, peers, or coaches. The influence of parents often went unrecognized by participants, with many commenting that their parents did not impact their relationship with food and body at all. It became apparent, however, that the discussion of parents created ways of knowing that did influence this relationship. Through body monitoring and food and body talk, this contradiction was illustrated.

### Body Monitoring

Although most participants disclosed that their parents did not comment on their bodies directly, many revealed how their parents, and other parents, discussed the bodies of other dancers in their presence. One participant commented:

My mom...she'll make comments about like how we're looking...not directly to us...but my dad does address things like he talks a lot about other girls...like oh she looks so thin and oh she's such like a twig and all this stuff about other girls around me and my sister... we've never really talked about our bodies to our parents that much. (P6, 17)

By commenting on the bodies of other dancers, in terms of thinness or heaviness, parents are sending the message that the body is being monitored. Participants give meaning to the comments their parents make regarding the bodies of others, translating them into messages about both the ideal dancer's body and their own bodies. The same participant later commented: "If my dad were to mention another girl looks really thin or something like that I might think twice about myself" (P6, 17). These comments led participants to engage in surveillance and monitoring of their own bodies.

Several participants also mentioned that parents would notice if another dancer was getting thinner or heavier:

If someone came back from the summer and looked bigger than they were before they would be like “OMG...she got big and stuff... you hear that a lot...because over the summer you don’t dance as much so you obviously get bigger because you aren’t exercising as much as you did...so you definitely hear a lot of times OMG she got really big. (P4, 17)

This participant commented that her mother would participate in talking about someone getting “bigger” or gaining weight. Concerned about her own weight gain over the summer she commented: “I have been saying I got fat and stuff and my mom would be like just wait for dance to come and you will lose it and stuff” (P4, 17). Although not directly agreeing with her, her mother’s response affirms the weight gain, as well as reaffirms the thin body that will be achieved once the dance season starts again.

Irrespective of discussion surrounding weight loss or weight gain, participants were equally affected by this talk. Participants found any talk from parents about their bodies to be negative and stressful. On the topic of being worried about her weight loss one participant commented: “Then all the dance moms started talking about me and how skinny I was” (P4, 17). Another participant stated: “Parents don’t realize saying someone is skinny can be just as bad as calling someone fat and that really brought me down” (P5, 18). Parents commented on both the weight loss and weight gain of dancers. This talk affected participants negatively because it increased their awareness of the body and made them question if they were straying from the ideal.

The messaging about the body from parents was overall inconsistent and often contradictory. For example, parents would comment on dancers getting bigger over the summer, which reaffirmed the need to have thin bodies. When participants discussed situations when they got too thin and developed eating disorders and/or eating disorder behaviours, their parents then became overly concerned about their weight loss. In all three cases of severe weight loss, the participant's parents threatened to take away dance if they did not gain weight back. This created a contradiction for dancers: thinness was valued while achieving it was punished. Participants also recognized that their parents had control over whether they were able to attend dance. As a result, participants did not want their parents thinking they were intentionally losing weight and remove them from dance.

Participants would often discuss how parents would watch their classes from the viewing window. Parents would monitor rehearsals and practices closely from the window and form opinions of the dancers. As a result, parents would be in the lobby area or outside the classroom when dancers entered and exited class and/or practice. Participants noticed the presence of parents and valued what they were discussing. Participants would let the presence of parents impact their feelings and thoughts, and give meaning to what was said:

So at my old studio it was all the parents used to sit in the lobby and just talk about other kids and when they did they wouldn't make it very secretive...it was really uncomfortable...because I knew what they'd say and then walk into class and it would just go through my mind and it would not make me self-conscious but it would...I wouldn't have as much confidence dancing. (P7, 14)

Even though it is not likely that all the parents stayed in the lobby the whole night, this participant commented that they did: "It was a really long time too cuz we had class from 4:30-

10 and they would just sit there” (P7, 14). Surveillance was being felt at all times, even when participants were likely not being watched or watched directly. This surveillance continued to be felt beyond the walls of dance:

I just think it’s important to work hard in every class and at competition because you never know whose watching...even on the streets...it’s not like people are going to dance on the street but say you have your hair in a bun and you’re walking to dance class and somebody comes up to you and says you’re a dancer. (P7, 14)

Most dancers felt that they were always on public display and permanently visible to be observed and evaluated. Both the discussion and surveillance of parents contributed to self-monitoring of the body, and resulted in practices that discursively formed an ideal body type.

### **Joking**

Joking created body image discourse that created and enforced the ideal dancer’s body. When discussing parents, participants believed parents never talked about food or body directly. When prompted further, however, participants would go on to say that if parents did talk about food or body it was only a joke. In using humour, parents would subtly enforce the ideal dancer’s body by joking about behaviour that deviated from obtaining or maintaining the ideal. Joking about deviant behaviour can result in dancers conforming to behaviour that is acceptable in achieving the ideal, and therefore not joked about. Jokes were perceived by participants as being acceptable and not ill-intentioned:

I don’t know if it is in a negative way but she will make like a joking comment like if you eat one more fry your body suit isn’t going to fit you...you won’t be able to get off the floor when you jump...if we (dancers) all go for dinner and we all order too much the



moms will be like my god you guys aren't going to fit into your costumes...but nothing specifically or to like target or hurt anybody. (P4, 17)

One of the participants acknowledged that even though such comments were presented as jokes, the comments still held meaning and could be hurtful:

They for sure are hurtful ...but I also think it all depends on the person...if someone were to comment on me like two years ago when I was in a low point in my life I probably would have been very hurt by it...like very hurt...but now if someone said to me if you eat one more fry you won't be able to get off the ground I'll laugh with them and I'll be like ya ya whatever. (P9, 16)

Joking was used as a form of expressing criticism. Critiquing food intake of participants and relating food intake to how the body will appear, sends messaging that is impactful and memorable. Masking criticism in the form of a joke also created a more acceptable form of delivery for parents. The only example of parents discussing food or body in a public setting (at a restaurant with other dancers and parents present) was presented as a joke. Joking as a form of discourse in dance created adversity in relation to food and body.

## **Support**

Most participants recognized and appreciated when their parents were supportive, and often made a point of commenting that other parents were more critical than their own. It was apparent that most participants believed their parents were supportive, encouraging and offered compliments regarding their appearance and talent. This endorsement, however, did not affect how participants felt about their bodies. For instance, a participant commented: "They're always like nooo you're not like that you have such a nice body bla bla bla bla bla...and they always try to bring me up" (P9, 16). When parents attempted to console or comfort dancers about their

bodies it was perceived as insignificant. This is largely because it is not the validation of parents that dancers value. Dancers let the negative talk of parents impact how they felt about their bodies, but not the positive talk. Dancers, however, appreciated their parents support in other forms.

Participants with supportive parents tended to report home as their safe space where they felt better about their bodies. One participant commented:

Like I mean if I am home ...I am not worried about if I wear a sports bra or booty shorts or I am not wearing it for anybody to see what I look like...my mom's not going to be like look you have a roll on your belly ...so I feel like my parents are kind of that place.  
(P2, 15).

Other participants commented on being comfortable at home; one participant described it as "secure" (P3, 16), particularly in relation to her clothing. Participants with supportive parents also valued being able to turn to their parents for support and someone to talk to, claiming that this often kept them from crossing the thin line between diet and disorder: "It is something that will be emotional for me as a dancer and as a person but I can always look to my friends and parents for support" (P1, 18). When the home environment was supportive, it provided a safe space that empowered dancers to resist disordered eating behaviours, even when faced with the strong forces at play in the world of dance.

## **Parents and Food**

The influence of parents on the diet of participants and their feelings towards food varied depending on the age of participants. With the younger participants (14 to 16 years of age), parents were largely responsible for their meal preparation and food intake, which resulted in the participants not thinking as much about food or eating. Many of the younger participants

commented that they just ate what was on their plate and believed it to be healthy because their parents valued and practiced healthy eating. With the older participants, parents were less involved with food preparation and not as concerned with monitoring eating behaviours and diets. Although participants wanted this control over their diet, it created greater opportunity for eating disorder behaviours. Reflecting on the ease of eating when she was younger, a participant commented:

Well when I was younger I didn't really have much care for how I looked...my mom would put food on my plate for me so she would take care of what I was eating, but in the past few years I don't know, it's hard to find a time where I completely felt normal about my body. (P1, 18)

As participants entered their mid-teenage years, their parent's role of preparing meals dissipated. Participants were given control of their diets, and consequently control of their bodies. This perhaps was one of the only tools they had to achieve the ideal dancer's body they desired. This tool, however, created tension for most dancers who were trying to balance healthy eating, sufficient food intake, and achieving the ideal dancer's body. Controlling food and diet led to greater scrutinizing of food and body and created dissociation; the body now began feeling disconnected or abnormal to participants. The mind measured every food and diet related decision regardless of the emotional state of the body. The participants would often deny their hungry bodies food because they thought it would help them improve their appearance and sequentially their abilities as a dancer. They realized they had a choice whether to eat or not. When parents were in control of diet and food intake the power of choice was nonexistent and participants ate with greater ease. Given mid-teenage years was a time where many participants

expressed high pressures to look good as a female, these pressures could have been a factor in increased disordered eating behaviours as well.

Although discussion of food and eating was often silenced, home was the one place that this discussion was more prevalent. Still, approximately half of participants commented that they did not talk about food or eating at home. It was something that did not need to be discussed but was valued and practiced silently: “Well we don’t talk about it, it’s just something that we know just from growing up” (P7 ,14). Even when silenced, the behaviours of parents are significant and contribute to the discourse of healthy eating. The family values and practices surrounding healthy eating exist in the absence of language, and, in turn, can create submission.

The participants that did discuss food and eating in their homes mostly framed this talk as their parents valuing healthy eating. One participant commented on how seriously her dad takes healthy eating, making home the place where food is talked about the most:

My dad goes on these healthy kicks and starts cooking really healthy food and starts saying we are going to be eating healthy for like forever and stuff...no treats...if we had an ice cream or something my dad would like freak out. (P4,17)

This participant also discussed the conflicting relationship she had between eating and adhering to her dad’s values: “Well I go into these spurts too where I like a lot of junk food and then I’m like NO, I need to eat healthy and stuff...so when I am in my junk food stage I kind of just sneak it around him” (P4, 17). Since parents valued healthy eating, participants did not want their parents to observe them partaking in unhealthy eating behaviours. This often resulted in participants keeping their unhealthy eating behaviours private from their parents. The ongoing cycle of dieting existed for most participants, where they would have spurts of eating healthy followed by spurts of overindulging on unhealthy foods.

Participants tended to eat unhealthy/junk when their parents were not around, such as at the houses of their non-dancer friends where they had access to “their foods” (P4, 17; P7, 14). Given that parents of dancers did not keep unhealthy food items in the house, junk was not readily available. This created the belief that unhealthy food was to be kept away from, but also created the belief that unhealthy food was treasured: “My friends from school always have a bunch of bags of chips at their house...when I go over to their house I’m always like omg chips...I don’t have these” (P4, 16). Although participants knew the junk foods available at their friends’ houses were not to be eaten, they could not resist the temptation of indulging in foods they did not have access to. Overall, parents influenced the relationship that participants had with food and created competing discourses. At times participants believed food was a friend, filling the role as a tool or mechanism for energy and a way to achieve health. Other times it was the enemy, a guilty pleasure, the ultimate path to weight gain. This conflicting relationship was created by parents through food talk, silence, and observational learning.

### **Summary**

Dancers believed that parents did not largely influence their relationship with food and body in the world of dance. This is partially because dancers did not consider their parents as having a large role in this world. A contradiction, however, occurred when participants described their experiences. Parents played a crucial role in forming food and body related discourse through food and body talk, food and body monitoring, joking, and support. Dancers were more concerned with the beliefs, values, and practices of their coaches than those of their parents. For this reason, dancers believed their coach had a much larger influence on how they came to understand food and body.

## **Chapter Seven: Coaches**

According to participants, the influence of coaches on relationship with food and body was one of the most significant. All participants commented that they spent several hours a day with their coach and viewed them as a leading authority figure and role model in their lives. Participants largely complied with the commands of their coaches and were especially eager to please them. All participants also believed that coaches had a great influence over how they felt about food and body:

Your coaches are the people you look up to...so they're the people that tell you whether you're doing good or whether you look bad and they're the ones who basically have the final say on who you are as a dancer...as soon as someone you look up to, who is supposed to mentor you and coach you, kind of turns you down... that's when your opinion of yourself completely changes. (P12, 18)

Coaches were a large part of participants' lives and highly valued and trusted by participants. Therefore, the beliefs and values of the coaches perpetuated a certain discourse around food and body that was focused on being thin and eating 'healthy'. It was often difficult for participants to recognize when the ways of knowing being formed by coaches were harmful because of trust, respect, and/or fear. Ultimately, however, all participants wanted to satisfy their coaches. This made it difficult for participants to resist adopting the practices and beliefs of their coaches.

### **Coaches and Body**

The influence of coaches on the body was significant and often discussed by participants. Participants recognized that coaches observing and monitoring the body was a large part of dance: "Your teachers...that's basically all they pay attention to is if your lines in ballet look nice

and what your body looks like...because that's just what dance is about I guess" (P6, 17). The ways coaches discursively produced the ideal body manifested itself in several ways.

**Choosing how the body is displayed.** Since correcting the body is such a large part of dance, tight clothes are necessary to reveal the body. One participant commented: "You can't wear baggy shirts and stuff ... we are so high up in competitive that they (coaches) want us to be wearing all tight clothes so they can see every part of our bodies to correct it" (P4, 17). Several studios even enforced dress code policies to deter baggy clothing, which created tensions for many dancers. One participant explained:

Some of them (dancers in her group) won't take off their shirts to show their belly...and our dance teachers always say "take off your shirt because I can't see your body to correct"...then a lot of them will be like "no, I'm fat" and stuff." (P4, 17)

Another participant described the dress code at her studio, which only allowed dancers to wear a bra top and "bootie shorts" or a body suit with no tights. She explained that because of the dress code her studio lost a lot of dancers: "So that year...I would say 6 people from my group quit and 6 people from the older group quit...and then we lost our whole adult group...because nobody wants to feel uncomfortable at dance" (P2, 15). The girls who quit were challenging the dominant ideal dancer's body discourse and decided to quit instead of participating in its perpetuation. Overall, dancers were not happy with mandatory and strict dress codes that took away their choice to wear the dance clothing they felt comfortable in and this created tension and conflict between themselves and their coaches. When dancers could choose their clothing, they felt better about their bodies, were more confident, and experienced less appearance anxiety.

This same issue of choice presented itself with costumes. Participants felt better about how their bodies were displayed on stage when they had a say in costume design. Most

participants, however, expressed frustration with the lack of negotiation of power between coaches and dancers during this process. Comments arose like: “Group dances were entirely picked by the choreographer...so if you did not look good in the costume that was not something you could change unfortunately” (P12, 18). It was often stated by participants that this was the way things were and there was no point in speaking up about it because “she is the teacher so if she says this is what you’re wearing it’s what we’re wearing” (P8, 18). Communication was hierarchical and one-way. Some coaches even created rules against speaking up. One participant explained: “My dance teacher created a rule that if you didn’t like the costume the costume was taken away and you weren’t in the dance anymore” (P12, 18). Such rules and practices created the belief for dancers that they are unable to comment on matters that affect their own bodies. It teaches dancers from a young age that their voice does not matter, it will not be heard, and it may even be punished. Punishing dancers who speak up can teach dancers that speaking up is a “bad” behaviour, and was shown to result in dancers suppressing and silencing their voices.

Some participants challenged the beliefs and practices within the dominant discourse by speaking up. When they did speak up, however, they felt unheard. This sent the message that their voice is not valued or taken into consideration. Consequently, most dancers decided not to bother speaking up in future encounters. Some dancers did speak up anyway. For example, one participant explained:

We had one costume and it was a top that cut off your circulation under your ribs so it gave you a muffin top... all 8 of us went in and said we aren’t comfortable...and she (the teacher) wasn’t going to change it...she was like well I like it...we had to compete with it for 3 competitions until we went in again for the last time and we said no! ...we are all



uncomfortable so you have to pull the dance or you can change the costume...and then she let us change it. (P2, 15)

Participants did express that they felt more comfortable speaking up to their coaches about costumes when they were supported by their peers. They experienced power in numbers when other dancers also wanted to speak up about feeling uncomfortable. This made dancers believe that they were not alone and their voices together stood a chance of being heard. Contrarily, if only one dancer felt uncomfortable with the costume they would keep quiet. Dancers felt their single voice was insignificant.

Every participant stated that they had previously experienced feeling uncomfortable in a costume. Participants generally believed that coaches could do a better job considering the bodies of all dancers when designing costumes:

When teachers pick costumes they don't look at the group as a whole...sometimes they sort of pick and choose a few of the different girls and go ok this will look good on her, this will look good on her, this will look good on everyone, and that's not necessarily the case. (P8, 18)

Whether in class or on stage, dancers can lose control over what parts of their bodies are exposed and observed when coaches solely choose how they are displayed. The demand to reveal as much of the body as possible, even when not comfortable doing so, negatively impacts how dancers feel about their bodies. This also leads to self-objectification because dancers believe their bodies are for the consumption of their coaches to display as they wish.

**Shaping the body.** Most participants believed that their coaches were positive role models regarding shape, weight and body. One participant explained: "My dance coach always talked very positively about our bodies...she would always say the benefit of having stronger

legs rather than skinnier slimmer legs, or having a more weighted torso than someone who is very skinny” (P12, 18). When participants were discussing scenarios that could portray their coach negatively, they would often attempt to defend their coach:

One time ...my teacher wasn't supposed to...she wasn't trying to be negative but she just made a comment that my one friend had more of like a man body...she was more tall and wide and strong then you know petite and feminine and that really negatively affected her. (P5, 18)

As interviews progressed it became evident that, despite the participants' beliefs, the food and body discourse perpetuated by coaches was not all positive.

Coaches formed and perpetuated discourses related to food and body through valuing and reinforcing 'healthy diets'. Participants believed that when coaches referred to healthy diets/eating, they were referring to diets that consisted of low calorie and low fat food items and avoided foods that were high in fat, calories or sugar. Such ways of knowing often made dancers believe that to be a good or successful dancer that they had to be thin, and to be thin they had to have a specific diet. Talking about a girl in her dance group who was diagnosed with anorexia, a participant commented: “When \*\*\*\* had her anorexia...how much they (coaches) continued to say how much better she got this year...that must of made people think that they have to be that skinny to be good” (P4, 17). Messaging about dancers' improvement simultaneous to messaging around noticeable and increasing weight loss created a connection for dancers: losing weight improves ability to dance and losing weight is connected to reduced food intake. Losing weight and improved technique were also two mechanisms to achieve the attention of the coach, which so many dancers desired.

Body related comments made by coaches, which often singled out dancers, were not uncommon. One participant explained:

She (ballet teacher) made a comment about her weight in front of the whole class saying about her stomach being like “oh if you can’t lose it you got to suck it in”...obviously that had a very big impact on her and she was really upset by that for a long time. (P6, 17)

Comments about the need to lose weight were also expressed. One participant shared:

When I was six years old I was a little heavier and my director told me that I needed to lose weight in order to make the competitive team... I have always had to keep on my weight because I am not a twig and I have always had to be aware of my body weight. (P3, 16)

Weight and body based comments made by coaches had a negative influence on the feelings of all dancers, not just the dancer at which the comment was directed. Weight and body based remarks communicate to all dancers that the thin body is valued and excess weight impacts the ability to dance competitively. Dancers strive to appease their coaches at all costs and consequently adopt their beliefs and values. When coaches value the ideal dancer’s body, dancers value the food and body practices that produce it.

Comments from coaches often focused more on muscle than on weight and participants believed this to be positive. Participants felt comments were unproblematic if specific words (thin, weight, fat) were avoided. Remarks made by coaches free of these words were perceived as relating to technique and form instead of weight and appearance. Although coaches’ comments focused on strength and muscularity, instead of weight and thinness, the outcome was the same. Different words did not produce different expected behaviours. The coaches were still looking to shape and reshape the body into the ideal. For example, one participant explained:

Our ballet teacher said we had large thighs one time and that impacted a couple of my friends pretty negatively... like she wasn't calling us fat or anything but...nobody really liked it that much...I don't want big thighs...that's not good...ballerinas aren't supposed to have big thighs. (P5, 18)

Similarly, another participant commented:

She (teacher) just talks about how we have to use our muscles a certain way to get the long lean muscles cuz she doesn't want anyone to have the bulky strong short muscles...she wants the nice lean muscles. (P10, 14)

Coaches valued and reinforced the ideal dancer's body regardless of the specific words being used. They disciplined the fat body and worked to construct a thinner body that was closer to the ideal. How coaches construct, shape and reshape the body influenced how dancers experienced themselves. All dancers believed their bodies were not good enough and could always be thinner, more toned, or more muscular. Yet, dancers are in constant conflict with their bodies because they also must balance not being too thin and not being too muscular.

**Validating the thin body.** Coaches validated the thin body in several ways. One way was choreographing dances around specific dancers, or what some participants deemed "the favourites". One participant commented:

They (the thin girls) are front and center ...the bigger girls in the back ... half of them are better and half of them I would say are equal to some of the self-conscious girls but... because they don't look like what they want them to, the teacher would favour the girls that look better. (P2, 15)

This led dancers to believe that the girls being chosen by coaches to be front and center had the body type that was desirable enough to be seen.

Coaches further validated the thin body through compliments that rewarded participants for their appearance. Participants expressed that compliments on their bodies from coaches made them feel good: “Of course I say complimented...like oh you have a great stomach let’s show that off...I’m going to put you in a half top for this dance” (P5, 18). Another participant similarly described: “One time I was going across the floor...she said that my legs looked toned today...that makes me feel good” (P11, 14). A coach complimenting the body based on appearance that fits the ideal reinforces the stereotypical dancer’s body. It sends the message to dancers that having a body thin or toned enough to show off is valuable and praised.

The coach was the only instance where a positive comment on the body was valued by participants. When parents or peers would complement the body, participants would comment that it was meaningless and did not change how they felt about themselves. One participant commented: “If coaches could do something to build us up and to get us to stop thinking bad things about ourselves I think that would help for sure” (P9, 16). Coaches are in a position where they can make dancers feel good about their bodies and positively influence how their relationship with food and body is shaped. Perhaps they are the only ones who can.

### **Coaches and Food**

Similar to relationship with body, participants largely believed that coaches promoted a positive relationship with food. One participant commented: “They (coaches) were supportive of eating...definitely encouraged eating rather than discouraging it” (P12, 18). Like with body, participants did not explicitly articulate their understanding of how the discourse of the ideal dancer’s body was being formed and consequently their relationship with food being shaped.

Coaches tended to talk much less about food than body. The remarks concerning food that were made, however, signaled participants to eat healthy and avoid junk food. All

participants believed when their coaches said to eat healthy, they meant to consume low calorie and low fat foods such as vegetables, grains, and proteins that would help them produce the ideal dancer's body. Take out foods, high fat foods, typical junk food items (candy, chips, pizza, pop) were all agreed on by participants to be unhealthy food items. Participants believed that because their coaches messaging was being framed around health that it was acceptable and justified. Participants would often even defend their coaches' comments. For example, one participant explained: "They (coaches) would be like why aren't you eating a salad like you should be, don't go out for pizza order a salad...but I think it's more promoting health and fitness and a healthier lifestyle as opposed to weight" (P8, 18). Participants believed that coaches wanted them to consume a healthy diet to have the energy and nutrients they needed to successfully dance. Participants did not recognize when their coaches discourse of diet was forming their negative beliefs around high-fat and high calorie foods. Coaches often reinforced a diet free of "junk", which dancers interpreted to be a diet free of calories and fat. This resulted in dancers restricting their fat and calorie consumption and lead to other (ED)Bs such as under eating, meal skipping, guilt, binging, and anorexia.

The literature illustrates that adolescent females often wrongly perceive healthy eating to mean the same thing as dieting (Roberts et al., 2001). Constant messaging about eating healthy without educated guidance can consequently be harmful. Participants struggled to come up with specific discussions that coaches would have regarding food or nutrition. Mostly participants commented vaguely: "They kind of just say that we should eat healthy to have a healthy body and not to eat a lot of junk food" (P7, 14), or "at the beginning of class or the end of class they'll be like let's make sure you know competition is coming up...make sure you are well rested and eating healthy" (P5, 18). Several participants also revealed that their studios had food policies

that forbid junk food such as candy, pop, Tim Hortons and McDonalds. Even though this messaging is less direct, it shapes the discourse around food by only allowing a diet that supports the maintenance of a low body weight. This way of understanding food reinforces to dancers that a healthy diet demands avoiding fat and calories, while shaping the dancers' beliefs, values and practices concerning food and eating.

Observational learning of dieting was also a large factor in shaping the relationship dancers had with food. Dancers would look not only to what their coaches were telling them to eat, but also to what their coaches were eating. One participant described:

Her (coach) whole Facebook is all about every meal she eats and stuff so for us to see that is kind of like...we don't eat that I guess...and we're like maybe we should if we want to be like her ...puts stress on you really. (P4, 17)

Another participant commented that her coach "definitely has a very negative view towards eating unhealthy foods ... she's definitely shown that to us and placed that thought in our minds" (P6, 17). Given that coaches have such a large influence, dancers adjust and monitor their eating to align with the values, beliefs and practices that coaches have around food.

## **Summary**

Coaches strongly influenced the relationship dancers had with food and body. How coaches displayed, shaped and validated the body created and perpetuated dominant discourse related to diet and body image. Coaches play an important role in a dancer's life and therefore have the privilege of shaping healthy young females. Coaches generally need to be more aware of how they talk about food and body and how their beliefs, values and practices are strongly taken up by the young girls they mentor. Similarly to coaches, peers had a large influence on

shaping the dancer's relationship with food and body. This is because both coaches and peers are valued, trusted, and live and breathe the world of dance.



## Chapter Eight: Peers

Many participants remarked that the most enjoyable part of dance was the friendships they had formed with other dancers. All participants spent most of their spare time at dance, and they were grateful to have friends at dance who could relate to their experiences. Participants did not tend to have close relationships with their peers outside of dance but consistently stated that they were very close to their dance friends. Such close relationships caused the influence of peers to be significant in shaping one's relationship with food and body.

Participants explained that their peers at dance had such a strong influence because they were the people who understood them: "It was hard to kind of relate to them (non-dancers)... non-dancers don't really understand how we converse...it's just hard to get to know people who you don't dance with, or who don't dance" (P9, 16). Often participants struggled to decide if coaches or peers had more of an influence on their relationship with food and body:

When it's coming from people that you relate with a lot and who you're friends with...then I feel like that makes me second guess myself...actually it is probably about an equal playing field between my teachers and my peers. (P6, 17)

Peers significantly shaped the participants' relationship with food and body in several ways, most dominantly through food and body talk, comparison, and support.

### Peers and Body

Participants talked about their bodies with peers more often than anyone else. Both positive and negative body talk occurred, but the discussions were mostly negative: "I would say mainly negative because we all want to have that nice body type and not everyone can" (P3, 16). It was easy to talk negatively about the body because there was always something every dancer wanted to change about it. Constant negative body talk was accepted as being normal by peers

because everyone engaged in it: “Everyone, like everyone at my studio had negative things to say that they didn’t like about their body...no one had the perfect body” (P5, 18). The negative body talk by participants was consistent throughout, including comments like: “I feel like I overate, I just feel disgusting and bloated and my stomach is hanging over my ballet tights and you can see my fat” (P9, 16). This negative body talk was habitual for participants and perpetuated a dominant body image discourse that produced self-consciousness and anxiousness about the body.

Body talk that veered away from using words and phrases like “I hate my stomach or I wish I had small thighs” (P5, 18) was interpreted as being positive. What was perceived as positive talk, however, was quite similar to the negative talk. One participant described the positive talk that took place between her peers, stating: “My friends and I will talk about how big our calves are or how toned our abs are or how we hold our arms, how we hold ourselves rather than your legs are super skinny” (P12, 18). This talk was perceived as being more acceptable because dancers understood it to be about the physical body instead of the aesthetic body: “We talk more about not our physical body or who is bigger than the other... we usually talk more about dance related like flexibility or who has better feet or the structure of our body that helps us dance” (P7, 14). Talk about technique was identified as being different from talk about the aesthetic body. This body talk, even though perceived as being different, was very similar. Participants still discussed appearance of body parts, scrutinized body parts, and compared themselves to others:

They’d talk about the length of their leg when they’d do certain moves like my leg looks very stouty, my leg doesn’t look as long as yours does or my knee didn’t straighten or my ankles aren’t very flexible...so talk about the technique of the body. (P12, 18)

Regardless of how the talk was framed, the goal was the same: the ideal dancer's body. The use of different words did not produce less peer comparison or less stress to improve the appearance of the body.

There was consensus among participants that dancers tended to talk positively about the bodies of others and negatively about their own bodies: "It's a lot of dancers talking negatively about themselves and positively about others" (P12, 18). Perhaps dancers have been trained that it is only acceptable to insult their own bodies and admire the bodies of others. If a dancer were talking positively about their body other dancers would feel comfortable joining. Negative talk, however, often received no response from peers. For example:

If somebody were to take a group picture and somebody was like "omg everybody look at this girls abs"...we would all zoom in and be like omg you are so ripped, omg...so we are positive towards them...but if we were to say "ughhh I hate our top it gives us muffin top"... nobody would say anything! (P2, 15)

Dancers easily talked negatively about their own bodies but not the bodies of their peers. Participants believed this was to spare the feelings of other dancers. When dancers talked negatively about their own bodies, however, this negatively affected the feelings of those around them. One participant discussed: "Girls are making comments about ... I got so out of shape this summer or I've gotten so fat this summer and making comments like that and it's definitely hard just cuz it makes you second guess yourself" (P6, 17). Dancers may have been silent when participants spoke negatively about their bodies because it consumed them with negative thoughts about their own. It is interesting that participants recognized the negative talk of others affected them this way, but continued themselves to talk negatively about their own bodies.

Participants often commented that they wished their peers spoke more positively. When dancers were positive towards their peers, however, it did not seem to make much of a difference: “For me to tell them like oh no your body is fine like it looks good to me it just doesn’t matter and so they just keep talking negative and like my point of view won’t help them that much” (P10, 14). The positive comments from peers were not seen as meaningful. Possibly dancers have internalized the dominant beliefs and values so strongly that they can only see themselves negatively. Positive body talk was ineffective because of the dominance of negative body talk.

**Peer comparison.** Body talk often led to and/or was centralized around comparison between peers about body shape, weight and size. One participant commented: “If someone that you know has a good body and then they are saying something bad about their body you kind of wonder, if you are saying that about yourself I wonder what you think of me” (P4, 17). Such talk led dancers to think negatively about their own bodies: “I’m not like her, I’m not as good, I’m still too fat, I’m not as skinny as her (P8, 18), look at my thighs, they are bigger than yours...why do I have this roll and you don’t” (P2, 15). Dancers would strive to have similar body types to their peers who had the ideal/stereotypical dancer body. It was obvious to dancers when their bodies were different.

When dancers did not meet the ideal, as perpetuated by the dominant ideal dancer body discourse, it created a negative body image. A participant who admittedly did not meet this ideal described how she felt beside her peers that did: “I think it’s just because I’d see the girls that are tinier and look better ...I’m just curvy and I always looked at the mirror and was like oh I look different” (P9, 16). Many girls in competitive dance met the ideal dancer’s body, or as one participant explained “fit the picture” (P12, 18). The participants who self-admittedly did not

meet this ideal engaged in increased peer comparison. They believed watching the food and body practices of their peers who met the ideal would help them achieve it. They were also more self-conscious about their bodies, which led to an increased desire to compare and change the body.

When competition season approached, it increased the amount of peer comparison among participants. Competition was a time of increased pressure and stress because the body was being shaped and prepared to be presented on stage. From the time the measuring tapes came out, tensions seemed to rise among participants. One participant commented: “When costume time comes around the measuring tapes come out and I think a lot of insecurities also come out” (P10, 14). She went on further to explain: “Especially when they say your numbers” (P10, 14). Participants were often measured in front of their peers and it was not uncommon for peers to record the measurements for the seamstress. This situation created stress for participants as they worried about their measurements and how they compared to the measurements of their friends. This caused dancers to judge and compare their bodies based on the number of inches attached to each part. It was also a time when dancers hoped their measurements were small because it was commonly believed that costumes looked better on the tinier girls.

At competition, comparison grew as the pool of dancers grew. One participant commented:

If you were to go to a competition and you'd see the girls that ended up winning everything are the girls that can wear a crop top and like underwear and have the ab lines...and the girls that have a hip line and their legs are like spaghetti....so it is more like you are trying to look like the girls that are winning. (P2, 15)

Competition created even greater opportunity for peer comparison and reinforced the endeavor to achieve the thin ideal. By observing the body types of winning dancers, participants connected

being thin with being successful. Participants would compare their bodies to the dancers who won, and believe that was the body they needed to achieve success. This comparison and connection was reinforced by social media.

**Social media.** Social media now consumes the lives of many adolescents, and, as a result, peer comparison has extended beyond the walls of dance class. Not only did participants compare themselves to the dancers directly around them but also to dancers on social media:

Social media does take a very big part in that (peer comparison) especially with Instagram and famous dancers always doing photo shoots...looking so good all the time and it's kind of like oh, well I don't necessarily look like that, and I want to look like that. (P10, 14)

The reason dancers wanted to look like the dancers on social media was because it was the "famed body type" (P12, 18). This was the body type participants believed was needed to be a professional or successful dancer. One participant commented that seeing professional or successful dancers on social media generated comparison: "You start comparing yourself to people who are more successful than you and then you compare leg length and arm length and body size...so that kind of changed how I see myself" (P12, 18). Most dancers competing at a high level are striving to dance professionally and turn to social media to see what this entails.

For participants, social media displayed a profound relationship between thinness and success, which most dancers seemed to internalize. One participant commented:

If you look at all these principal dancers...they're all mini they're all very very skinny...they're thin as a twig and they're very tall and they're very successful...so most people they relate those two topics and think if they're thin and they're successful, then I need to be thin to be successful. (P8, 18)

Social media creates exposure to an even greater number of dancers to compare oneself to, which contributes to the dominance of the ideal dancer's body and ideal dancer's body discourse. Participants consequently believed that a body that strayed from this ideal/stereotype would not produce success. One participant commented: "I will strive to look like them (dancers on social media) but maybe I'll never look like them...and that's a struggle, that's hard to accept as a dancer" (P1, 18). This common desire motivated dancers to engage in weight-loss behaviours such as increasing home exercise, eliminating unhealthy foods, and/or engaging in unhealthy food and body practices. If dancers could not attain this ideal they would question their abilities as a dancer.

Participants recognized that peer comparison had a large influence on how they felt about their bodies. They also recognized that it was a complex concept: "That's the tricky part ...you are always going to compare yourself to someone else no matter how much people compare themselves to you and no matter how much people envy the way you look" (P8, 18). Participants generally agreed that negative body talk, peer comparison, and social media was damaging and caused harmful feelings towards the body and self-esteem: "I don't think it benefits anybody...if everybody is going to look at somebody and be like ughh I want to be like that" (P2, 15). Nonetheless, all participants engaged in such behaviours that produced the feelings they wished to avoid. Photos of professional dancers on social media are often professionally taken, airbrushed and distorted. When dancers compare themselves to the dancers in these photos they develop unrealistic expectations. These photos can be harmful to dancers who believe that this ideal is obtainable when, in fact, it was digitally created. The inability to achieve this unattainable body often contributed to participants engaging in (ED)Bs.

## Peers and Food

Food was generally a less prevalent topic in the world of dance than body. Talking about food was a rare occurrence and this was similar between peers. One participant noted: “That is the secret... that is everybody’s secret...I think it is all kind of private” (P2, 15). It was a common consensus among participants that food talk was much less prevalent than body talk because participants were not as comfortable discussing food. A few participants also mentioned that it was a scary topic: “Not a lot of people talk about that (food)...especially if someone is struggling...because you’re scared” (P5, 18). It was scary for dancers to address their feelings about food and eating because it created a sense of vulnerability. Dancers feared how their peers would view their food related beliefs and practices.

Dancers were also scared to admit to eating disorders or eating disorder behaviors because they were afraid of the consequences once verbalizing this. Participants often believed that others were struggling more than them and therefore felt their issue was trivial. Participants remarked that when a peer appeared to be struggling with food they did not know what to say, so they would choose to say nothing: “We don’t really know what to say...so we would probably just leave it” (P6, 17). Dancers generally were very uncomfortable discussing food and diet. In the absence of this discussion, however, participants believed their beliefs, values and practices regarding food and eating were similar to their dancing peers.

All participants believed they ate similarly to their dancing peers and had the same beliefs concerning unhealthy foods and eating. One participant commented:

I feel like a lot of dancers have a similar view towards food and unhealthy food ...they definitely restrict what they eat ... they don’t allow themselves to have certain foods ...I



feel like it's really common for most dancers to often not allow themselves to have junk food and things like that. (P6, 17)

Participants attributed their similar eating practices to sharing an understanding of food.

Participants believed this understanding was not shared with their non-dancing peers:

We (dancers) all just have that understanding that you have to eat healthy, and even if you don't want to and even if you take a day off ...then there's always that kind of guilt feeling. Whereas with my school friends, they do it and they move on. (P1, 18)

Participants believed that dancers had to restrict their food intake to achieve the ideal body. If participants ate foods that they knew would not produce this ideal, they felt guilt and would punish themselves. Participants would increase work outs, skip meals, or decrease overall food intake in the following days. Dancers believed that their school friends did not need to engage in these worries or behaviours because "they're just normal people who you know...after they have school they just go home" (P1, 17). Participants also believed they belonged to a culture that set them apart from non-dancers who had the liberty of behaving in a normal way. All dancers recognized that they did not have the freedom to eat whatever they wanted because after school they went to dance where their bodies were exposed. Dancers were aware that their bodies were constantly under surveillance and they could not afford to eat unhealthy foods.

The world of competitive dance produces a system of beliefs that constructs a negative relationship between dancers and food. Dancers bodies are consistently exposed, judged and under surveillance. Knowing this, a dancer's relationship with food is largely based on using food to produce the ideal dancer's body. Participants believed this relationship was different from their non-dancing peers. One participant explained:

If I'm at home with my neighbour who she doesn't dance or anything, she definitely views food a lot differently... she doesn't have a negative view towards eating sweets and junk food...she enjoys junk food. Whereas if I'm with my friends who are dancers ...they don't reach for junk food... they have a very negative thought towards eating any kind of sweets. (P6, 17)

Dancers believed their school peers did not have a negative relationship with junk food because they did not worry as much about the effect it had on their body. After they ate junk food, they did not need to change in to revealing clothing where their body was critiqued and judged. They were also surrounded by other adolescents who would regularly eat junk food for a snack. Whereas, participants rarely observed other dancers eating junk food as a usual snack item.

Dancers negative mindset towards eating junk food or sweets was largely produced through observational learning. To compensate for the limited discussion around food, dancers would observe the eating behaviours of their peers. Participants would change their food practices based on what they observed, and as a result deemed acceptable. One participant explained:

I found I was watching what other girls were eating more and they weren't really eating a whole lot at lunch...and so when I brought like a big lunch which obviously you need when you're dancing so much...I would kind of like oh, am I eating too much...so I wasn't always finishing my lunch and things like that... and around that time I lost like quite a bit of weight. (P6, 17)

Dancers were aware of both how much and of what their peers were eating. If they believed they were eating larger portions or more unhealthy foods they would adjust their meals. Participants learned that eating less had the greatest impact on their weight loss. Irrespective of exercise,

participants believed that limiting food intake was the most efficient way to lose weight. This was both an observed and learned behaviour.

As previously stated, talk about food was limited. The talk that did surface, however, focused mostly on calories or fat content. This talk initiated participants to reflect on their own food choices and impacted their food related practices. One participant explained how talk among peers surrounding high calorie foods affected her: “I would try to avoid that food at all costs...if someone said did you know there is this many calories in a Frappuccino or something I would just cut out Frappuccino’s all together” (P5, 18). Another participant similarly commented:

If they’re (peers) talking about how they ate too much or ate a whole lot of junk food or something it might make me feel really bad about myself, bad about my choices and what I choose to eat...it affects me that way. (P6, 17)

Similar to adjusting food practices based on observing what peers were eating, dancers would adjust their beliefs about food based on what peers were saying. If a dancer commented on the amount of calories or fat in a food item, it caused the dancers around them to reflect on the amount of calories and fat in the foods they had chosen to eat that day. Participants would often eliminate food choices if their peers commented that they were unhealthy or high in fats and calories. If participants ate the food item anyway, they would often feel guilty about their choice.

Eating practices of peers perpetuated a discourse around food that established what was acceptable and what was not. Negative talk around food caused participants to avoid foods deemed unacceptable by their peers and resulted in an increased obsession with calories and fat content. Participants were easily consumed by the talk of their peers and seemed unable to challenge negative talk when it presented itself. The lack of discussion around food,

observational learning, and the meaning produced through silence, permeated how participants understood food and eating.

### **Peers and Joking**

Discussion around food and body between peers was often perceived as a joke. Similar to parents, participants perceived jokes as being acceptable and harmless. For example, one participant commented: “My peers at dance we kind of ...joke around I guess about our bodies...if there was something about our bodies that we didn’t like about it we would kind of just make fun of it in a joking way” (P5, 18). This led participants to believe there was never any serious talk about food and body present at dance: “We will joke I guess maybe sometimes like a sensitive point of topic in a conversation but I don’t think anybody...no one seriously speaks about food or body” (P8, 18). Perceiving food and body talk to always be a joke concealed the importance and impact of such talk. Participants were often expressing their true feelings about their body dissatisfaction, but it was incorrectly being dismissed as a joke. This can be detrimental for the dancers who need help and are expressing early warning signs of (ED)Bs.

Joking about food and body was equally prevalent. Comments about the body such as, “I have a food baby” (P1, 18), “I feel bigger today” (P1, 18), and “I wish I was that skinny” (P8, 18), were all presented by participants as being jokes. Jokes about food and eating generally surfaced in the presence of food or meals. One participant explained:

If we’re all out for dinner for example we’ll talk about whatever I’ll have the mac and cheese you guys can have the salad, I don’t care ...they’ll be like I don’t know you should probably watch what you are eating, competition is next week...no serious talk though. (P8, 18)

Even though the judgement of food choice was perceived as a joke, it was being judged. The choice to order high fat foods was constructed as “bad” and the choice to order a salad was constructed as “good”. Since food is a rather taboo topic, any food related comments were relayed and perceived as a joke.

Talk comparing calories and nutritional value would often take place but participants would perceive this as a joking matter. One participant described a situation where they were comparing the number of calories in a dancer’s muffin to that of a donut. Everyone was joking that the dancer’s muffin had the same number of calories as a chocolate glazed (P7, 14).

Although the people joking about the calories in the food may have perceived it as a joke, it is likely that the dancer eating the muffin was insecure about her food choice. When dancers would comment on the calories and fat contents of foods, participants stated that they would likely avoid those foods in the future. A different participant described a similar scenario:

At the beginning of the year we all thought that booster juice was super super healthy so every day we would all go to booster juice and get a smoothie...my mom was always talking about how it was not good so she looked up the nutrition and found out that the small booster juice is equivalent to eating 7 chicken breast...so we were all joking around about it...so say one person went and got booster juice we would be like oh are you going to eat your 7 chicken breast. (P2, 15)

Even though presented as a joke, the comment holds meaning about what is valued and acceptable practice. Jokes around food often reinforce the thin body and endorse low calorie food choices that produce the thin body ideal. Healthy snacks that are low in calories and low in fat are what dancers believe they should be eating.

Jokes were used to make light of food and body talk, which participants were not comfortable enough to discuss with their peers in a serious manner. The topic of food and body pervaded the lives of participants, and joking created an outlet to discuss these subject matters without causing confrontation or hurt feelings. Jokes towards oneself, however, are often being used as a mechanism of protection, and jokes towards others are likely internalized by those they target. Constant joking about serious topics is a practice that can negotiate beliefs about food.

### **Peers and Support**

With all the cultural forces at play in the world of dance that pressure dancers to conform to ideals and often unobtainable expectations, it is critical dancers have support systems. When asked how participants managed to resist or recover from eating disorders and/or eating disordered behaviours, participants often commented it was their friends: “I had good friends at dance to support me” (P5, 18). Another participant similarly commented:

We all have those days and we all feel crappy and feel unconfident about ourselves...there still is the negative that is there, and it is always sort of part of our dance experience to feel uneasy about ourselves, but then the great thing that we can do is help each other and support each other. (P1, 18)

It is critical that dancers feel supported by their peers and that dance environments that encourage peer support are established. Strong relationships with peers at dance can help with resistance and recovery of eating disorders and eating disorder behaviours. It is important that peers are educated to have open lines of communication and positive discussions with their peers. Learning strategies to decrease peer-comparison may also be helpful.

## **Summary**

Peers were a large influencer in shaping the relationship dancers had with food and body. Dancers valued their peers and used them as a tool to learn how to be successful in the world of dance. Talk and comparison between peers formed an understanding around food and body. This dominant food and body discourse led dancers to alter their beliefs, values and practices to fit with those of their peers.

## Chapter Nine: Discussion

This research set out to answer the following question: *How does experience in the world of dance shape the female dancer's relationship to food and body?* Through interviews with twelve female dancers, it was found that environment, parents, coaches and peers were the largest influencers in shaping this relationship. This chapter will focus on discussing the implications these findings provide for health promotion and will conclude with discussing the limitations and recommendations for future research.

To begin, I would like to re-state my position in this research as a former dancer and female who experienced an eating disorder. I do so because I recognize that my personal experiences and perspectives had an influence on this research process. The data collected resonated with my own experiences as a young female dancer and forced me to reflect on how the world of dance shaped my own relationship with food and body. Given that these relationships for me have been toxic to my own health, it was challenging to hear dancers echo my own lived experiences. There were dancers too, however, who had contradicting experiences to my own. I anticipated, welcomed, and represented these experiences. Although the perspectives of all dancers interviewed were understood and represented, using discourse analysis I critically assessed and interpreted the participants' experiences as well. As stated by Pyett (2003), "it is not enough to accept everything the participants say without subjecting it to more detailed examination of the circumstances, structures, and constraints that have contributed to the formation of their worldviews" (p. 1173). This is how the use of discourse analysis develops an understanding that is beyond the perspectives of the participants. I recognize that through my interpretation of the data that I am situated in this research. This can serve as both a strength and a potential limitation in producing both the findings and the discussion below.



## **Implications for Health Promotion**

This research provides an opportunity to better understand how the female dancers' experiences in the world of dance shape their relationship with food and body. This contributes knowledge to the current gap in the literature, which lacks a qualitative and critical approach to understanding the intricacies of (ED)Bs in female dancers. Many similarities, however, exist between current literature and the findings of this research. It is evident from both this research and the current literature that sociocultural values play a critical role in the development of ED(B)s. Obsession with thinness, policing eating, and ritualistic food and body behaviours are all culturally produced (Bordo, 1994; Chernin, 1981, Hesse-Biber, 2007; Orbach, 1981; Orbach, 1982). There was consensus among the dancers interviewed that they felt the pressures of having to conform to the sociocultural expectations present in the world of dance. Although the thin ideal, the media, and objectification are factors for the development of (ED)Bs in all young females, the data displays that participation in the world of dance magnifies these elements (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997; Tiggemann & Slater, 2001). This finding is similar to that of the current literature, which emphasizes that female adolescents that participate in aesthetic sport are at the highest risk for development of (ED)Bs (Filaire, Rouveix, & Bouget, 2008; Resch, 2007; Sundgot-Borgen, 1999, 2002, 2004). The literature proposes that this is because of the extreme closeness between aesthetic sport and the predominant ideal of beauty, as well as the link between peak performance and a thin body ((Neumärker, Bettle, Bettle, Dudeck, & Neumärker, 1998; Toro et al., 2005). These proposed reasons were supported by this research. When studying dancers specifically, the findings of this research concur with the literature in terms of objectification, competitiveness, and weight related pressures from coaches and peers in the world of dance (De Bruin et al., 2009; Dosil & González-Oya, 2008; Kleposki, 2002; Thomas et

al., 2005; Tiggemann & Slater, 2001). Further, these contributors shape the dancers' relationship with food and body and can contribute to the development and maintenance of (ED)Bs.

The current literature highlights that the key elements that make dancers a high-risk group for (ED)Bs remains uncertain due to the lack of qualitative research that identifies the experiences of dancers (Goodwin, Arcelus, Geach, & Meyer, 2014). This research contributes to this gap by further investigating the world of dance with a critical lens and a focus on the sociocultural elements that produce (ED)Bs in the world of dance. The findings also provide a first-person account of young girls' experiences in the world of dance that is lacking in current literature. Most studies have also focused solely on anorexia in ballet dancers and do not consider dancers who participate in a variety of dance styles or have other (ED)Bs (Nordin-Bates, Walker, & Redding, 2011). To fill this gap, participants of this study engaged in a range of dance styles, including ballet, tap, jazz, lyrical, hip hop and others. Further, this research was primarily interested in exploring how the relationship with food and body is shaped overall and not just in dancers with anorexia nervosa. Last, this research focused on the female dancer's relationship with food, food choices, and nutritional intake, which is largely absent in current literature.

Through using feminist poststructuralism guided by discourse analysis, it was found that all participants experienced negative physical, mental and/or emotional repercussions throughout their dance experience. A new perspective on the values, beliefs, practices and relations of power negotiated in the world of dance about food and body was also found. In addition to the new knowledge the findings of this research produce, tracing the ways dancers experience food and body provides information to guide health promotion initiatives and prevention efforts aimed at reducing (ED)Bs in female dancers. The findings from this research provide insight into the

world of dance and the available discourses that shape the dancer's relationship with food and body. To interrupt the dominant discourses in the world of dance that produce a problematic relationship with food and body, health promotion initiatives should focus on a cultural shift. Although changing the culture of dance is a multi-level phenomenon and there are many challenges to creating such a shift, disrupting the problematic everyday practices of dancers has the potential to change the dominant food and body discourse. This could contribute to changing the current dance culture that produces a negative relationship with food and body and allows (ED)Bs to thrive.

**Knowledge translation.** Overall, determining how to successfully implement prevention efforts to improve the physical, mental and social health of female dancers can benefit from the voices of the participants. This research and knowledge can be translated to educate dancers, parents, coaches and society on how experiences in the world of dance impact the female dancer's relationship with food and body. The knowledge produced from this research seeks to move the focus of (ED)Bs in female dancers beyond individual behaviour and draw focus to the cultural forces at play in the world of dance. The goal is to provide dancers, parents, and coaches with knowledge that will empower them to challenge the status quo and support change that builds a healthier dance culture.

I believe that dance coaches and parents are not aware of how the food and body related discourse they perpetuate reinforces the thin ideal and unhealthy food and body practices of young dancers. Many dance moms and dance coaches grew up in the world of dance and likely do not recognize how they were shaped by the dominant food and body discourse they perpetuate. Once coaches and parents are aware of the impact they are having, I hope they see the value in disrupting the problematic discourses related to food and body. I believe that parents

and coaches value the health of young female dancers and will want to be partners in making the much needed shift in dance culture. The knowledge generated from this research will be translated in several ways and shared with dancers, parents, coaches and the public. It is in hopes that sharing this knowledge highlights the significance in changing the culture of dance to benefit the health of young female dancers.

Although I plan on publishing this research, dancers, dance coaches and parents are more likely to access this information through non-academic modes of communication. I will prepare a final report of this research in lay language and distribute it widely through Facebook, dance forums/blogs, studio directors and competition directors. When published, I will also connect my Facebook and Twitter contacts to the publication.

Facebook has a large variety of groups for dancers, dance coaches, and dance moms. I will share the final report on the Facebook groups and dance forums I am aware of, and ask for it to be shared more widely. I will also share the report with popular dance blogs to see if they are interested in blogging about the findings of this research. Through recruitment I gained access to the contact information for several studio owners. I will distribute the final report to them, as well as others, and ask them to share with their distribution lists via email (this could reach a high volume of parents). The contact information for competition directors and boards is public. These boards and/or individuals are responsible for providing the rules and regulations for the competitions they govern. The aim is to inform the rules and regulations created, specifically about costumes. When I provide my participants with the final report I will ask them to share with their networks widely, as well as ask them for their suggestions in disseminating this information. The importance of sharing this knowledge with dancers, parents, coaches and society will be summarized below.

**Parents.** Parents shape the dancer's relationship with food and body through talk, body monitoring, joking, and support. This contributes to the creation of dominant and competing discourses about body image and healthy eating. These discursive struggles and contradictions contribute to how dancers experience food and body. Within these struggles, it becomes apparent that parents are a critical element in shaping the dancer's relationship with food and body.

Body monitoring is one of the main ways parents influence how dancers feel about their bodies. Parents often talk about the bodies of other dancers in terms of appearance and thinness versus heaviness. This signals to dancers that the body is constantly under surveillance and reinforces that there is an obvious ideal that the body is being compared against. Parents may believe that it is not harmful when they discuss the body of other dancers. Dancers, however, are in a constant state of anxiety about their appearance and such comments easily inscribe and intensify themselves on the dancer's body. Further, it is not a harmless form of delivery when parents talk about food or body in the form of a joke. This tool of communication is often an expression of criticism and shapes discourses related to body image. Jokes constitute knowledge for dancers about what is acceptable behaviour in terms of appearance and diet. Humour often passes unnoticed but is in fact discursively forming the dancer's relationship with food and body. Parents can also be aware of how they respond to their daughter's food and body questions and comments. The often silent response from parents discursively shapes negative body image and disordered eating discourse. In general, parents could be more aware of how and why they talk about food and body. Increasing awareness for parents on how they create and perpetuate food and body discourse could be a constructive first step in changing the dominant discourse in dance culture.

Dancers are aware that parents talk about the bodies of dancers. This creates insecurities for dancers when parents are present and/or observing them while they are in class. Parents observing class through a viewing window adds additional elements of stress, insecurity and surveillance. Perhaps an alternative to the viewing window or less frequent observation of parents would make dancers feel more comfortable. If parents were less critical of the body, however, this would likely create an environment where the observation of parents would not be as stressful for dancers.

In terms of food, participants commented that there was limited discussion with their parents. When participants were asked how they learned about healthy eating, however, they would often claim they learned it from home/their parents. Home is where participants largely shaped their relationship and understanding of food and eating. The findings suggest that when the home environment was supportive, dancers could better resist the unhealthy food and eating related discourse present at dance. Having a nutritionist available to parents may help parents create healthy discourse related to food and eating both at home and at dance. A nutritionist could also provide parents with the knowledge to recognize and interrupt problematic food and eating discourse. If parents disrupt the problematic food and eating related discourse that is present in dance culture, the status quo could be challenged.

**Coaches.** The findings illustrated that coaches significantly impact the female dancer's relationship with food and body and are an influential role model for young dancers. Coaches primarily contribute to discourses related to food and body by how they display, shape and validate the body. Given the challenges participants noted with wearing skin tight clothing even for rehearsal, studios can attempt to create a balance between clothing that shows dance movements and clothing that exposes every part of a young girl's body. Studios can reconsider

dress codes/clothing policies with this in mind. Taking away a dancer's choice to wear clothing they are comfortable in contributes negatively to a dancer's relationship with food and body. This lack of choice creates constant anxiety for dancers, which they are rarely able to escape. The participants clearly stated that when they were able to choose their clothing, they felt more comfortable, confident and empowered to develop a positive relationship with their body.

This same issue of choice presented itself with costume design. When dancers have a say in the costume design process they feel more confident about their bodies. It is important for coaches to include dancers in the costume designing process and consider the bodies of all dancers wearing the costume. It is a simple way for coaches to engage dancers in matters of their bodies, help dancers feel confident, and empower them to have an opinion on the way their body is displayed. It is also important that coaches promote and encourage dancers to speak up about how they feel about their bodies in costumes or otherwise. The findings illustrated that coaches often discourage, prevent or undermine dancers speaking about their bodies. This can result in dancers believing that their body is for the consumption of others and their voice is not valued. This often silenced dancers.

As stated in the findings, coaches contribute to discourses that perpetuate negative body image through their attempts to create the ideal dancer's body. Dancers receive feedback from coaches and adjust their bodies accordingly in hopes of receiving their validation. In this feedback, participants heard that coaches only validate the ideal/thin body. One recommendation to begin making a cultural shift is for coaches to increase the acceptance of different body types in the world of dance. Coaches could start to do this by validating and displaying dancers with diverse body types. This could result in dancers being more accepting of both their own bodies and the bodies of other dancers. Participants noted that a variety of shapes, sizes and weights can

be successful in dance and they do not receive this message. Participants believed showcasing successful dancers who do not meet the traditional ideal is one way to assist in tearing down the stereotype. If girls with a variety of body types are not welcome, and therefore not present in the world of dance, the stereotype will perpetuate. If coaches begin displaying dancers with a variety of body types at competition who produce success, this could interrupt the stereotype that only dancers who have the ideal dancer's body can be successful. The dominant image of an ideal dancer's body could begin to shift and valuing extreme thinness in the world of dance could be disrupted.

In terms of food, the findings display that coaches talk much less about food than body. The remarks concerning food that were made, however, signaled to dancers that eating healthy meant avoiding consumption of high-fat and high calorie foods that would deter them from achieving the ideal dancer's body. This often resulted in dancers restricting their fat and calorie consumption and can lead to (ED)Bs such as under eating, meal skipping, guilt, bingeing, and anorexia. Knowledge about food is constituted in terms of acceptability. When dancers eat foods that they have been told they are not allowed, they often feel guilt, shame and punish themselves. This clearly created an adversarial relationship with food. Based on the findings, studios could encourage dialogue about food rather than implementing food policies and regulations. Dancers could also benefit from their coaches modelling healthy food and eating practices.

**Peers.** Through food and body talk, comparison, and support dancers help each other make sense of their experiences in the world of dance. Participants claimed that the beliefs, values and practices of all dancers are mostly the same. This similarity in beliefs, values and practices is because it is among peers where dancers largely form an understanding of food and body.



Dancers tend to talk about their bodies with their dance peers more than with parents, coaches, or peers from school. Dancers are trained to admire the bodies of their peers but not to admire their own. This also results in peer comparison being a dominant practice in the world of dance. The findings display that dancers do not feel that they are in an environment that empowers them to talk or feel positively about their bodies. Through the knowledge translation mechanisms mentioned above, coaches, parents and dancers will hopefully become more aware of when negative talk is present. Given that negative body talk is the accepted cultural norm in dance, attention is often not brought to its prevalence in affecting the beliefs, values and practices of dancers. If coaches, parents and dancers try to become aware of when negative talk is occurring, and support each other in shifting this talk in a positive direction, dancers may begin to talk and think more positively about their bodies. If dance culture shifted to create space for positive body talk and thoughts, it is possible that dancers would see that all bodies have value. It could also result in dancers being less vulnerable to the images presented to them of other dancers both in person and in the media. If dance culture continues to promote the dominantly negative thoughts and talk about the body, discourses that contribute to a negative body image will further perpetuate a problematic dance culture.

According to the findings, talking about food is a rare occurrence in dance culture. Dancers claim that food is the biggest secret because dancers are often very private about food and diet. Participants addressed that food is an uncomfortable and scary topic that creates a sense of vulnerability. This may be because dancers do not know how they should be eating. Dancers are always worried if they are eating the right types of food, and if they are eating too much or too little. Dancers often observe the practices of their peers for guidance on these matters. If dancers eat foods that they believe are “bad”, they feel guilt and often punish themselves. The

dance environment creates a competing relationship where dancers struggle to decide whether food is an enemy or a friend.

Though it occurred infrequently, some dancers commented on the value of a nutritionist consulting with them. Having a nutritionist available who is well versed in the special circumstances that dancers face could be a helpful resource in changing the culture of dance. Through the creation of positive and educated food related discourse, dancers may be better equipped to resist negative ways of thinking about food. A nutritionist may also help dancers understand how and why their relationship with food changes during puberty, which is something many participants struggled with. Guiding and educating dancers on how to maintain a healthy and balanced diet, as well as help create an environment where dancers are comfortable talking about food, could prevent dancers from up taking harmful and uneducated food and body discourse and break the silence around food and eating.

A nutritionist may also be able to help resolve the competing, adversarial relationship that dancers often have with food. A dancer who developed anorexia nervosa spoke to how she just wanted to get stronger and better at dance but did not know how to eat to get the body she desired (P5, 18). A nutritionist could help support dancers through these types of struggles. Information from coaches, parents, peers and the internet often led dancers down a wrong and dangerous path. A nutritionist could help prevent this available discourse from dominating. Implementing a nutritionist also aligns with the literature, which has recommended nutritional education that is realistic for dancers as part of dance training to promote good physical, mental, and social health (Dotti et al., 2002; Montanari, 2000). Having a nutritionist on staff, a dance teacher who is also a registered nutritionist, creating a relationship with a community program

that offers nutritional support, or having a nutritionist volunteer their time are potential options for implementing nutrition education.

**Environment.** Environmental elements in the world of competitive dance include mirrors, dance attire, costumes, and the image associated with the ideal dancer's body. These elements shape the dominant ideal dancer's body and food related discourse that contribute to the beliefs, values and practices of dancers. Although dancers cannot avoid their environment, the way they interact with these environmental elements does not need to be unhealthy or negatively shaped. It is likely that if a healthier culture of dance was created, the environmental influencers present in the world of dance would have less of an impact.

Mirrors, for example, are a main teaching tool in the world of dance that produce negative body image. Dancers observe, examine, compare and scrutinize their bodies in the mirror for hours each day. These behaviours result in negative thoughts that, in turn, generated self-hate among participants. Even when dancers are not in front of the mirror, they continue to feel its reflection and surveillance weighing on them. Participants believed that mirrors were both inescapable and detrimental, but not because they were the root of the problem. The root of the problem was their negative body image and the overall negative relationship they had formed with their bodies. According to the findings, the current competitive dance culture generally creates dancers that identify with unhealthy beliefs, values and practices in relation to food and body and this intensifies when the mirrors are present. It is the sociocultural values in dance that promote the negative thoughts and disembodiment that dominate when dancers stand in front of the mirror. If dancers were in a dance culture that produced positive body image, the presence of mirrors would likely not be as daunting or produce as much negativity and hate.

Similarly, dance attire and costumes are an environmental factor that perpetuate the ideal dancer's body discourse. Dance attire and costumes are generally tight, revealing, and bare much of the body. They are created for the ideal dancer's body. When dancers cannot attain this ideal, and are not comfortable exposing their bodies, negative body image is often produced.

Costume season creates additional stress and anxiety for dancers because they worry about how their bodies will appear in their costumes. Costumes are often not custom made, but instead costume designers and coaches attempt to fit a variety of body shapes and sizes in to a few model prototypes. Dancers noted how costumes were supposed to fit unanimously, and it was stressful when the costume was less flattering on their body when compared to another dancer. It may be beneficial for studios to consider having their costumes custom made to fit each individual body. This would eliminate the stress dancers feel to fit into a mold that conflicts with their body shape and size. It would also eliminate the inconsistency of how the costume appears on each dancer, which often results in dancers feeling pressure to change their body. Based on the findings, dancers strongly believe that not only should consideration be given to the bodies of each dancer when designing costumes, but that coaches should also consider the amount of bare skin the costume will expose. Some dancers spoke to costumes that allowed for proper adjudication of the body without exposing a large amount of bare skin. Costumes that are extremely revealing also tend to be objectifying and sexualized. This can have long term implications for how dancers experience their bodies. Dancers learn from a young age that the body is meant to be exposed for the consumption of others and adjudicated based on thinness and attractiveness.

The trend of having dance costumes that are overly revealing and sexualized needs to shift. Displaying the body in this way is not necessary to produce success. The value of coaches

needs to change towards prioritizing the comfort of dancers and producing dancers that are comfortable with their bodies. Costume trends change in the world of dance regularly. To ensure the trend moves away from being more revealing and sexualized, I think it would be helpful for dance coaches, parents and adjudicators to have access to the findings from this study. Providing these findings in previously mentioned forums for these groups of people to access (Facebook groups, dance forums/blogs, competition directors) will hopefully impact perception on dance costumes. Competition directors also can alter competition rules. For example, when I was competing you were not allowed to have bare legs on stage (all dancers had to wear tights). This was beneficial in reducing worry about the appearance of fat and cellulite on the legs. It also increased comfort when wearing costumes that were high-cut, because even if your costume moved out of place you were not exposing yourself.

Dancers are often measured for costumes in the presence of others and experience anxiety about the measurements that will be attached to them. Participants expressed the extraordinary amount of insecurity and anxiety generated when they were measured in groups and their peers knew their measurements. Measuring dancers in private and keeping their measurements confidential could help offset this anxiety. If the culture of dance, however, placed less emphasis on achieving the ideal dancer's body, the body insecurity and anxiety dancers feel while getting measured may diminish. In general, the dance environment creates many barriers that make it difficult for dancers to confidently shape a positive relationship with food and body. These environmental elements, however, are predominantly negative because of the culture in which they are situated.

## **Limitations and Recommendations for Future Research**

As with all research, this study has limitations. The study population for this research was limited to female dancers ranging in age from 14-18 years. This was intended to create a study population that currently was in the world of dance and at high risk for the development of (ED)Bs. It would be compelling, however, to gain insight from younger dancers. Participants often commented that they believed younger dancers had a different relationship with food and body. Future research could inquire into what alters relationship with food and body as dancer's age. Perhaps discourses related to food and body are different or younger dancers are more resilient.

This study also did not look at male dancers. It could be valuable for future research to determine how male dancers experience food and body in the world of dance and determine how this compares to the experiences of female dancers. Perhaps male dancers would benefit from the same health promotion initiatives and prevention efforts as female dancers. Future research may also benefit from investigating the perspectives of parents and coaches in the world of dance in determining best practices for prevention strategies. Many dancers become dance moms or dance coaches, and it would be interesting to determine if this perpetuates or prevents negative discourses. How parents and coaches believe dance culture could be changed would provide a fascinating viewpoint.

Formal health promotion strategies and prevention initiatives appear to be absent in the world of dance. Two participants, however, discussed how their coaches had brought in a nutritionist. Even though the nutritionist was only brought in one time, the participants felt it was beneficial. Future research could investigate if implementing initiatives, like having access to a regular nutritionist, would help reduce the production and maintenance of (ED)Bs in the world of

dance. This study only looked to gain insight and understanding and did not test prevention mechanisms.

Although not intended to be, the findings of this study are not generalizable. Findings are based on the individual's experiences and interviewing different participants may produce different results. Recruitment was done exclusively through Facebook, and, as a result, dancers who are not on Facebook would not have had the opportunity to participate. Dancers who participated did so voluntarily and were likely comfortable discussing food and body. This study could have omitted dancers uncomfortable with discussing this subject matter.

## **Conclusion**

The purpose of this research was to qualitatively explore the experiences of female dancers and the impact of the world of dance on their relationship with food and body. The use of feminist poststructuralism and discourse analysis provided a critical approach to explore the beliefs, values and practices of female dancers. This methodology allowed for exploration of how the available discourses in the world of dance constitute the beliefs, values and practices about food and body. Through interviewing twelve young dancers, it was determined that environment, parents, coaches and peers largely shape relationships with food and body in the world of dance. These influencers generate and perpetuate food and body discourses that reinforce the ideal dancer's body, negative body image, and dieting. Dancers are often unable to resist dominant food and body discourse and consequently their relationship with food and body suffers. Implementing prevention efforts targeted at strengthening relationship with food and body is critical to reducing (ED)Bs in female dancers. For substantive change to occur, however, the world of dance needs to focus on generating a cultural shift where (ED)Bs are not valued and do not thrive. This research provides an opportunity to better understand how to successfully

shift problematic dance culture and challenge the status quo. The ultimate goal of this research is to support change that improves the health outcomes for female dancers, both within and outside of the world of dance.



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## Appendix A: Recruitment Message

My name is Nicole Doria and I am currently working on my master's degree in health promotion at Dalhousie University. I am researching how the world of dance influences the female dancer's relationship to food and body, and am looking for female dancers to interview! You may be eligible to participate in my study if you meet all of the following:

- 1) You are a female competitive dancer between the ages of 14-18
- 2) Train for 12 hours a week or more (including at least 3 hours/week of ballet)
- 3) Have been competing for 5 or more years

Participation will include one 45-90 minute interview that will be audio recorded, and will focus on your experiences in the world of dance. I am hoping this research will help us better understand the world of dance in order to prevent eating disorders and eating disorder behaviours in female dancers.

If you are interested in participating or have any further questions, please contact me through Facebook or email me at [nicole.doria@dal.ca](mailto:nicole.doria@dal.ca). If you know of anyone who may be interested in participating, please feel free to pass this message along.

Your participation will be kept private and confidential.

Thank you,

Nicole Doria

## Appendix B: Semi-Structured Interview Guide

Hello,

I am Nicole Doria, the primary researcher for this project. I am a former competitive dancer myself, and have lots of experience talking about dance, food and the body. I am interested in hearing about your experiences in the world of dance and how these experiences have shaped your relationship with food and your body. I have questions prepared, but please think of this interview more as friendly conversation.

To clarify, for the purposes of my research, the world of dance has been defined as a competitive culture with its own language, thoughts, communications, actions, beliefs and values. It is inclusive of dancers, dance teachers, the dance environment (mirrors, ballet bars, music), dance attire, costumes, stage makeup, peers, parents, judges/adjudicators, and the images associated with the ideal dancer.

Do you have any questions before we begin?

### **Demographic Information:**

Age:

Training location/studio:

Years of training as a competitive dancer:

### **Questions:**

1. Can you tell me about your experience in the world of dance?

Potential prompts:

- How long have you been dancing?
- What types of dance do you do?
- Where do you dance?
- Were you always in competitive dance?
- Have you danced at other studios?

\*How did that make you feel? How did you feel about that situation?

2. Can you tell me how the world of dance has shaped how you talk about your body?

Potential prompts:

- How do you talk about your body at dance? How do others (parents, peers, coaches)?
    - What influences this (parents, peers, coaches, mirrors)?
  - How do you talk about your body in dancewear/dance costumes? How do others (parents, peers, coaches)?
    - What influences this conversation (parents, peers, coaches, mirrors)?
  - How is this different then how you talk about your body outside of dance/in regular clothing?
  - Do you ever talk positively about your body – can you explain?
  - Do you ever talk negatively about your body – can you explain?
  - Is how you talk about your body the same as how you feel about your body – can you explain?
  - What is your reaction when you hear other people talking negatively/positively about your/their bodies?
3. Can you tell me about the ways the world of dance has shaped how you feel about your body?

Potential prompts:

- Tell me about the dance attire you practice and compete it makes you feel about your body?
  - How is this different then how you feel about your body in regular clothing?
  - How do the mirrors influence how you feel about your body?
  - Who/what most in the world of dance influences how you feel about your body (peers/parents/coaches/dance wear/costumes/mirrors)?
  - Are there places where you feel better/worse about your body? What are they?
  - Have there been times in your life where you feel better/worse about your body? When/Where?
  - Does how you feel about your body impact how you treat your body (dieting, unhealthy eating behaviours, etc.)? Can you explain
4. What things are important to you in terms of how your body looks and performs as a dancer?

Potential prompts:

- Do you think of your body as being whole or do you think of it as individual parts - how?
- How do you feel others expect your body to look and perform (coaches, peers, parents)?
- Do you feel more comfortable with your body at dance than you do outside of dance or vice versa?
- How has the world of dance influenced what is important to you in terms of how your body looks and performs?

5. Can you tell me how the world of dance has shaped how you talk about eating/food?

Potential prompts:

- How do you talk about eating/food at dance? How do others (parents, peers, coaches)?
    - What influences this conversation (parents, peers, coaches)?
  - Is this different then how you talk about food/eating outside of dance? How?
  - Do you ever talk positively about food/eating – can you explain?
  - Do you ever talk negatively about food/eating – can you explain?
  - Is how you talk about food/eating reflected in what you eat/your food choices? How?
  - What is your reaction when you hear other people talking negatively/positively about food/eating?
6. Can you tell me about the ways the world of dance has shaped how you feel about eating/food?

Potential prompts:

- Tell me what you think about eating/food? How does this impact your food choices?
  - Do you often eat the same foods – what are they?
  - Do you think that you have different eating behaviours compared to your peers that aren't in dance? What about your peers that are in dance?
  - Do you think of eating/food differently at dance and at home?
  - Do how you feel about eating/food impact what you eat?
7. Is there anything else about your experiences in the world of dance you would like to tell me about?
8. Do you have any questions before we finish?

*Thank you for sharing – I really appreciate it!*

## Appendix C: Consent Form

**Project Title:** The World of Dance: A Feminist Poststructural Analysis of Food and Body Among Female Dancers

**Lead Researcher:** Nicole Doria, Dalhousie University

**Supervisor:** Dr. Matthew Numer, Dalhousie University

**Funding Provided By:** Canadian Institutes of Health Research (CIHR) & Nova Scotia Health Research Foundation (NSHRF)

I am inviting you to take part in a research study being conducted by me, Nicole Doria, as part of my Master of Arts degree in Health Promotion at Dalhousie University. Taking part in this research study is completely voluntary and all information you provide will be kept private and confidential. The information below explains what you will be asked to do if you agree to participate in the study, as well as potential benefits, risks, and discomfort you may experience. You should discuss any questions you have about this study with me, Nicole Doria, who can be contacted any time at (902) 452-8021 or [nicole.doria@dal.ca](mailto:nicole.doria@dal.ca).

### **Who is Conducting the Research Study**

This research is being conducted by myself (Nicole Doria) and Dr. Matthew Numer (my supervisor). I am a second year student in my Master of Arts in Health Promotion, and Dr. Matthew Numer is a Health Promotion professor at Dalhousie University. I am a former competitive dancer and have done research in this area before. My undergraduate research was on former dancers and was titled: *Eating disorders, objectification theory, and dancers*.

### **Purpose of the Research Study**

The purpose of this research is to explore the experiences of female dancers in the world of dance and see how the world of dance influences their relationship with food and body. This research provides an opportunity to better understand the experiences of female dancers in the

world of dance, which will be helpful in understanding how to prevent eating disorders and eating disorder behaviours in female dancers. This research is important to the study of health promotion, which focuses on prevention and improving overall health and wellness. As a dancer being interviewed, you will be asked to speak to your experiences in the world of dance and how these experiences have shaped your relationship with food and body in order to answer my research question: *How does experience in the world of dance shape the female dancer's relationship to food and body?*

### **Who Can Participate in the Research Study**

You are eligible to participate in this research study if you meet all three criteria below. However, selection to participate also dependent on trying to select dancers from a variety of dance studios.

- 1) You are a female competitive dancer between the ages of 14-18
- 2) Train for 12 hours a week or more (including at least 3 hours/week of ballet)
- 3) Have been competing for 5 or more years

For the purposes of this research study, a competitive dancer is considered to be a dancer who trains in a learning environment, such as a dance studio, dance-based school, or professional dance company, to prepare for regular competitions and/or performances.

### **What You Will Be Asked to Do**

You will be asked to participate in one 45-90 minute interview, which will be one-on-one and audio recorded. If you are unable to meet with me in person, the interview may also be conducted over the phone using the recording app *TapeACall*. You will not have to answer any questions that you do not want to and are free to stop participating in the interview at any time.

### **Possible Benefits, Risks and Discomforts**

Although there are no direct benefits being provided to you, participating in this study may allow you to better understand your own experiences. It is also anticipated that participating in this study may benefit the health and wellness of future female dancers by providing knowledge that can contribute to prevention programs. It is important to recognize that potential risks and discomforts may occur. There is a possibility that you may be suffering with an eating disorder or eating disorder behaviours, and/or is affected by someone who suffers. Given this risk, contact information for local eating disorder resources will be provided to you.

### **Privacy and Confidentiality**

All personally identifying information you provide will remain private and confidential. Only I, the researcher, and my supervisor (Dr. Matthew Numer) will have access to the data (your interview transcripts). All data, including direct quotations, will use pseudonyms (pretend name to replace your name or the name of your studio and/or coaches) to ensure your privacy is protected. When the data are reported or presented, pseudonyms will also be used to ensure none of the information or quotations you provide is identifiable. All records and transcriptions will be kept on a memory stick in a locked drawer in my supervisor's office and all files on the memory stick will be password protected. Any electronic exchange of information will also be password protected. After the study is completed, data will be stored securely for 5 years in a locked drawer in my supervisor's office before being destroyed.

In the event that you disclose any evidence of abuse, neglect or need for protection during the course of my research project, I will report the incident directly to the child welfare agency in the area which you live. I will also notify my supervisor (Dr. Matthew Numer) immediately.

## **If You Decide to Stop Participating**

You are free to stop participating and/or withdraw from the study at any time. After your interview, you will have two weeks to email me at [nicole.doria@dal.ca](mailto:nicole.doria@dal.ca) if you would like your interview to be removed from the study. After the two-week period has passed, it will not be possible for your interview data to be removed as the data analysis process will begin.

## **How to Obtain Results**

A short description of the final research results will be provided when the research study has concluded if you consent to this on the following signature page; no individual results will be provided. These results will be emailed to the contact information (email address) that you provide me with on the signature page.

## **Questions**

If at any time you have questions or concerns about this research study, or your participation in this research study, please do not hesitate to contact me, Nicole Doria, (Student Researcher) at (902) 452-8021 or at [nicole.doria@dal.ca](mailto:nicole.doria@dal.ca). You may also contact Mathew Numer (Supervisor) at [Matthew.Numer@dal.ca](mailto:Matthew.Numer@dal.ca) and/or Catherine Connors (Director of Research Ethics) at (902) 494-1462 or at [ethics@dal.ca](mailto:ethics@dal.ca). If any changes to the research project are made that may affect your decision to participate you will be contacted by me directly.



Appendix D: Signature Page

I (the research participant) have read the explanation about this study and agree to participate in *The World of Dance: A Feminist Poststructural Analysis of Food and Body Among Female Dancers*. I have been given the opportunity to discuss any concerns and my questions have been answered to my satisfaction. Furthermore, I agree that the researcher may audio-record my interview and use direct quotations.

I would like the researcher to provide me a summary of the research via the provided email address:

Yes  No

Email address:

Date:

Signature (research participant):

Date:

Signature (student researcher):

## Appendix E: List of Resources

### All of Canada

- National Eating Disorder Information Centre

<http://nedic.ca>

Toll Free Help Line: 1-866-633-4220

### Alberta

- Canadian Mental Health Association – Calgary Region

Phone #: (403) 297-1700

Email: [info@cmha.calgary.ab.ca](mailto:info@cmha.calgary.ab.ca).

- Eating Disorder Support Network of Alberta

<http://www.eatingdisordersupportnetworkofalberta.com>

Facebook: Eating Disorder Support Network of Alberta

Email: [info@EDSNA.ca](mailto:info@EDSNA.ca)

### British Columbia

- Jessie's Legacy Program, Family Services of the North Shore

<http://www.familyservices.bc.ca>

Phone #: 604-988-5281

- Keltie Eating Disorders

<http://www.keltieatingdisorders.ca>

Toll Free Phone #: 1-800-655-1822

- HealthLink BC

<http://www.healthlinkbc.ca>

Phone #: 811 (can speak to a registered nurse about symptoms you are worried about)

Crisis Line: 310-6789 (Do not add area code before the number)

\*Crisis lines aren't only for people in crisis. You can call for information or if you just need someone to talk to.

#### Manitoba

- National Eating Disorder Information Centre

<http://nedic.ca>

Toll Free Help Line: 1-866-633-4220

#### New Brunswick

- Hungry for Hope

[www.hungryforhope.ca](http://www.hungryforhope.ca)

Phone #: (506) 455-1444

#### Newfoundland and Labrador

- Eating Disorder Foundation of Newfoundland and Labrador

<http://edfnl.ca>

Phone #: 709-722-0500

Email: [info@edfnl.ca](mailto:info@edfnl.ca)

#### Nova Scotia

- Eating Disorders Nova Scotia

<http://eatingdisordersns.ca>

Phone #: 902-229-8436

Email: [info@eatingdisordersns.ca](mailto:info@eatingdisordersns.ca)

- Nova Scotia Mental Health Mobile Crisis

Phone #: 1-888-429-8167

## Ontario

- National Eating Disorder Information Centre

<http://nedic.ca>

Toll Free Help Line: 1-866-633-4220

## Prince Edward Island

- National Eating Disorder Information Centre

<http://nedic.ca>

Toll Free Help Line: 1-866-633-4220

## Quebec

- Amiquebec

<http://amiquebec.org/eating-disorders/>

Phone #: 514-486-1448

Email: [info@amiquebec.org](mailto:info@amiquebec.org)

## Saskatchewan

- National Eating Disorder Information Centre

<http://nedic.ca>

Toll Free Help Line: 1-866-633-4220