A critical geography of physical activity:
Investigating the role of gender in gym environments

By

Stephanie Eve Coen

A thesis submitted to the Graduate Program in Geography and Planning
in conformity with the requirements for the
Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

Queen’s University
Kingston, Ontario, Canada

June, 2017

Copyright © Stephanie Eve Coen, 2017
Abstract

This thesis develops a critical geography of physical activity by examining the implications of socio-spatial processes at the scale of the everyday exercise environment for gendered inequities. Around the world, men are more active than women. Meeting recommended physical activity guidelines significantly reduces risk of a range of chronic conditions and premature death; yet, on the whole, women are missing out on these health benefits as compared to their male counterparts. Gyms—although routine places for exercise—are conspicuously absent from health geography research. In this thesis, I investigate the central question: What is the role of an everyday exercise environment, specifically the gym, in the gendering of physical activity? Situated in a conceptual framework linking literature on gender, health geographies, and emotional geographies, my research design comprises an in-depth, multi-method qualitative study incorporating semi-structured interviews, participant-generated drawing, and journaling with 52 women and men in a mid-sized Canadian city. First, I investigate how gender manifests in gym environments and identify five multisensorial gendered performativities of place: bodily materialities; the soundscape; visual fields; the physical environment; and the imaginary. Next, I examine how gender influences gym-users’ practices and mobilities and identify three socio-spatial processes at play (embodying gender ideals, policing gender performance, and spatializing gender relations), along with a fourth theme illustrating the agency some individuals interject to disrupt gender hegemony. I then turn to consider how gender matters in the emotional geographies of the gym where I find three processes (dislocation, evaluation, and sexualization) that create a sense of gender displacement and configure an unevenly gendered emotional architecture of place, while individual factors can mediate negative emotional outcomes. My findings demonstrate that while gyms are potentially sites for health promotion, they are also
places where gendered inequities in health opportunities emerge. I argue that addressing gender inequities requires attention to the complexities of the socio-spatial processes that naturalize, as well as challenge, gender differences and disparities in the very places where physical activities are undertaken. Interventions to improve gender equity in physical activity participation need to account for the gendered features of everyday exercise environments.
Co-authorship

I, Stephanie Eve Coen, am the lead author on all work presented in this thesis. I am responsible for developing the research questions and conceptual approach, undertaking all data collection and analysis, and writing all manuscripts. My thesis supervisors Dr. Joyce Davidson and Dr. Mark Rosenberg, included as co-authors on the manuscripts submitted for publication in Chapters 4, 5, and 6, provided theoretical and methodological guidance and critical feedback that contributed to each of the aforementioned manuscripts.

Chapter 3: A version of this chapter, of which I am the sole author, was previously published in: Coen, S. E. (2016). What can participant-generated drawing add to health geography’s qualitative palette? In N. Fenton & J. Baxter (Eds.), Practising qualitative methods in health geographies (pp. 131-152). Oxon & New York: Routledge. This includes figures 3.1 – 3.4, originally published as figures 8.1 – 8.4. A waiver from the publisher is included in Appendix B.

Chapter 4: A version of this manuscript has been submitted for publication to Gender, Place, and Culture.

Chapter 5: A version of this manuscript has been submitted for publication to Social Science and Medicine.

Chapter 6: A version of this manuscript has been submitted for publication to the Annals of the American Association of Geographers.
Acknowledgments

The acknowledgments I wish to make truly require their own thesis-length document. I cannot possibly do them justice here.

With that caveat, my most heartfelt thanks goes to:

My supervisors Dr. Joyce Davidson and Dr. Mark Rosenberg: Thank you, Joyce, for the immense support and compassion with which you have guided me through this Ph.D. process and the positive imprint you made in my feminist thinking. Thank you, Mark, for taking me under your wing and always keeping your office door open to me—I never took that for granted. I am sincerely grateful for all of the opportunities in health geography you opened up for me.

All of the participants who so kindly, generously, and openly shared their experiences and time with me. Speaking with you was the highlight of this work for me. I learned so much from you, and continue to reflect fondly on our conversations about the gym.

The grants and awards that made my doctoral work possible and provided me with professional development opportunities, including a Frederick Banting and Charles Best Canada Graduate Scholarship (#134844) from the Canadian Institutes of Health Research (CIHR), an Ontario Graduate Scholarship, Graduate Awards from Queen’s University, and conference travel awards from the Department of Geography and Planning and CIHR.

Edwin Morelli and Anna Zhuo for research assistance. I owe a particular debt of gratitude to Edwin for his collaboration throughout several stages of this work.

My parents Judy Danzig, Gary Visco, Sandy Berbeco, and David Coen, and my brother Thomas Coen for your unwavering support in everything, from the major to the mundane.
Many people who supported me personally and professionally in the lead up to and during my doctoral work—I am grateful to each of you, and you know why: John Bond, S. Abo-El Ella, Michael Grossman, Joan Knox, Kathy Hoover, Joy Johnson, Brad Mac Neil, Susan Phillips, Pam Ratner, Nancy Ross, Liz Smith, Sari Tudiver, Sarah Turner, Ashley Vanstone, all of my colleagues in the Sex/Gender Methods Group, the entire team at The Secret Illness, my dear friends (near and far), and my #AcWri buddies.

Wagner Rulli: This thesis belongs to you, too. Thank you for making me realize what I am truly grateful for.
In loving memory of

Dr. Meyer Danzig
The conversations we had about my Ph.D. meant so much to me. I hope I make you proud.

Sylvia Danzig
If there ever was chicken soup for the soul, it was your recipe.

Freda Fishman Stroh
Getting to know you as an adult, as a woman, has forever shaped the woman I want to be. Thank you for telling me to “stop working so hard, and have fun.”

Felicidad Licyayo Rulli
Your stories are part of my heart. I miss you telling them to me, every day. Salamat.
# Table of Contents

Abstract .............................................................................................................................. i  
Co-authorship .................................................................................................................. iii  
Acknowledgments .......................................................................................................... iv  
Table of Contents .......................................................................................................... vii  
List of Figures ................................................................................................................... x  

**Chapter 1 | Introduction** .............................................................................................. 1  

**Chapter 2 | Conceptual framework** ............................................................................... 12  

2.1 Overview .................................................................................................................. 12  
2.2 Feminist geographies: placing, scaling, and embodying gender............................. 13  
2.3 Health geographies: doing gender and health in place............................................ 19  
2.4 Emotional geographies: connecting health-related behaviour and context ............ 28  
2.5 Relating the intersections ....................................................................................... 32  
2.6 Methodological approach ....................................................................................... 32  
2.7 References ............................................................................................................... 34  

**Chapter 3 | What can participant-generated drawing add to health geography’s qualitative palette?** .................................................................................................................. 44  

3.1 Introduction ............................................................................................................... 44  
3.1 Drawing as a research method ................................................................................ 47  
3.1.1 Locating participant-generated drawing in visual methodologies ..................... 47  
3.1.2 Operationalizing and analyzing participant-generated drawing ....................... 50  
3.2 Methodological benefits ......................................................................................... 53  
3.2.1 Comprising a medium for exploring emotions .................................................. 53  
3.2.2 Supporting a participant-centred research process .......................................... 54  
3.2.3 Reinforcing rigour ............................................................................................. 56  
3.3 Potential pitfalls ....................................................................................................... 58  
3.4 Participant-generated drawing in health geography: A pilot study ....................... 60  
3.4.1 Understanding experiences in gym environments .......................................... 62  
3.4.2 Value added by drawing ..................................................................................... 64  
3.4.3 Limitations of drawing ...................................................................................... 68  
3.5 Conclusions ............................................................................................................. 70
## Chapter 3 | “Reflections on praxis”

### 3.6 Reflections on praxis

- Page: 71

### 3.7 References

- Page: 72

## Chapter 4 | “Welcome to the ‘gun show’:” Gendered performativities of an everyday exercise place

### 4.1 Introduction

- Page: 78

### 4.2 ‘Doing’ gender, place, and health

- Page: 79

### 4.3 Methods

- Page: 83

### 4.4 Results: Sensing gender, performing place

#### 4.4.1 Bodily materialities

- Page: 86

#### 4.4.2 The soundscape

- Page: 91

#### 4.4.3 Visual fields

- Page: 94

#### 4.4.4 Physical environment

- Page: 96

#### 4.4.5 The imaginary

- Page: 98

### 4.5 Discussion and conclusions

- Page: 100

### 4.6 References

- Page: 104

## Chapter 5 | “It’s gym, like g-y-m not J-i-m:” Exploring the role of place in the gendering of physical activity

### 5.1 Introduction

- Page: 114

### 5.2 Gender, health, and place

- Page: 116

### 5.3 Methods

#### 5.3.1 Data collection

- Page: 118

#### 5.3.2 Analysis

- Page: 119

#### 5.3.3 Sample characteristics

- Page: 120

### 5.4 Results

#### 5.4.1 Embodying gender ideals

- Page: 121

#### 5.4.2 Policing gender performance

- Page: 123

#### 5.4.3 Spatializing gender relations

- Page: 127

#### 5.4.4 Breaking gender binaries

- Page: 131

### 5.5 Discussion

- Page: 132

### 5.6 Conclusions

- Page: 136

### 5.7 References

- Page: 136
Chapter 6 | “I felt like such a girl:” Gender and the emotional geographies of the gym... 143

6.1 Introduction .................................................................................................................. 144
6.2 Towards a critical geography of physical activity ....................................................... 145
6.3 The study ....................................................................................................................... 150
6.4 Results: Feeling gendered in/out of place .................................................................. 153
  6.4.1 Dislocation .................................................................................................................. 153
  6.4.2 Evaluation .................................................................................................................. 158
  6.4.3 Sexualization ............................................................................................................. 164
  6.4.4 Motivation .................................................................................................................. 168
  6.4.5 Attenuation ................................................................................................................ 169
6.5 Discussion: Emotional geographies and the gendered boundaries of physical activity... 170
6.6 Conclusions .................................................................................................................. 174
6.7 References .................................................................................................................... 175

Chapter 7 | “Ok, gender! Where are you?” Conclusions ..................................................... 182

7.1 Introduction .................................................................................................................. 182
7.2 Contributions ............................................................................................................... 186
7.3 Unanticipated observations: Tensions, contradictions, and interventions in gender talk . 192
7.4 General limitations ....................................................................................................... 199
7.5 Future directions .......................................................................................................... 200
7.6 Conclusions .................................................................................................................. 201
7.7 References .................................................................................................................... 202

Appendices | A – G ....................................................................................................................... 207

A: Research ethics board approval ..................................................................................... 208
B: Permission waiver for published material in Chapter 3 .................................................. 210
C: Recruitment flyer ............................................................................................................. 211
D: Letter of information (Interviews and drawing) ............................................................... 212
E: Letter of information (Journals) ....................................................................................... 214
F: Interview guide ............................................................................................................... 216
G: Journal instructions ....................................................................................................... 220
List of Figures

Figure 3.1. Drawing by a participant who credited the process of drawing with the acquisition of new self-knowledge. .............................................................................................................. 65

Figure 3.2. Drawing by a participant who credited the process of drawing with helping to pinpoint “the ‘essence’ of the exercise experience.” ................................................................. 66

Figure 3.3. Drawing by a participant who preferred written over visual expression.................. 69

Figure 3.4. Drawing by a participant who noted that neither visual nor written representation could capture the tone with which she would have conveyed her experiences in talk............. 70

Figure 5.1. Drawing by a participant that prompted her to reflect on how her femininity is implicated in the policing of her practices and spatial presence in the gym................................. 127

Figure 6.1. “There’s confinement.” Drawing by a participant who limited her use of space in the gym to avoid discomfort in the “high testosterone region.” ................................................. 156

Figure 6.2. “I want to be considered bigger.” Drawing by a participant depicting how the gym environment magnifies body insecurities. .............................................................. 161
Meeting recommended physical activity guidelines significantly reduces risk of a range of chronic conditions, including coronary heart disease, type 2 diabetes, breast and colon cancers, and premature mortality (Lee et al., 2012; Warburton, Nicol, & Bredin, 2006). Yet, on the whole, women are missing out on these health benefits as compared to their male counterparts. Around the world, men are more active than women (Azevedo et al., 2007; Hallal et al., 2012; Ransdell, Vener, & Sell, 2004). Women fall behind men in meeting the minimum levels of physical activity set out in internationally accepted guidelines (Azevedo et al., 2007; Colley et al., 2011; Statistics Canada, 2015). Women are also less likely than men to meet strength training recommendations (Caspersen, Pereira, & Curran, 2000; Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2006; Chevan, 2008), as well as to engage in moderate to vigorous intensities of physical activity (Colley et al., 2011; Grzywacz & Marks, 2001; Hallal et al., 2012; Livingstone et al., 2001) where the greatest health benefits stand to be gained (Tremblay et al., 2011). This gender gap holds in Canada; men fare better than women in all categories of fitness, except flexibility (Shields et al., 2010). When women and men pursue leisure time physical activities, types of activity often differ significantly by gender (Livingstone et al., 2001; Gilmour, 2007). Bolstering physical activity participation thus requires more than a one-size-fits-all solution.

Understanding the gendered barriers and facilitators of physical activity behaviour is essential for developing effective strategies to promote and support physical activity uptake. In this thesis, I investigate the central research question: What is the role of an everyday exercise environment, specifically the gym, in the gendering of physical activity?

Although gyms present opportunities for fulfilling physical activity prescriptions, they can also reinforce gender differences and stereotypes. Routine training areas, namely free-weight
and cardiovascular rooms, are known to be respectively typecast as masculine and feminine spaces for their correspondence with exercise regimes perceived to produce idealized muscular and thin physiques (Brace-Govan, 2004; Dworkin, 2001, 2003; Johansson, 1996; Johnston, 1995, 1996, 1998; Salvatore & Marecek, 2010). Evidence points to the significance of gendered factors in shaping gym-related health behaviour and opportunities. Motivations for gym attendance have been cited as gendered, tied to weight loss for women and enhancing muscularity for men (McCabe & James, 2009). Gendered body ideals and norms have been linked to women’s avoidance of weightlifting (Brace-Govan, 2004; Dworkin, 2001, 2003; Salvatore & Marecek, 2010) and masculinized gym cultures and muscular motivations have been associated with men’s steroid and supplement use (Andrews, Sudwell, & Sparkes, 2005; Atkinson, 2007; McCabe & James, 2009; Monaghan, 2002). Women in particular are reported to experience psychological distress in gym environments, including social comparisons, body evaluation concerns, and social physique anxiety (Kruisselbrink, Dodge, Swanburg, & MacLeod, 2004; Pridgeon & Grogan, 2012; Salvatore & Marecek, 2010; Wasilenko, Kulik, & Wanic, 2007). The gym itself can be perceived as a hyper-masculine institution (Craig & Liberti, 2007; Pridgeon & Grogan, 2012), which can be a barrier to exercise adherence for both women and men (Pridgeon & Grogan, 2012). Little is known, however, about how these and other gender dynamics within the social and spatial context of the gym can drive or circumscribe the physical activity pursuits of women and men.

Geographical research on physical activity has largely focused on the built environments of residential neighbourhoods, to the neglect of people’s experiences within the distinct sites and facilities where individuals take up physical activities (Andrews, Hall, Evans, & Colls, 2012; Blacksher & Lovasi, 2012). Biehler and Simon (2010, p. 174) caution against “the pervasive
fallacy of enclosure and the privileging of the Great Outdoors,” arguing that indoor environments have the potential to provide insight into and transform human-environment relations across multiple scales. Recent studies mapping individual daily physical activity patterns have challenged the saliency of neighbourhood as a unit of analysis for capturing all physical activity behaviours (Troped, Wilson, Matthews, Cromley, & Melly, 2010; Zenk et al., 2011). In this thesis, I respond to the need to examine the influences of other relevant environments for physical activity by conceptualizing the micro-context of the gym as an under-explored window into understanding the processes underlying wider gender differences in physical activity participation.

There is a small body of work on gyms outside of geography. Of the research that has been undertaken, a number of studies are limited to student samples in university gyms (cf. Dworkin, 2003; Salvatore & Marecek, 2010; Wasilenko et al., 2007). Qualitative research in commercial gyms with more diverse membership has shed light on motives for working out (Crossley, 2006), body aesthetics (Frew & McGillivray, 2005), body surveillance (Markula & Pringle, 2006), and fitness culture (Sassatelli, 1999), but this work has rarely foregrounded considerations of health (for an exception, see Pridgeon and Grogan 2012 on exercise adherence and dropout). In addition, perhaps because of a perception of gym cultures as masculine and misconceptions of body image as a feminine issue (Kehler & Atkinson, 2010), the majority of research—excluding the bodybuilding literature—has focused on women’s behaviours and experiences in gyms (cf. Dworkin 2001, 2003; Wasilenko et al., 2007). Not only are men’s experiences under-considered, but more research is needed into differences and similarities among men and women using gyms and how gender relations may be implicated in shaping gym-related health opportunities and experiences (Bottorff, Oliffe, Robinson, & Carey, 2011).
Ethnographic work has demonstrated that gyms can function as distinct cultural enclaves with embedded social hierarchies, norms, and etiquette (Crossley, 2006; Sassatelli, 1999), but has not extended to consider what these social contexts mean for health or health equity—a contribution my research seeks to make.

Gyms are a missing place in geography. To the best of my knowledge, only two studies in the discipline have focused on gyms (Andrews et al., 2005; Johnston, 1995, 1996, 1998); however, both were concerned with bodybuilding gyms and cultures, as opposed to everyday physical activity and health. On the other hand, geographical research on physical activity, with its overwhelming focus on neighbourhood environments, has recently come under critique for verging on environmental determinism (Colls & Evans, 2013), inattention to human agency and subjective experiences (Blacksher & Lovasi, 2012), and overemphasis on some types of physical activities, such as walking (Andrews et al., 2012). To this I would add that gender has arguably been a muted consideration in geographical physical activity research. The same could be said for emotional experiences related to exercise and other movement activities (Andrews et al., 2012). Calls have been made for geographical attention to everyday fitness places (Andrews et al., 2005; Hopkins, 2008), but these have yet to be taken up in health geography—precisely a gap that my research seeks to fill.

I begin this thesis by developing a conceptual framework tying together feminist, health, and emotional geographies (Chapter 2). Next, informed by feminist methodological approaches in health geography concerned with the experiential dimensions of health and place (Dyck, 1999, 2003), I explore the potential of drawing as a method for a critical geography of the gym (Chapter 3). I then examine the role of gyms in the gendering of physical activity through three research questions:
(1) How does gender manifest in the gym environment? (Chapter 4);

(2) How does gender influence women’s and men’s gym-based exercise practices and mobilities? (Chapter 5); and

(3) How does gender matter in women’s and men’s emotional geographies of the gym? (Chapter 6).

I conclude by highlighting the geographical and wider contributions of my work, as well as reflecting on some of the tensions and contradictions I observed in asking people about gender (Chapter 7).

Informed by feminist methodological approaches in health geography (Dyck, 1999, 2003), my research comprises a multi-method qualitative study of gym-users’ experiences in a mid-sized city in Ontario, Canada. My approach takes the gym as an institution with a particular gender regime (Connell, 2012)—a place where gender and gendered space are (re)formed in everyday life (Browne 2004, 2007). Therefore, seeking to excavate the gender regime of the gym and the implications for gendered inequities in physical activity participation, I undertook semi-structured interviews coupled with a drawing activity ($n=52$; 18 men, 34 women) and journaling with a sub-sample of interviewees ($n=37$) who used a variety of different gym environments.

Overall, in this thesis I seek to advance a more critical geography of physical activity—one that attunes to experience and agency while centring on the socio-spatial processes and gendered power structures enabling and constraining physical activity participation. This research makes several more specific contributions to health geography scholarship. First, this study directly takes up calls to examine everyday sites of fitness (Andrews et al., 2005; Hopkins, 2008), attend to first-hand experiences of physical activity, and consider physical activity environments beyond residential neighbourhoods (Andrews et al., 2012; Blacksher & Lovasi,
Second, by bringing a missing place—the gym—into geography, my work expands geographies of physical activity to consider the more micro scales of everyday exercise environments. Finally, this research provides insights into ways to intervene to improve gender equity in physical activity participation by taking into account gendered barriers and facilitators within everyday exercise environments.

References


Dworkin, S. L. (2003). A woman’s place is in the... cardiovascular room?? Gender relations, the body, and the gym. In A. Bolin & J. Granskog (Eds.), *Athletic intruders: Ethnographic research on women, culture, and exercise* (pp. 131-158). Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.


Chapter 2 | Conceptual framework

2.1 Overview

To address my central research question regarding the role of gyms in the gendering of physical activity, in this chapter I develop a conceptual framework that enables me to trace out the relations between gender, health behaviour, and emotions in place. In doing so, I directly take up and build on the feminist and relational approach proposed by Thien and Del Casino Jr. (2012) in which they consider the “intertwined sociospatial forces and embodied experiences linking health, emotion, and masculinity” (p. 1147). My framework assumes the connectivity among these concepts that Thien and Del Casino Jr. (2012) espouse in their relational view; however, I extend their triad in three ways. First, I build-in recent explicit theorizations about femininities in order to understand how multiple masculinities and femininities intersect with health and emotions. Second, I consider physical activity as a type of health behaviour that has a particular interlocking relationship with gender through the body. Third, gender, health behaviour, and emotions also take shape within the interactions among people and between people and place. In this relational sense, my framework sees exercise and emotions as not only outcomes of individuals, but as features that contribute to the collective environment of the gym. Overall, this framework allows me to examine the micro-level processes and relationships implicated in constructing and constraining opportunities for health, and look to these as sites of intervention (Connell, 2012).

My conceptual framework draws upon three bodies of literature in geography: feminist geographies; health geographies; and emotional geographies. These literatures are not mutually exclusive, and in recognizing and further developing their connections, I highlight the intersections where I situate my work as well as the gaps between them that I seek to fill. First, I
utilize feminist geographies to conceptualize gender, the relationships between gender and place, and how space is implicated in the materialization of gendered power regimes. Next, health geographies are my platform to understand the linkages between gender and health, the dynamic relationships between health and place, and geographical perspectives on physical activity. Finally, I engage emotional geographies as the “connective tissue” (Davidson & Milligan, 2004, p. 524) between bodies and gym spaces—an invisible driver with material effects on health.

2.2 Feminist geographies: placing, scaling, and embodying gender

My conceptual framework takes gender, as its starting point, to be a central organizing feature of social life. The dual categories of man/woman matched with biological sex categories male/female remain a problematic and persistent ordering scheme of many contemporary societies, with resources, roles, expectations, and behaviours divided along these lines (Bondi & Davidson, 2003). It is precisely because gender is unavoidable, taken-for-granted in everyday life as ‘natural’ and unquestioned, that it is so powerful and problematic (West & Zimmerman, 1987). When combined with the gym as a taken-for-granted, mundane place, I suggest that ‘common sense’ assumptions about gender can be compromising for health. The gym is a place where wider gendered body ideals and stereotypes can crystalize in place, etched into the material structure of the gym and embodied in the practices of individuals (Johnston, 1998; Dworkin, 2001, 2003; Frew & McGillivray, 2005). Yet, there is certainly more to gyms than gender difference and hyperbole. Beyond these more visible binaries, my research seeks to understand the in-between spaces of gender in the gym—that is, the more subtle and non-dichotomous ways that gender is enacted or challenged within a seemingly gender-oppositional setting (Browne, 2004, 2007). To do this, and to establish a basis for my first research question
(How does gender manifest in gym environments?), I draw upon feminist geographical perspectives that illuminate the relationships between gender and place.

Geographers and other social theorists have advanced conceptualizations of gender as a social construct, as opposed to a biological fact (Connell, 1987; Massey, 1994). Rather than being fixed in individuals, gender comes into being through social interactions amongst people and within settings (Massey, 1994; West & Zimmerman, 1987). Gender thus has as much to do with places as with people (Bondi & Davidson, 2003). West and Zimmerman (1987) coined the notion of ‘doing gender’ to distinguish gender as something that we do in concert with others, not something that we are. Gender thus refers to context-contingent behaviours and cues considered manly or womanly that are realized in social transactions with others. Gender is relational and situational (Berg & Longhurst, 2003; Bondi & Davidson, 2005). Different situations, such as places of work or leisure, may provide variegated resources that people draw upon to do gender in ‘appropriate’ ways (West & Zimmerman, 1987) and they may do so strategically (Hopkins & Noble, 2009). This view of gender is particularly relevant to considering the gym environment, as a unique context, with its own stock of resources for doing gender, as well as sets of norms for what is gender-appropriate and what aspects of gender become powerful. Butler (1988, 1990) famously described the enactment of gender as performative, rather than pre-given or pre-determined by biological bodies. Geographers have extended Butler’s conception of performativity to argue that space is also performative in that it also does not pre-exist, but is rather “brought into being through performances and as a performative articulation of power” (Gregson & Rose, 2000). Browne’s (2004, 2007) work in particular has shown how everyday spaces are continually reworked in ways that (re)fix binary ideas about gender, and render non-conforming individuals out-of-place.
Not only is gender performed contextually, but these performances feed back into place. Built into my gendered lens, is the feminist geographical contention that gender and place are mutually constitutive (Bondi & Davidson, 2005; Massey, 1994). From this standpoint, I understand gender to be both social category and social structure—a social product of the interactions and activities in particular places and spaces that, at the same time, shapes those very places and spaces (Bondi & Davidson, 2005; Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005; Schippers, 2007). Moreover, places are not isolated gender islands, but are rather composed of the overlap of wider scales of gender and social relations in space and time—what Massey calls “power-geometries” (Massey, 1994, p. 265; see also Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005; Connell, 2012). Institutions, organizations, and places may thus have particular gender regimes that operate locally, yet relate to and draw from the broader gender orders in which they are situated (Massey, 1994; Connell 2012). In the case of the gym, for example, this scalar dimension of gender is important as wider gendered body ideals are transported into the gym environment through commercial fitness marketing techniques and the potentially physique-oriented goals of some participants (Dworkin, 2001, 2003; Frew & McGillivray, 2005); in turn, the gym itself may contribute to the (re)production of these wider-reaching ideals. Thus, gender is not bound by place and place boundaries are not impermeable (Massey, 1994); yet, places may be “sticky” in relation to gender identities in that they come to be associated with certain gender expressions and experiences (Pratt & Hanson, 1994, p.25). Together, these perspectives allow me to conceive of gender as social locations and sets of practices that are enacted and embodied by individuals and collectivities at various scales which, in turn, comprise gender structures and orders that impact upon the lives of individuals and groups.
At the heart of feminist geographical conceptions of gender and place is a concern with power, inequality, and exclusion. Places and spaces may be experienced differentially on the basis of gender, come to be associated as masculine or feminine, and implicated in constructing various constellations of gender relations (Bondi & Davidson, 2005; Massey, 1994). Feminist geographical perspectives provide a way to understand how the socially ascribed labels of woman and man can become powerful and exclusionary in place, as well as a way to challenge this binary division by considering the pluralities, complexities, and contradictions of gender in particular contexts (Bondi & Davidson, 2005; Browne, 2004; Massey, 1994). Placing the lens of analysis on gender relations is one way to embrace the fluidity of gender, detach gender from dualistic categories, and contend with the power dynamics within and among groups of women and men (Bottorff, Oliffe, Robinson, & Carey, 2011; Connell, 2012). Connell (2012, p. 1677) refers to this approach as relational theory which “gives a central place to the patterned relations between women and men (and among women and among men) that constitute gender as a social structure.”

Originating with Connell’s 1987 work, this approach sees gender in terms of a relational hierarchy of gender relations, with hegemonic masculinity at the top, serving to maintain patriarchy. Connell’s (1987) concept of *hegemonic masculinity* comprises a dominant and culturally idealized version of masculinity that subordinates femininities and other possible masculinities. Hegemonic masculinity does not refer to essential qualities of a person, but rather to certain culturally idealized features that men may or may not take up; these masculinities are never available to women in Connell’s view. The power of this hierarchy also rests on oppositional gender relations, in which the characteristics of masculinities and femininities are polarized and fitted together via heterosexuality. Connell’s original concept has been critiqued
for being equated with an essentialized set of Western masculine ideals, rather than adapted to the specificities of local context (Campbell & Bell, 2000; Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005), and inadequate theorization of femininities (Schippers, 2007).

Schippers (2007) extended Connell’s masculinities framework to contend with what she calls hegemonic femininities. In Schippers’ view, hegemonic femininities and masculinities are both made-up of idealized qualities—what she calls quality content—that society holds of men and women. In Schippers’ model, non-hegemonic masculinities are not subordinate when enacted by men, but instead represent men displaying feminine quality content. When women take on masculine quality content, they threaten the gendered order in the form of ‘pariah femininities.’ Using a masculinities and femininities framework allows me to move beyond a binary treatment of gender to consider the features of masculinities and femininities that may be powerful or transgressive within the gym environment. This approach also enables me to consider more inclusively where differences and similarities may lie among men and women, and within groups of women and groups of men, as opposed to a focus on categorical gender difference—what Bondi and Davidson (2003) call ‘fracturing gender,’ or highlighting where gender intersects with other facets of identities (also called intersectionality).

I acknowledge that there is a methodological tension in using dichotomous terms, like men and women, throughout this thesis and the fluid conception of gender put forth in my conceptual framework (Bondi & Davidson, 2003; Browne, 2004). I accept the limitations of this language, with the same concession as Browne (2004, p. 334) that “in order to make sense of [participants’] narratives and to stress the problems associated with not fitting dichotomous sexes, it is necessary to use these sexed terms.”
Attention to masculinities in geography has advanced understandings of how masculinities are multiple, contingent upon time and place, and relational—located in the systems of gender relations in which they are situated (Berg & Longhurst, 2003; Longhurst, 2000; Noble & Hopkins, 2009; van Hoven & Hörshelmann, 2005). Kath Browne (2005) has suggested that geography has more work to do in terms of decoupling masculinity and femininity from the attendant gender/sex categories of man/male and woman/female. Browne’s research has shed light on the crucial role of space in re-inscribing these dualities on bodies, with negative consequences and social sanctions for those who seemingly unsettle hegemonic gendered/sexed assumptions in everyday places (Browne, 2004, 2005, 2006, 2007). In her study of the sex-dichotomous spaces of public toilets and the mis-readings of self-identifying women as men by other women, Browne (2004) shows how gender/sex is (re)produced at the sites of bodies relationally in space. Through these disruptive moments of encounter, Browne demonstrates how the gendering/sexing of spaces and bodies works to naturalize differences and maintain sexed regimes of power. Browne uses the term genderism to describe the “(often unnamed) discriminations that are based on not conforming to the rigid categorisation of man/woman, male/female” (p. 343). I aim conceptually and empirically to build on Browne’s take on the micro-level socio-spatial processes and moments of encounter through which gendered/sexed regimes and bodies are co-constituted by extending to the realm of the everyday fitness gym. Lynda Johnston’s research (1995, 1996, 1998)—albeit on bodybuilding gyms and women bodybuilders—has demonstrated how the built and spatial environments of gyms can be dimorphic along stereotypical gender lines and, in turn, reinforce the embodiment of gender differences. Informed by Browne’s work that points to how mundane spaces—such as bathrooms (2004) or restaurants (2007)—are implicated in the gendering/sexing of bodies and vice-versa,
my research aims to understand how gender/sex-place dynamics play out in the context of the
gym, and what this means physically and emotionally for the people who use them.

It is difficult to conceive of bodies without categorizing by gender (Bondi & Davidson, 2005), yet one of the critiques in feminist geography is that the materiality of bodies has often been overlooked (Johnston, 2009; Longhurst, 2001). The gym is an everyday place where the physicality of bodies is front and centre. Geographers understand the gendering/sexing of bodies to be a context-specific process (Browne, 2004, 2005, 2006, 2007; Johnston, 2009) and bodily performances as implicated in the production of place and gender (Johnston, 2009). Bodies can also be conceived as spaces nested within ascending scales of gender regimes and orders (Valentine, 2001). My framework embeds these assumptions by accounting for how gym-based exercise behaviour, as a place-specific bodily practice, factors into the gender regimes of gyms and how gender regimes, in turn, shape what people do with their bodies in gyms. While my first research question queries the production and enactment of gender in the gym, my second research question links this to health, to which I turn in the next section.

2.3 Health geographies: doing gender and health in place

Over a decade ago in health geography Isabel Dyck lamented that “divorcing women’s health
from other aspects of women’s lives is mistaken, for ‘doing gender’ is, in effect, ‘doing health’” (Dyck, 2003, p. 366). Despite this, and calls for consideration of gender in some of the seminal papers that helped to chart directions in health geography (Kearns, 1995; Parr, 2004), little work in the sub-discipline has investigated everyday behaviours related to health as a way of doing gender. Health geography has attended to gendered experiences of health in place, but less attention has turned to the reverse—how health behaviour works to constitute gender in place.
An exception is a body of work on the gendered geographies of alcohol consumption (Campbell, 2000; Holloway, Valentine, & Jayne, 2009; Leyshon, 2005). Rather, a growing body of work in the wider health sciences has theorized how routine health-related behaviours—such as eating habits, alcohol consumption, or health service utilization—can be gendered signifiers (Courtenay, 2000; Galdas, Cheater, & Marshall, 2005; Lyons, 2009; Saltonstall, 1993).

Courtenay (2000), in his seminal paper on masculinities and men’s health, argued that hegemonic masculine ideals encourage men to dismiss their health needs and adopt health-damaging behaviours which, in turn, reify notions of men as the ‘stronger sex.’ Hegemonic masculinity, while bad for men’s health, still rewards men’s privileged social status. Feminine ideals, on the other hand, are traditionally tied to health-promoting and protecting behaviours, such as care-taking and asking for help (Courtenay, 2000). As Johnson and Repta (2012, p. 26) note: “Health behaviour can thus be implicated in the construction and maintenance of the gender order.” This is important because intervening in gender relations and regimes can be a way to improve health (Connell, 2012).

Linking back to the feminist geography prong of my conceptual framework, there is clearly a role for health geography to play in further conceptualizing how health behaviour is interlinked with masculinities and femininities in place—a contribution my research seeks to make. Seeing health behaviour as a way of doing gender allows me to conceptualize how gender and exercise behaviour within gym environments are inseparable. Interestingly—and perhaps tied to hegemonic ideals of male physical strength—physical activity more broadly is not a health behaviour where men fare poorly; instead, men are consistently more active than women across a variety of indicators and countries (Azevedo et al., 2007; Hallal et al., 2012; Livingstone et al., 2001). On the surface, physical activity participation challenges the gendered bifurcation
of men’s risk-taking (health-damaging) and women’s care-taking (health-promoting) behaviour. Evidence indicates that physical activity type may play a role in explaining some apparent gender differences (Livingstone et al., 2001). We understand less, however, about the everyday processes underlying these categorical gender disparities in place, where exceptions may surface, and how physical activity may be practiced as a way of doing gender in particular contexts. My research will investigate these linkages through my **second research question**: *How does gender influence women’s and men’s gym-based exercise practices and mobilities?*

Bodies are the pivotal place through which gender and health are ‘done.’ Yet, health geography has endured the longstanding irony of critiques for not paying sufficient attention to bodies (Andrews, Hall, Evans, & Colls, 2012; Andrews, Sudwell, & Sparkes, 2005; Craddock & Brown, 2010; Dorn & Laws, 1994; Hall, 2000; Parr, 2002). Dorn and Laws (1994) were among the first to call for health geography to problematize bodies as socially constructed, rather than as biomedical blank slates. Hall (2000) later argued for health geography to understand bodies as socio-biological processes, rather than exclusively representational or biological. In Hall’s conception of bodies “social context becomes an integral part of the experience of the biological process” (p. 26).

Conceiving of bodies as socio-biological processes is particularly relevant to my consideration of the interactions of gender and health in gym environments for two reasons. First, physical activity undeniably generates physiological effects. Some of these can be visible, such as changes to body shape and size; others, resulting from internal biological or psychological mechanisms that may reduce risk of chronic disease or support mental wellbeing, elude plain sight. It is in relation to the former—visible effects—where gender operates in ways that *may impact the latter*. For example, gendered body ideals can drive exercise decisions and
practices. Research has shown that men often attend gyms with the goal of increasing muscul arity, while women seek to lose weight (McCabe & James, 2009). Health geographers have pointed to the tension between, and conflation of, aesthetics and health in the contemporary era of public health (Brown & Duncan, 2002), and how this can be gendered in terms of the associations of slenderness and muscul arity with femininity and masculinity respectively (Craddock & Brown, 2010). In the case of physical activity, aesthetics and health are both clearly implicated in how people engage in physical activity and what they get out of it. What my study seeks to unravel is how gendered social dynamics within gym spaces may shape exercise behaviour and the emotional experiences of exercising in ways that compromise, or maximize, reaping the spectrum of health benefits of physical activity. Second, thinking of bodies as socio-biological processes is helpful because physical activity is about the interaction of gender (as social) and sex (as biological). While the divisions between gender and sex are not clear-cut (Johnson & Repta, 2012), I acknowledge that my research focuses on social influences on physical bodies. There is no evidence to suggest differential health benefits from physical activity on the basis of biological sex (Warburton, Nicol, & Bredin, 2006); nor do the Canadian Physical Activity Guidelines differentiate by sex (Tremblay et al., 2011). This underscores the importance of the social as a point of intervention for equalizing physical activity participation. Noting that gender structures are not immune to change, Connell (2012) emphasizes the productive potential of intervening in gender regimes to mitigate gendered inequities.

Interestingly, geographical research on physical activity has been largely asocial, for the most part subscribing to ecological approaches that emphasize the built environment (Andrews et al., 2012; Colls & Evans, 2013). Geographical research has also largely folded physical activity into obesity-oriented studies. This entanglement and emphasis likely reflects a growing research
and policy concern with obesogenic environments; that is, built features of residential settings understood to promote physical inactivity and other weight-related (e.g., dietary) behaviours (Townsend & Lake, 2009). There have been three major critiques recently levied at this vein of research, which I actively take up to inform my approach in this study. First, the obesogenic environments thesis rests upon a biomedical model of energy balance (i.e., calories in, calories out), leading some to argue that it has foreclosed other possible explanatory factors (Guthman, 2012). In this equation, physical activity is limited to the prescriptive role of ‘calories out,’ making physical activity a means to an end rather than a topic meritorious of geographical study in its own right. Second, this line of research generally embraces (urban) neighbourhood as the preferred scale of analysis and site of intervention, leaving other contexts overlooked (Blacksher & Lovasi, 2012; Colls & Evans, 2013). Indeed, recent studies suggest that neighbourhood is not necessarily the most salient geography for all types of physical activity. Troped, Wilson, Matthews, Cromley, and Melly (2010) in their study of active adults in Boston, found that the majority of moderate to vigorous physical activity took place outside of 1-kilometre buffers from home and work. Similarly, Zenk et al. (2011), studying physical activity and dietary behaviours in the Detroit area tracked participants’ movements for seven days using Global Positioning Systems (GPS). Participants’ daily geographies generally covered areas much larger than residential neighbourhoods. Moreover, relationships between the weight-related environmental features of neighbourhoods and those of activity spaces were weak, leading the authors to conclude that neighbourhood is not a robust proxy for the exposures people encounter in the course of their day-to-day lives. There is clearly a need to examine the influences of other relevant environments for physical activity, and the gym is one such place. Third, this proclivity for neighbourhood built environments has raised concern that there is a marked absence of
people—and, consequentially, I would add gender considerations—in geographical physical activity/obesity research, veering uncomfortably close to environmental determinism (Andrews et al., 2012; Blacksher & Lovasi, 2012; Colls & Evans, 2013). Andrews and colleagues (2012) posit that health geography is well-positioned to consider the more experiential aspects of physical activity in place—a direction I seek to advance.

Engaging with these critiques, and inspired by the recent work of Colls and Evans (2013), I aim to develop what I envision as a critical geography of physical activity. A critical geography of physical activity would recognize human agency in relation to physical activity (Blacksher & Lovasi, 2012), contend with “what it feels like to inhabit those environments” (Colls & Evans, 2013, p. 10) related to physical activity, and examine the socio-spatial processes and factors that work to support or exclude people in being active (Colls & Evans, 2013; Hopkins, 2008). Such a geography would also be attuned to issues of difference, such as gender (Parr 2004), and be skeptical of health orthodoxies and assumptions that moralize about individual behaviour (Brown & Duncan, 2002; Colls & Evans, 2013). In the same way that Colls and Evans (2013) argue for critical geographies of obesity/fatness, which decouple body weight and disease (in contrast to geographies of obesity that, they claim, presume fat is pathological), my critical geography of physical activity unhinges physical activity from the obesity equation in geographical research. The potentially positive implications of physical activity are wide-ranging, from physical health benefits like chronic disease prevention to mental health benefits such as reduced risk of depression factors (Hallal et al., 2012; Warburton et al., 2006). Obesity, on the other hand, is a condition for which physical inactivity may be one of many causal factors (Guthman, 2012). My research deliberately displaces physical activity from the frame of obesity in order to consider more inclusively both the positive and negative implications that gym-based
exercise has in physical activity. Still, I acknowledge that body shape and size is an undeniable axis of identity, differentiation, and stigmatization in the gym that is invariably intertwined with gender. Hopkins (2008), in his agenda-setting paper, called for greater development of critical geographies of body size and shape that would examine how social processes and spatial structures act to deem certain body shapes and sizes as more or less in- or out-of-place, with particular regard to gender.

In line with this critical perspective, my conceptual framework recognizes the place of the gym within a context of increasing individualization of personal health responsibility in contemporary times (Brown & Duncan, 2002; Crawford, 1980). Crawford (1980, p. 368), calls this healthism, referring to the “preoccupation with personal health as a primary—often the primary—focus for the definition and achievement of well-being: a goal which is to be attained primarily through the modification of life styles.” By denying the social structures implicated in producing ill-health, healthism makes health a matter of individual choice. Achieving health, and practicing its antecedent lifestyle habits (such as exercise), become moral benchmarks against which people are judged (Brown & Duncan, 2002; Crawford, 1980)—a moralizing thread that is woven through much of the obesity research and policy (Colls & Evans, 2013; Evans, 2006).

Fitness historian Jennifer Smith Maguire (2008a) has argued that the commercial fitness industry is built on the notion that engaging in fitness is a form of productive leisure where one is able to make good on the responsibility to partake in self-care. Fitness is a cast as the freedom to do work on the self. Because of this, Smith Maguire sees commercial fitness venues as leisure businesses that can activate health as an added value over other outlets (e.g., entertainment) competing for people’s discretionary time.
I am mindful that these wider social forces play a role in shaping the very nature of the gym, who is there, and why. Of particular significance to the gym, in the context of healthism, the fit-looking body is legitimated as the healthy body—a visual marker of success in fulfilling individual health obligations (Brown & Duncan, 2002; Crawford, 1980; Smith Maguire, 2008a). The legitimate body is also invariably a (middle) classed body; lifestyle habits associated with so-called responsible health behaviour are not always available to everyone (Crawford, 1980). These habits are also socially located. Bourdieu (1978) theorizes that sporting and exercise practices are inseparable from social class; factors such as economic capital, cultural capital, and spare time, determine the field of possibilities for participation, thereby making sport and exercise socially signifying practices. According to Smith Maguire (2008b), contemporary commercial fitness clubs emerged in the 1980s as a distinctly middle (and upper) class lifestyle phenomenon. The health-imperative that characterizes contemporary social life, its moral trimmings, and class dimensions comprise an important backdrop for what happens inside the gym.

There are a number of socio-cultural antecedents outside the gym thought to contribute to the gendered nature of physical activity in Western contexts. For one, opportunities for women and men to engage in physical activity may be skewed due to the uneven gender distribution of household labour. A number of studies have found that life transitions, such as marriage and childbirth, disadvantageously affect women’s participation (Brown & Trost, 2003; Craig & Mullan, 2013). Gender gaps in physical activity participation may thus be in part a product of the persistence of broader gender inequities. Second, women and men may be socialized into participating in different types of physical activities. Indeed, there is evidence of gender differences by physical activity type (Gilmour, 2007). A recent study in Canada, for example,
found a significant gender differences in participation in weight-training and home exercises (Coen, Subedi, & Rosenberg, 2016). This has caused some to argue that generic or composite measures of physical activity may in fact further obscure gender differences (Livingstone et al., 2001; Pascual, Regidor, Martínez, Calle, & Domínguez, 2009). Third, there may be contextual factors that differentially support women and men’s physical activity participation. For example, Sallis, Hovell, and Hofstetter (1992) reported that social factors, such as friends and family support, predicted women’s uptake of vigorous activity, while environmental factors, such as neighbourhood environment, predicted men’s. Finally, wider socio-political contexts of gender equality may have downstream implications for gender equity in physical activity. In their 27-country European study, Van Tuyckom, Van de Velde, and Bracke (2012) found that country-level social measures of gender equality correlated with gender differences in leisure time physical inactivity; gender differences in physical activity abated in the most gender-equal places. As such, they argue that gender differences in physical activity are a social phenomenon, requiring interventions in social structures.

Finally, I conceptualize gyms as part of the wider landscape of opportunities for physical activity. Gyms may factor into people’s daily geographies in ways that a neighbourhood-defined scale may not capture. Neighbourhood does not tell us about the micro built aspects and social dynamics within physical activity places. Biehler and Simon (2010, p. 174) caution against “the pervasive fallacy of enclosure and the privileging of the Great Outdoors,” arguing that indoor environments have the potential to provide insight into and transform human-environment relations across multiple scales. This omission, they contend, leaves us with an incomplete picture of the spaces and processes implicated in shaping health given that indoor spaces are vital in our everyday lives and relationally interconnected with other scales. Indoor environments,
then, can aid in understanding broader human-environment relations. Taking this argument onboard, it is possible to imagine how interventions within the gym have the potential to reshape gendered inequities in physical activity more widely. Research has illustrated that gyms can function as hierarchical and informally (and formally) regulated social environments with particular norms, etiquette, and systems of informal surveillance (Andrews et al., 2005; Crossley, 2006; Frew & McGillivray, 2005; Markula & Pringle, 2006; Pridgeon & Grogan, 2012; Sassatelli, 1999). It is precisely these micro dynamics that I seek to investigate from a gender and health geographical standpoint. I now turn to locate emotions within the connections between gender and exercise behaviour, which brings me to my third research question.

2.4 Emotional geographies: connecting health-related behaviour and context

In keeping with my inspiration from Thien and Del Casino Jr.’s (2012) feminist and relational approach that argues for the conceptual linking of gender, health, and emotions in health geography to understand the processes producing men’s health, emotions are the third prong of my conceptual framework for examining the role of the gym in gendering physical activity. Thien and Del Casino Jr. propose that emotions are an inextricable part of the gender and health juncture, and I embed this relationship in my conceptual framework. My focus on emotions also addresses a gap identified by Andrews and colleagues (2012) in their call for greater integration of subjective experiences and emotions in geographies of physical activity. Specifically, I see emotions as the tie between exercise behaviour and place, but also as outcomes in and of themselves that affect individual wellbeing and the collective milieu of the gym. My third research question seeks to understand how emotions matter in the gym, and asks: How does gender matter in women's and men's emotional geographies of the gym? My goal is ultimately
to understand what these dynamics mean for health, both in terms of how emotions may factor into how people participate in the gym, but also how they may create place effects on emotional wellbeing.

Emotions provide a platform through which to understand the relationships between people and places. Davidson and Milligan (2004) envision emotions as “as a form of connective tissue that links experiential geographies of the human psyche and physique with(in) broader social geographies of place” (p. 524). Emotions are a medium through which what happens seemingly outside (e.g., environment, place) affects us inside. The premise of emotional geographies then is that emotions are mediated and articulated through socio-spatial processes (Bondi, Davidson, & Smith, 2005). This means that, from an emotional geographies perspective, emotional responses are always contextual; they materialize in the transactions between people and places. This also points to the inherently relational and interactional nature of emotions, as they emerge at the interface of people and places, and among people within places (Bondi, Davidson, & Smith, 2005; Davidson & Milligan, 2004). This conception of emotions allows me to consider how emotional responses take shape within gym environments, as well as how particular emotions might come to be associated with the gym.

Bodies are at the fulcrum of the emotions-place nexus. Emotions happen and are experienced through the body (Davidson & Milligan, 2004), and bodies can also be conceived as “emotionalized sites” (Johnston, 2009, p. 330). Placing bodies within emotional geographies is particularly relevant to understanding emotions within gym environments, given that research points to body dissatisfaction and anxieties as influential to how people experience the gym (Frew & McGillivray, 2005; Pridgeon & Grogan, 2012; Wasilenko et al., 2007). The gym is a place where bodies are proximate and viewable; bodies are in visual, and sometimes, physical
contact. As per my framework, in which I conceive of bodies as gendered, gender is also at the crux of bodies and emotions.

Empirical work has revealed how gyms can be both places of pleasure and pain, and that similar circumstances can produce emotionally divergent responses for individuals. In terms of pleasure, Crossley (2006), in his ethnographic study of a UK gym, noted how feeling good was an important factor characterizing the motives of gym-goers. Pridgeon and Grogan (2012), also in the UK, found that the social environment of their study gym positively impacted men’s and women’s exercise continuity by helping them to feel connected to and supported by the gym community. On the painful side, gyms can be emotionally damaging by perpetuating cycles of body dissatisfaction. Frew and McGillivray (2005), in their qualitative study of three UK fitness clubs, concluded that gyms facilitated these negatively reinforcing cycles as places where consumers sought to achieve unattainable idealized physiques ‘sold’ to them via messages both external and internal to the gym. As such, they called gyms “spaces of fear” in that they encapsulated a gap between body expectations and reality (Frew & McGillivray, 2005, p. 173). Other studies have documented negative emotional impacts arising when committed gym goers experience exercise dependency symptoms and feel guilty when workouts are missed (Andrews et al., 2005; Banbery, Groves, & Biscomb, 2012; Pridgeon & Grogan, 2012). Evaluation concerns—worries about body scrutiny or competence judgements by others—have been shown to be especially problematic for women in gyms (Salvatore & Marecek, 2010). The directionality of upward social comparison—self-comparison with bodies perceived to be relatively more fit or ideal—may depend upon a gym-goer’s level of body satisfaction and gender. Pridgeon and Grogan (2012), for example, found this to be a positive, motivating factor for men and women who adhered to their exercise routines; whereas, for women who had dropped out and displayed
poor body satisfaction, upward social comparisons were a discouraging factor for exercise participation. These studies highlight the relational character of emotional experiences in gyms as between self and others in place, as well as the centrality of the physical body in terms of body self-perceptions and sensations in mediating these emotional experiences. This thesis builds on this work and illuminates in greater depth the emotional geographies of the gym and how they intersect with gender.

There is some evidence that gendered emotional effects can be implicated in reduced health opportunities for women in gyms. Wasilenko et al. (2007), in their study of US university women, found a link between body satisfaction and exercise behaviour, with exercise behaviour operationalized as time spent on an aerobic exercise machine. Women were likely to shorten their duration of exercise when a woman they perceived to be more fit than themselves exercised nearby. Salvatore and Marecek (2010), also studying a US university population, found that evaluation concerns were a more significant barrier for women engaging in weightlifting than aerobic exercise. In terms of the gendered environment of gyms, Kruisselbrink, Dodge, Swanburg, and MacLeod (2004) studied the effects of mixed-sex and same-sex composition of fitness centres on men’s and women’s situational social physique anxiety—anxiety provoked by perceived responses to external evaluations of physique. They found that women were more likely to plan to shorten workout sessions in predominantly male settings, but there was no effect for more evenly mixed-gender or all-female settings. For men, on the other hand, there was no compositional gender effect. These findings point to the significance of the micro-level gender dynamics within the gym, as well as intra-gender category dynamics and differences. My research extends this work by considering how gender, emotions, and exercise behaviour
influence each other in an everyday setting among both men and women. This will shed light on the minute spaces of activity where emotions arise and shape the geographies of working out.

2.5 Relating the intersections

By bringing together literature from feminist, health, and emotional geographies, this conceptual framework provides a basis to understand the dynamic relations between gender, exercise behaviour, and emotions in the gym. From a feminist geographical perspective, I see these relationships as both constituted in place and constitutive of place. The gym is situated in wider gender orders, the broader context of health, and within landscapes of physical activity opportunities; these contextual features shape the realities of the gym and the gym also feeds back outward. Together, my three research sub-questions enable me to address my central question of how an everyday exercise environment like the gym may be implicated in some of the wider gender inequities in physical activity participation. In doing so, I seek to place people in geographies of physical activity and identify points of intervention to improve health equity.

2.6 Methodological approach

This thesis is situated in methodological traditions that stem directly from my conceptual framework. I start from a feminist epistemological stance in which I understand knowledge to be contextually produced within participant-researcher interactions, and that these relationships are inherently power-laden. As such, research knowledge is always situated, or partial—rather than objective or value-free—and inseparable from the context of its production (Haraway, 1988; Rose, 1997). As researcher, I am an active participant in the research process, and thus practicing critical self-reflection (or reflexivity) in relation to my own positionality (or social locations) and
the knowledge creation process is part of how I conceive of rigorous research practice (Rose, 1997). In line with this perspective, and acknowledging the connections between emotions and space, I understand emotions to be an inescapable part of the research process that are thus folded into reflexive practice (Widdowfield, 2000). Feminist methodologies in geography foreground issues of justice, social change, research relations, and subjectivity, and often employ qualitative research methods that have the potential to attune to these aims and priorities (Thien, 2009).

Next, my methodology is informed by the stream of health geography that takes a social conception of health, is concerned with the dynamic relationships between place and health, and holds the experiential elements of these relationships to be important (Kearns, 1993; Dyck, 1999). This perspective places participant-centred perceptions at the fore, and takes seriously the everyday aspects and experiences through which health is lived out (Dyck, 1999). Accordingly, this domain of health geography envisions qualitative methods as “capable of producing place-sensitive and subject-centred analyses of the geographical dimensions of health and health care” (Dyck, 1999, p. 243). The methodological rationale for qualitative methods in health geography includes the “grounding of research in the everyday locales where health care practices and health behaviour are ‘played out’” (Dyck, 1999, p. 246), advancing how “the body and environment can be theorized together” (Dyck, 1999, p. 249), and unsettling taken-for-granted social categories (Dyck, 1999). In addition, by allowing for sensitivity and attention to difference, qualitative techniques have been credited with bringing gendered considerations into health geography (Kearns, 1995; Dyck, 1999; Parr, 2004). As such, a qualitative research strategy supports my aim to examine how gender is implicated in the construction of health opportunities in an everyday context.
Situated in this methodological framing, my research design comprises an in-depth, multi-method qualitative study in which I draw together techniques that enable me to investigate men’s and women’s experiences of gyms from multiple vantage points and different sensory modes of experience. Specifically, these methods include semi-structured interviews coupled with a drawing exercise and workout journals. Using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006), I engage with the multiple data types in a triangulated strategy to support rigorous practice and to analyze the places where different data types connect and disconnect as avenues for greater understanding (Baxter & Eyles, 1997; Nightingale, 2009; Thien, 2009).

2.7 References


Dworkin, S. L. (2003). A woman’s place is in the... cardiovascular room?? Gender relations, the body, and the gym. In A. Bolin & J. Granskog (Eds.), *Athletic intruders: Ethnographic research on women, culture, and exercise* (pp. 131-158). Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.


Pratt, G., & Hanson, S. (1994). Geography and the construction of difference. *Gender, Place and Culture, 1*(1), 5-29.


Chapter 3 | What can participant-generated drawing add to health geography’s qualitative palette?

3.1 Introduction

A growing body of qualitative health research demonstrates that drawing as a research method can yield important insights into a diversity of adults’ health-related experiences and perceptions from HIV testing (Mays et al., 2011) to living with spinal cord injury (Cross, Kabel, & Lysack, 2006). In this chapter, I explore what drawing can add to health geography’s qualitative palette. Participatory mapping techniques familiar to health geography may involve drawing, but such applications are more often limited to representations of cartographic or spatial knowledge rather than more flexible depictions of the experiential dimensions of health. The form of drawing that I consider here is participant-generated, meaning that it involves asking participants to draw in response to a question (or questions) and then to describe or interpret the resulting image (or images). This mode of drawing is typically engaged in conjunction with more conventional social research methods, such as interviews (Guillemin, 2004). Unless stated otherwise, drawing throughout this chapter refers to the participant-generated variety, as opposed to researcher-generated or use of other existing drawings. In the first part of this chapter I look to literature outside of geography to illustrate the possibilities that drawing presents to advance some of the methodological commitments in qualitative health geography to foreground first-hand experience and take seriously everyday contexts relevant for health (cf. Dyck, 1999; Kearns, 1993). I then report on a pilot study in which I sought to empirically assess the suitability of drawing as a method for my research on women’s and men’s experiences in gym environments and to evaluate the benefits and constraints of drawing from the perspectives of research participants. Overall, I argue that there is a strong alignment between the kinds of knowledge
that drawing can help to produce and the types of topics that many geographies of health seek to understand. I suggest that the methodological utility of drawing may lie not only in advancing what we know, but in how we do health geography research. As such, this method may offer added benefits for a range of health geographers committed to privileging first-hand accounts of health-related experiences, in particular those working from critical or feminist perspectives. At the same time, I underline that despite its apparent novelty drawing should not be implemented uncritically.

I first set out to study gyms in response to critiques levied by health geographers that geographical research on physical activity had been largely asocial, for the most part subscribing to ecological approaches emphasizing the built environment (Andrews, Hall, Evans, & Colls, 2012; Colls & Evans, 2013), often to the neglect of people’s experiences within the distinct sites and facilities where individuals take up physical activities (Andrews et al., 2012; Blacksher & Lovasi, 2012). Gyms are one such increasingly common place, yet they can reinforce and perpetuate problematic gender stereotypes about both men and women. Research has shown that gyms can be divisive along gender lines, with weight rooms perceived as masculine and ‘cardio’ areas as feminine (Dworkin, 2001; Johnston, 1998). From a geographical perspective, however, we know little about the socio-spatial processes that work to exclude or include people in various workout spaces. By focusing on these micro dynamics, I hoped to identify points for intervention to make gym environments more supportive of the participation of a diversity of users.

My methodology is informed by the stream of health geography that takes a social conception of health, is concerned with the dynamic relationships between place and health, and holds the experiential elements of these relationships to be important (Dyck, 1999; Kearns, 1993). Methods stemming from this approach allow for “grounding of research in the everyday
locales where health care practices and health behaviour are ‘played out’” (Dyck, 1999, p. 246) and are open to unsettling taken-for-granted social categories (Dyck, 1999). Methodologically though, I grappled with how to get at the experiential aspects of this arguably mundane, yet significant, physical activity context. Gender too is often taken-for-granted in everyday life as ‘natural’ and unquestioned (West & Zimmerman, 1987). Given the seeming ordinariness of both the gym and gender, I was concerned that participants might deem aspects of their gym experience too obvious or inherent to mention in an interview alone.

In addition, I conceptualized the gym as a contentious site for the practice of ‘good’ health behaviour within in a wider context of increasing individualization of personal health responsibility (Brown & Duncan, 2002; Crawford, 1980), or what Crawford (1980) calls healthism. I saw this health-imperative, with all its moral trimmings, not only as an important backdrop for what happens inside the gym, but also for what people might tell me about it. Finally, I was cognizant that my own positionality (Rose, 1997), particularly as a long-time exerciser, one-time competitive powerlifter, and group indoor cycling instructor, shaped the questions I was posing—even the fact that I was doing this research at all. How could I encourage my participants to re-examine the seemingly obvious? What could I do to assuage a sense of obligation that participants might feel to demonstrate ‘good’ health behaviour to me? How could I push myself outside my own gym frame of reference to avoid foreclosing potentially important questions?

In seeking a solution, I came across a small, but compelling, body of health research using drawing as an adjunct to augment more familiar qualitative research methods. Particularly intriguing to me was how a few studies enlisted drawing as a way to investigate topics where dominant social scripts might be particularly at play in interview settings. For example, Mays
and co-authors (2011) included drawing in their research on reasons for declining HIV testing because they suspected that participants might feel pressure to provide socially acceptable answers in standalone interviews. Similarly, in their study on recovery from addiction, Shinebourne and Smith (2011) turned to drawing out of anticipation that interview dynamics might compel participants to replicate and adhere to the language of treatment programs. These questions and possibilities inspired my foray into drawing.

3.1 Drawing as a research method

Before discussing the results of my pilot study, I first present a primer on drawing as a research method. I locate drawing within the wider family of visual methodologies, differentiate between drawing techniques, identify approaches to analysis, discuss several methodological benefits, and point to some potential pitfalls.

3.1.1 Locating participant-generated drawing in visual methodologies

Visual methodologies are united in the epistemological assumption that the visual constitutes a particular sensory way of knowing and representing the world (Rose, 2001). Proponents contend that visual methods provide entry points into an array of research questions that may not be accessible via other (non-visual) senses or modes of expression (Banks, 2008; Gauntlett & Holzwarth, 2006). Yet, there are a diversity of approaches to contending with visual content and culture (Rose, 2001). It is important to distinguish between those that utilize researcher-created or existing imagery versus approaches that employ participant-generated visuals because they

1 While various techniques to avoid what is referred to as ‘social desirability bias’ have been developed for more quantitative social survey research (Krumpal, 2013), to the best of my knowledge such techniques have not received a great deal of attention in qualitative interviewing, perhaps because this is less problematic when we consider research knowledge to be always situated or partial rather than objective or value-free (Haraway, 1988; Rose, 1997).
entail very different research processes (Guillemin & Drew, 2010). The latter domain, where the form of drawing that I consider fits in, engages participants in the research process as active producers, and oftentimes interpreters, of visual products (Guillemin & Drew, 2010). In the wider field of visual methods, the participant-generated suite of visual techniques has largely been dominated by photographic approaches, such as photo elicitation and photo-voice (cf. Azzarito, 2010; Harrison, 2002). Photographic methods, however, comprise a particular visual genre with its own methodological and epistemological issues (such as use of technology and representation of ‘real-world’ scenes) that may not be appropriate for all health-related topics, yet visual approaches could still be beneficial. This may be the case if a topic is of a highly sensitive nature or emotionally difficult to speak about (Guillemin & Drew, 2010; Guillemin & Westall, 2008; Scott, 2009) or where for ethical, practical, or privacy reasons photography may be prohibited, such as in gyms.

Drawing has gained increasing attention in health research as a participant-generated visual method with distinct methodological attributes (cf. Guillemin, 2004; Guillemin & Drew, 2010; Guillemin & Westall, 2008). What sets drawing apart, according to Guillemin (2004) who has extensively employed drawing in her research on women’s heart disease, postnatal depression, and menopause, is its dual role as both verb and noun; drawing is at once process (the act of drawing) and product (the drawing itself) (p. 274). For Guillemin, this is no linguistic coincidence, but helps to frame drawing as a meaning-making activity that generates visual representations of experiences as understood in particular places/times. As process, the act of creating something from scratch on a blank sheet of paper necessitates a degree of thoughtful engagement on the part of participants that may uniquely stimulate knowledge construction (Guillemin, 2004; Shinebourne & Smith, 2011). In addition, unlike other visuals such as
photographs, drawing is not necessarily tied—or perceived to be tied—to the depiction of ‘real’ images. Drawings may be abstract, concrete, or anything in between. As such, this medium may engage participants in a qualitatively different way than capturing images via other means and offers a categorically different platform for research participant expression (Harrison, 2002). As product, drawing provides a stepping-stone to foster discussion with research participants about the topic at hand (Guillemin & Drew, 2010; Shinebourne & Smith, 2011). Viewing the resulting image may spur participants to reflect further on their experiences (Guillemin, 2004; Morgan, McInerney, Rumbold, & Liampoutong, 2009).

Locating drawing within the broader family of visual methods also requires attending to the relationships between the visual and other senses and systems of communication. Drawing, like all visual methods, does not exist in a visual vacuum, but is always inter-related with other forms of knowledge. Geographer Gillian Rose (2001), in her framework for a critical visual methodology, notes that even though the visual might not be reducible to language alone, it exists relationally with other texts. This dynamic is particularly pertinent to drawing as method as it is most often used in conjunction with other (verbal or written) social research methods (Guillemin, 2004). The interpretation of drawing data also inevitably circles back to the linguistic realm regardless of whether images are interpreted by participants or researchers or both (Cross et al., 2006; Guillemin, 2004). While drawing is categorized as a visual research method, its application requires engagement with more traditional non-visual data collection and analysis techniques, such as interviews and thematic coding, and the well-established methodological considerations that go along with them.
3.1.2 Operationalizing and analyzing participant-generated drawing

There are several variations to consider in determining how to operationalize drawing into a research methodology. First, the number of questions or drawing prompts can vary. Some studies employ a single open-ended question to solicit a single image. Guillemin (2004), for example, uses single questions, asking women in one study to draw “how they understand their menopause” (p. 276) and women in separate study to draw how they “visualized their heart disease” (p. 276). Other researchers use multiple questions to generate multiple drawings. In their work on women’s experiences with chronic vaginal thrush, Morgan and colleagues (2009) asked women to draw “how chronic vaginal thrush has made you feel in your day to day life” (p. 131), followed by additional requests for separate images about their experiences with biomedical and complementary and alternative medicine treatments. More than one drawing also presents the possibility to pose comparative questions. For instance, Scott (2009), in her study of AIDS meanings asked HIV-positive women to draw “‘a picture she had in her mind’ of HIV and how it was in her body” (p. 456) followed by an image of what AIDS looks like. She then engaged participants in a discussion of the difference between the two. Second, the researcher needs to choose the placement of the drawing exercise within an interview. Guillemin (2004) argues that placing the drawing activity at the conclusion of an interview is crucial to establish the level of rapport needed to facilitate drawing. Indeed, Cross and co-authors (2006), studying experiences of living with spinal cord injury went so far as to implement drawing at the end of a second round of interviews with participants, asking them to “draw your self” and then “draw how you see your spinal cord injury in your mind” (p. 185). In contrast, Shinebourne and Smith (2011) opened with drawing, inviting participants to first draw for ten minutes about how they presently see their recovery from addiction before commencing an interview. Third, drawing
techniques can be distinguished by where the visual activity and the verbal interpretation meet. While most applications of drawing ask participants to describe and interpret the finished drawing product (e.g., Cross et al., 2006), some researchers pose questions to participants during the drawing process (e.g., Scott, 2009). Relatedly, a key consideration in operationalizing drawing is whether the researcher is present while the participant is producing the drawing. Guillemin and Drew (2010) suggest that researchers should be critically reflective about how their presence (or absence) may affect drawing production. If the researcher becomes audience to the image production, do participants feel watched or compelled to perform drawing in certain ways? A fourth consideration is the duration of the drawing exercise. While the time spent drawing is most often left up to participants, an exception is Shinebourne and Smith (2011) who ask participants to draw for a set period at the onset of the research encounter. Lastly, researchers are faced with nearly endless options about the types of drawing materials to be made available for participants. This choice is more or less important depending upon whether the analytic strategy is strictly textual or includes a visual analysis of the drawing itself by, for example, extending to consider colour and composition.

In terms of practically implementing drawing, as with other qualitative methods, drawing requires significant rapport between participant and researcher. As mentioned, drawing at the end of an interview may be one way to ensure sufficient rapport is in place (Guillemin, 2004; Guillemin & Westall, 2008; Morgan et al., 2009). Participants may also initially feel tentative about drawing, and either hesitate or decline. To address this, Guillemin (2004) suggests ensuring participants are well-informed beforehand, being patient and offering encouragement, and reiterating that artistic skills are irrelevant. Defusing any perceived artistic pressure is
paramount to ensuring that participants are not overwhelmed by the request. Cases where participants ultimately refuse to draw should be subject to analytic scrutiny (Guillemin, 2004).

Analyzing drawing data largely relates to how two related questions are addressed in study design. First, what is the role of the participant’s interpretation of their drawing and what is the role of the researcher’s interpretation of the drawing? Some researchers argue that the drawer’s interpretation of their own image should take primacy, and that the role of the researcher is instead to analyze and synthesize across interpretations within a given study (e.g., Gauntlett & Holzwarth, 2006; Guillemin & Drew, 2010). Holding the maker’s intention as the most important element in the interpretation of images is a perspective that Rose (2001) classifies as auteur theory, to which I subscribe in this chapter. Others allow for greater variation in the author-to-researcher interpretation ratio, especially if the researcher has undertaken a separate visual analysis of the images (e.g., Cross et al., 2006). Second, does the analysis contend with textual data, visual data, or both? Some researchers, for example, use drawings primarily as a tool for talk, incorporating participants’ oral descriptions into the main interview narrative and analyzing them as part of the interview text (e.g., Mays et al., 2011; Morgan et al., 2009). This is what Harrison (2002) refers to as the visual being “a technical means to an end; that is, the generation of verbal data for analysis” (p. 865). Others perform visual analyses of the drawing products, in addition to any textual analysis of participant interpretations (e.g., Scott, 2009; Shinebourne & Smith, 2011). How visual and verbal data are analyzed likely depends on whether one takes the visual as topic (i.e., substantive focus of study) or tool (i.e., an entry point to the topic) (Harrison, 2002).
3.2 Methodological benefits

Certainly different qualitative methods are needed to query various aspects of understanding and experience, so how can drawing specifically diversify our methods palette? Below, I outline three methodological mechanisms by which drawing can benefit qualitative research practice in health geography, before discussing some limitations of the method. These themes are not neatly collapsible into discrete categories—they are wrapped up together in the messy process that is drawing. I separate these here as a heuristic device to conceptualize the methodological contributions of drawing.

3.2.1 Comprising a medium for exploring emotions

Emotions are an important part of unpacking the experiential and contextual dimensions of health of interest to health geographers seeking to foreground human agency and participant perceptions (Davidson & Milligan, 2004; Thien & Del Casino, 2012). An often cited strength of drawing is that it provides a means to access emotional aspects of experience that may not emerge in the context of a traditional interview, particularly those that may be ineffable or not easily spoken (Guillemin & Drew, 2010; Morgan et al., 2009; Nowicka-Sauer, 2007; Reason, 2010; Shinebourne & Smith, 2011). For example, Nowicka-Sauer (2007), in her US work on women’s experiences of living with lupus noted that drawings prompted participants to think differently—in a non-medical way—about their experiences, by “concentrating on ‘feeling’ and ‘experiencing’ the disease” (p. 1524). Drawing may surface sensitive material that prompts participants to reconsider aspects of their experience in potentially emotionally-charged ways. In their Australian research on postnatal depression, Guillemin and Westall (2008) observed that drawing revealed women’s feelings of isolation, despair, and entrapment that many women
found difficult to articulate in interviews. Likewise, Cross, Kabel, and Lysack (2006), in their US study of community integration of adults with spinal cord injury, found that in interviews participants described adjusting well to changes in their life circumstances with spinal cord injury, while through drawing participants expressed some of the unresolved issues and struggles they faced. Drawing can thus be a more palatable platform, than direct talk, for broaching sensitive topics. There are, however, ethical concerns if drawing spurs participants to relive difficult and painful aspects of their experiences. Researchers should take measures to pre-empt and minimize any such risk (Guillemin & Drew, 2010; Morgan et al., 2009).

Such emotional content impacts not only participants and researchers, but also other audiences who view the resulting drawings. Drawings can provide vivid evidence to incite action by, for example, portraying patient perspectives in ways that can be illuminating for practitioners and health policymakers (Cross et al., 2006; Morgan et al., 2009). In their editorial on the implications of arts-based research for healthcare professionals, Parsons and Boydell (2012) argue that such research products can convey lived experience in ways that can powerfully communicate messages to target audiences in practice and policy arenas. The capacity of drawing to be a potent translational tool for research findings may be especially beneficial for critical health geographers seeking to inform policy and practice changes through their research.

### 3.2.2 Supporting a participant-centred research process

Drawing as a method can help to support a participant-centred research process, and this aligns well with the stream of qualitative health geography that subscribes to subject-centred approaches (Dyck, 1999). An important aspect that sets drawing apart from many talk- and word-based techniques—and indeed some other visual methods—is the potential time involved
in the drawing process, although this ultimately depends upon how drawing is administered. As it is most commonly employed, drawing disrupts the question-answer rhythm of research. By not demanding an instantaneous response, as may a face-to-face interview, drawing allows room for reflection about the phenomena at hand (Guillemin & Drew, 2010). This has implications for the character of the data derived, as argued by Gauntlett and Holzwarth (2006): “The data you end up with is the result of thoughtful reflection” (p. 84). This room for reflection arguably puts the locus of knowledge production more squarely in the participants’ court. Participants may take more conscious control over the knowledge production process and more ownership over the research time. In this way, drawing may work to alter the terms of participant engagement with research, particularly if an auteur theory approach is taken to recognize participants as experts about their products and invites their interpretive contributions. The finished drawing product can also serve a reflective function. Shinebourne and Smith (2011) explain that “the activity of drawing results in an enduring object which can be used as a resource for remembering the past as it presents itself in the present” (p. 320). This opportunity for in-situ reflection breaks with traditional research dynamics and offers the potential for a participant-driven process (Guillemin & Drew, 2010).

Making sense of experiences and representing them through drawing can also generate nuanced or heightened self-understandings, often in the emotional realm as discussed above (Cross et al., 2006; Gauntlett & Holzwarth 2006; Guillemin 2004). For example, in Morgan and colleagues’ (2009) Australian study of women’s use of complementary and alternative medicine to manage chronic vaginal thrush, participants reported that drawing helped them to stand back and see how they feel. From this vantage point, participants were able to articulate how they experienced a sense of disconnection from their physical bodies to cope with daily pain and
discomfort. The opportunity to open up about a sensitive topic via drawing may be cathartic in itself (Morgan et al., 2006). A number of studies identify therapeutic benefits as a positive side effect of drawing (Guillemin & Drew, 2010; Morgan et al., 2006; Nowicka-Sauer, 2007). Such informal therapeutic effects may be an unintended benefit that researchers should consider, but I would caution researchers are not necessarily therapists. There is an important difference between therapeutic effects as positive by-products of drawing versus using drawing as a form of therapy—the latter being the domain of trained therapists and clinicians. Overall, drawing can foster a more participant-centred research process by disrupting embedded power differentials (e.g., time allocation, expertise), positioning participants to make meaningful analytical contributions to research (e.g., as interpreters of their images), and deriving benefits from being involved (e.g., self-awareness, therapeutic benefits).

3.2.3 Reinforcing rigour

Drawing can be valuable in ‘sighting’ similarities and contradictions across visual and linguistic modes of expression (Guillemin, 2004; Guillemin & Westall, 2008). This is particularly pertinent in research designs employing a triangulation strategy. Scott’s (2009) research, which combined drawing with interviews and free lists, concluded that drawings reinforced other data types and allowed for a deeper exploration of HIV/AIDS meanings than would have been possible without them. Other empirical examples demonstrate that drawing can lend credibility to researcher interpretations of other data types (e.g., Morgan et al. 2009) or surface ambiguities and contradictions among them (Guillemin, 2004). As one more opportunity to probe data further and interrogate seeming discrepancies among visual and other modes of expression and experience, drawing can be a useful check for rigour (cf. Baxter & Eyles, 1997). It could also be
conceived as a form of participant validation (cf. Turner & Coen, 2008) where participants can augment or edit their interview responses based on any realizations post-drawing (Guillemin, 2004). Cross and team (2006), who conducted two separate interviews with each participant, intentionally placed the drawing activity at the end of the second interview as a way to encourage participants to fill in any gaps not previously covered (see also Guillemin, 2004). One participant, for example, who had indicated acceptance of his spinal cord injury, only revealed challenges he experienced associated with loss of independence, privacy, and control based on his drawing. While using drawing to reinforce rigour has implications outside of the sub-discipline of health geography, it does present a potentially innovative opportunity to advance rigour within qualitative health geography practices.

Beyond being a consciousness-raising activity for participants, drawing can be likewise for researchers. Mannay (2010) argues that participant-generated visuals (albeit not using drawing specifically, but photo-elicitation, collage-making, and mapping) can be a productive way to ‘make the familiar strange.’ In her research on mothers’ and daughters’ experiences living in a marginal UK neighbourhood—the same neighbourhood where she resided—Mannay makes the case that participant-created visual products can render visible preconceptions on the part of the researcher, as well as shine a light on assumptions about shared points of reference or sameness among researchers and participants. Given her familiarity with the research setting, Mannay found that certain interview questions were awkward and seemed irrelevant to pose. To get around this, she used participant-generated visuals as “an instrument for making the familiar strange and…a gateway to destinations that lay beyond my repertoire of preconceived understandings of place and space” (p. 96). Mannay echoes a broader methodological argument put forth by Banks (2008) that visual methods “can and should provoke the researcher into
(re)considering taken-for-granted analytical categories” (n.p.). Drawing can thus be an especially useful analytic tool in situations where the researcher is close to the research setting and topic (Mannay, 2010). Drawing in this sense is more than a visual method for data elicitation; it can be a tool for critical self-reflection on the part of the researcher to support rigorous qualitative analysis. In health geography, this could be one strategy to engage in the sometimes enigmatic practice of researcher reflexivity.

3.3 Potential pitfalls

Capitalizing on the methodological strengths of drawing requires cognizance of its potential pitfalls. Given that many qualitative health geographies subscribe to social constructivist, critical, or feminist epistemologies, it is especially important that health geographers recognize its positivist heritage and applications. One of the primary methodological concerns about drawing is that it can be (and has been) used as if it could represent something absolute—and ultimately decontextualized—about people's lives and experience. This is very much the case with historical uses of the draw and write technique (drawing and writing in response to a question or prompt) in health research with children, from which drawing with adults has its origins (Backett-Milburn & McKie, 1999). Some of the foremost problems with draw and write include insufficient consideration of how the research process shapes what is drawn and a tendency to quantify drawing data (such as counting or measuring compositional elements), thereby applying a qualitative method toward quantitative ends (Backett-Milburn & McKie, 1999). Indeed, there is a recent vein of drawing in medical research with adults that exemplifies these tensions, using participant drawings to make correlations between the compositional properties of drawings and characteristics of participants. In studies on heart failure (Reynolds, Broadbent, Ellis, Gamble, &
Petrie, 2007) and myocardial infarction (Broadbent, Petrie, Ellis, Yinh, & Gamble, 2004), patients were asked to draw their hearts before and after their health incident. Drawings were then subjected to computer-based analysis which calculated the size of the hearts drawn and analyzed this measurement in conjunction with other survey data. These pictorial hearts were taken as indicators of the actual health status of individuals—an approach counter to the non-positivist epistemological underpinnings of many qualitative health geographies. Recent research employing drawing with children and adolescents in health geography (see Fenton et al., 2011) has done so critically, but these methodological cautions still require carrying forward into health geography research with adults.

Relatedly, there is the danger that drawing can be undertaken as a projective technique, essentially using deception and lack of information to elicit data from the seeming ‘depths’ of participants’ consciousness (Reason, 2010). Not only do such applications pose an ethical issue of lack of fully informed consent, but “the claim that the methodology reveals truths below the surface of the participants’ consciousness” ultimately positions participants as passive subjects (Reason, 2010, p. 394). Drawing in this way is disabling, as it implies a lack of agency on the part of participants (Reason, 2010). One way to counter this potential pitfall, according to Gauntlett and Holzwarth (2006, p. 82), is to situate visual methods within methodological frameworks that are “optimistic and trusting about people’s ability to generate interesting theories and observations themselves”. Adopting an auteur theory approach is one way to realign the balance of expertise and agency toward the participant (Reason, 2010; Rose, 2001). Soliciting participants’ interpretations of their drawings also ensures that drawing data is not devoid of context. Indeed, for this reason, many researchers argue that drawing must be accompanied by participants’ descriptions or else image meanings are indiscernible (Cross et al.,
Conceptualizing drawings as products of the time/space in which they are produced and as being imbued with meanings that are multiple, rather than fixed, can be another way to protect against these misgivings (Guillemin & Drew, 2010; Rose, 2001).

3.4 Participant-generated drawing in health geography: A pilot study

With an aim to assess the methodological utility of drawing from a health geography perspective, I undertook a pilot study to empirically evaluate a participant-generated drawing method. My objectives were twofold. First, I sought to gauge the suitability of drawing as a method for understanding men’s and women’s experiences in gym environments to inform the development of my wider multi-method study. Second, I aimed to appraise the value and limitations of drawing, vis-à-vis traditional qualitative methods, from the perspectives of research participants.

I recruited self-identified gym users via an email listserv within the Queen’s University (Canada) community subscribed to by faculty, staff, and graduate students. The study was open for a two-week period in which participants could retrieve, complete, and submit a participation packet at any time. Packets contained: (1) letters of information/consent forms; (2) drawing activity instructions and accompanying questions; and (3) blank sheets of paper and a pencil. Packets were available for retrieval from two campus locations and a separate box was available for participants to return completed packets in sealed envelopes. Instructions emphasized that no artistic skill whatsoever was required to participate. Participation was anonymous and no identifying information was collected. Participants were advised to avoid including identifying information in their drawings, such as drawing a recognizable self-portrait or including the name of their gym. The final sample consisted of six useable responses from three men and three
women, ranging in ages from 20s through 60s. Despite this small sample size, as my findings below demonstrate, participants’ responses were productive in providing insight into gym experiences and the efficacy of drawing as method.

The drawing method consisted of a four-part self-administered activity. Part 1 collected brief demographic information (age, self-identified gender) and details about gym use (frequency, types of activities). Part 2 asked participants to draw, using the paper and pencil provided, in response to the question: “How do you feel in the gym?” Part 3 asked participants to describe their drawing in writing. In Part 4, participants were asked to reflect on the process of drawing in relation to three questions: (1) Would you have answered this question any differently if you had not drawn about it (e.g., if you had only talked or written about it)?; (2) Do you think drawing is a helpful method to understand people’s experiences in gym environments?; and (3) Is there anything you would recommend to change about the drawing exercise?

I did not undertake a visual analysis of the drawings, but rather adopted an auteur theory approach. I thus treated participants’ written responses as textual data, which I sorted into a priori codes corresponding with my study objectives as follows: (1) Understanding experiences in gym environments; (2) Value added by drawing; and (3) Limitations of drawing. Within these themes, I identified similarities and differences across responses.

I preface my results discussion below with one key limitation of this pilot. Given that this was a self-administered exercise, removed from an interview context, I had no way to probe participants about their responses. My data thus consisted only of what participants chose to

---

2 One response was submitted without a completed consent form and thus was excluded from the study. This study was granted clearance by the Queen’s University General Research Ethics Board according to the recommended principles of Canadian ethics guidelines and Queen's University policies. Participants consented to the publication of their drawings for scholarly purposes. Participants were not offered any compensation.
write, and the level of detail varied significantly across responses, with some providing lengthy paragraphs and others including only a few short lines.

3.4.1 Understanding experiences in gym environments

In describing their drawings, participants tended to focus on either articulating immediate bodily sensations of exercising or their relationships with the gym environment and its impacts on their emotional states. This scalar split suggests that drawing can help to illuminate multiple geographies of the gym, from the proximate geography of the body to the interrelationships between individual experience and the socio-spatial context of the gym.

With regard to the physical experience of gym exercise, participants identified sensations of both pleasure and pain. One man in his 60s, for example, who used a gym 2-3 times per week cited happiness associated with the feeling of exercising and the sweating that goes along with it, explaining: “My drawing depicts me - happy to be exercising and sweating - a good thing.” For this participant the external gym environment did not factor explicitly into his representation of his gym experience. A woman in her 40s, who used the gym several times per week for individual and group exercise, also represented physical sensations in her drawing. She described that she drew “a BIRD STUCK ON A CROSS with wings out strengthened, in some pain. I suffer from tightness + soreness in my upper back and shoulders” (capital letters and symbols in original). These responses emphasized the physicality and individuality of some gym experiences.

For other participants, the external atmosphere of the gym factored more prominently into their feelings of wellbeing and behaviours in the gym, both positively and negatively. For example, a man in his 30s who used the gym 1-2 times per week for cardiovascular exercise
explained that, “I drew an awkward, off-balance, portly man. He is alone. This is generally how I feel at the gym. Though I am not a ‘portly’ or awkward guy - and I’m fairly active - when I use the gym I feel out of place.” By drawing an intentional misrepresentation of his physical self, this participant expressed the mismatch he experiences between his sense of self and the gym environment. Another participant, a woman in her 20s visiting a gym 3-4 times per week for cardiovascular exercise and recreational sports, underscored that the gym is not an emotionally homogenous entity, but rather that her experiences vary throughout. Representing this varied emotional terrain in her drawing, she explained:

Sometimes going to the gym makes me feel very powerful or can fill me with pride, as though I've won a competition with myself and others […] In the bottom right corner, I drew a bunch of faces staring at me, as well as a surveillance sign. I often feel as though everyone is watching me - judging me, assessing me - and it makes me uncomfortable and nervous.

In contrast, a man in his 20s using the gym for strength training 5-6 days per week, described how the gaze of others positively affected his experience. He enjoyed gaining the attention of nearby exercisers, explaining: “I drew my friend and I lifting together because when I'm in the gym with her I am generally happy […] I also drew some guys who are surprised by how strong she is. This makes me feel unique in the gym because many guys lift with their other male friends.” For this participant, standing out was a positive influence on his feelings in the gym.

These results suggest that drawing yielded insights into the highly heterogeneous and individualized nature of gym experiences. Participants reported multiple scales and layers of feeling in gym environments, spanning the physiological effects of exercise to the psychological impacts of interactions with other exercisers. The responses to drawing were also useful in
helping me to critically reflect upon my own assumptions about the nature of the gym spaces, particularly with regard to the extent of their emotionally variegated topography.

3.4.2 Value added by drawing

The majority of participants (five out of six) indicated they would have responded at least somewhat differently to the question “how do you feel in the gym?” if they had instead replied only orally or in writing, without drawing. For two participants, drawing was significant in surfacing new self-understandings that they credited decisively to drawing. For one respondent, the woman in her 40s using the gym several times per week, the drawing exercise was instrumental in bringing to the fore aspects of her gym experience that would not have been readily apparent otherwise. She explained: “I think I might have written about 1 or 2 of the elements I mentioned. But I'm struck that I would NOT have mentioned the tree (and balancing stuff) if I hadn't been drawing the river” (emphasis in original). The tree, as per her description and shown in Figure 3.1, represented feelings of rootedness and peacefulness while exercising in the gym—despite the physical pain she mentioned in her back and shoulders. Similarly, the participant whose drawing depicted him “happy to be exercising and sweating,” shown in Figure 3.2, explained that drawing enabled him to identify aspects of his gym experience that he might not have pinpointed in writing or talk. For him, drawing worked to strip away “extraneous details that did not capture the ‘essence’ of the exercise experience. Unless asked directly ‘did exercise in a gym make me feel happy’ I might not actually have articulated that.” Drawing for this participant provided a mechanism that helped to reveal aspects of his gym experience were not immediately recognizable to him.
Figure 3.1. Drawing by a participant who credited the process of drawing with the acquisition of new self-knowledge.
Participants who cited value in drawing indicated that the drawing process was productive in fostering reflection and memory recall in their responses. For the man in his 30s who felt “out of place” in the gym, drawing served a functional purpose in aiding to concretize memories, but did not substantively affect his self-knowledge or the content of his response. He
noted that, without drawing, his response would have been, “Probably a bit different. Drawing a picture shifts the focus instead of pure memory - I now have a visual to work from. However, the general info I give wouldn't have changed much.” Despite not changing the content of his response per se, this participant still recognized drawing as a beneficial adjunct in research, noting: “Being able to create is always an asset to understanding experiences. It broadens the emotional spectrum.” Similarly, the woman who drew the scene of the tree and river explained that drawing “slows down the thinking - or maybe more so - intensifies it in a different way. Even though I'm not a great drawer - I felt I could convey something better than I could in words. That ‘something’ was interesting to me as a participant.” For these participants, both the product and process of drawing encouraged thinking about the research question in ways distinct from purely oral or written responses. Drawing fulfilled this methodological function by providing a visual cue that aided in connecting past memories to the present responses and by opening up possibilities for different thought processes and timetables than those typically associated with traditional qualitative methods. Overall, these responses lend support to the notion that, for some people, drawing can fulfill a distinct methodological function that can complement other qualitative methods in fruitful ways.

In contrast, rather than augmenting their responses, two participants indicated that drawing had a limiting effect for them, which I explore in detail in the section below. Both explained that drawing did not enable them to capture and communicate certain details, such as naming particular emotions, with the level of precision that they would have used if they had responded in oral or written form. The drawing activity had no impact on how one respondent—the man in his 20s using the gym for strength training—answered the question. He cited his own familiarity with the gym setting as a possible explanatory factor.
Overall, from the perspective of participants, the question as to whether drawing adds value to qualitative research design was mixed. Half of these participants indicated that drawing positively influenced their research contributions, while two participants found drawing to be constraining, and a third was indifferent. Among the three participants for whom drawing did make a positive difference, the magnitude and nature of this difference varied widely, from unearthing self-knowledge to serving as a representational tool and memory aid.

3.4.3 Limitations of drawing

Two participants indicated that drawing was a constraining means of communication, one citing a preference for written expression and the other pointing to the boundaries of uni-sensory data. These participants underscored that drawing is not a sensory fit for everyone. For example, one woman in her 50s who used the gym 2-3 times week for cardiovascular exercise and strength training, provided a collage of words instead of an illustration, stating: “I was unable to draw about my gym experience in the first place. The written word is better for me […] When drawing doesn't work for people, like me, there is absolutely nothing there to express that would not be contrived.” Despite being “unable” to draw, the collage of words itself, shown in Figure 3.3, was very descriptive about the participant’s feelings in her gym environment and provided useful insights into her experiences. This suggests that drawing can be operationalized by participants in diversely productive ways, not limited to the pictorial aspects of drawing. Indeed, this response highlights the importance of allowing for flexibility in how participants take up drawing. Another participant, the woman in her 20s who drew a very detailed depiction of the varied emotional landscape of the gym (Figure 3.4), explained that the visual and written components of the activity curbed the scope of her expression:
If I could speak, I would offer a more descriptive account of what I think is a very multi-sensory experience (rather than just visual). I might also express tone differently - e.g., I don't know if my frustration came out in one drawing, or if it came across as more angry, confused, etc.

This participant’s experience exemplifies the importance of applying drawing as an adjunct to other qualitative methods that allow for talk or text; however, it is not always possible to include all communicative outlets in every study. Still, the limitations of such choices should be critically reflected upon and discussed when using drawing as method.

**Figure 3.3.** Drawing by a participant who preferred written over visual expression.
3.5 Conclusions

Throughout this chapter, I have made the case that the processes of drawing have the potential to generate qualitatively different research products, and these present some exciting possibilities for advancing health geography research. Drawing can add to our qualitative palette in health geography by surfacing emotions, supporting a participant-centred research process, and reinforcing rigour. My pilot study supported the methodological utility of drawing, with some participants valuing its reflective function and crediting drawing with the acquisition of new self-knowledge. At the same time, my analysis demonstrates that drawing should be employed critically and flexibly, with attention to the communicative preferences of participants and the
limitations inherent in distinct sensory modes of expression. Even when drawing does not ‘work’ for a particular individual per se, the results can still be significant (cf. Guillemin, 2004). The word collage provided by one of my participants was highly effective in portraying how she felt in the gym. It is quite remarkable that this participant self-selected to engage in this drawing study despite her stated preference for writing. This underscores the point that drawing as a method does not need to be pictorial. Indeed, perhaps the method itself requires a re-name. As this chapter has demonstrated, creating representations free-hand—in whatever form—can be a productive technique in constructing and representing knowledge in health geography.

3.6 Reflections on praxis

Deploying participant-generated drawing as a research method presented me with two new challenges. The first is rather personal. Although I am convinced that drawing is a valuable method, and stand by what I have written in this chapter, I wrestled with the internal dilemma that I am far from a drawer myself. Dabbling in drawing as a method has helped me to realize just how very much I think through writing. I literally formulate my ideas by putting words down on the page and moving them around until concepts and arguments take shape. From the outset I was aware that drawing might not be the best method for me if the roles were reversed—indeed part of my rationale for piloting this method was to engage with this dissonance. Two realizations have helped me to contend with this discrepancy. For one, my findings make clear that there are a number of methodologically significant reasons to use drawing to explore men’s and women’s experiences in gym environments and in health geography research more widely. No single qualitative method is a perfect fit for everyone and it could be equally problematic to avoid drawing simply because of my own personal communicative preferences if it is a
productive method for the research question. Next, the overall experience of my participants with drawing was positive—even for the one who preferred *not* to draw! This participant was able to embrace the activity yet still honour her preference for words (this could have been me!).

My second challenge related to analysis. Despite exploring numerous ways to interpret visual data using critical approaches, I could not find a technique that made me feel in any way equipped to interpret someone else’s drawing. I resolved this by taking an auteur theory approach, consistent with the feminist orientation of my research that privileges participant perspectives and acknowledges their expertise (Dyck, 1999). I still question, though, what—if anything—could be gained from engaging more directly with the visual component, in addition to participants’ own interpretations. If ‘a picture is worth a thousand words,’ what happens when participants re-represent their images in words and researchers then parse these texts into themes? These challenges are not inherently problematic, simply illustrative of some of the opportunities for critical reflexivity implicated in drawing.

### 3.7 References


Dworkin, S.L. (2003). A woman’s place is in the... cardiovascular room?? Gender relations, the body, and the gym. In A. Bolin & J. Granskog (Eds.), *Athletic intruders: Ethnographic research on women, culture, and exercise* (pp. 131-158). Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.


Chapter 4 | “Welcome to the ‘gun show”:’ Gendered performativities of an everyday exercise place

Abstract

The gender gap in physical activity participation is pervasive globally, with men being more active than women. Geographies of physical activity, however, have rarely attended to these gendered health inequities, favouring a focus on built environment influences on physical activity behaviours. Drawing on feminist conceptions of space as performative and everyday places as sites where gendered power relations (re)materialize in space, we propose addressing these gendered inequities from the inside-out; that is, by examining micro-scale gendering processes at play within the very places where physical activities are taken up. In this paper, we explore the gendered performativities of one common everyday physical activity place, the gym. Using a trio of in-depth qualitative methods, including interviews, participant-generated drawing, and journals, we identify five dimensions of gendered performativities: bodily materialities; the soundscape; visual fields; the physical environment; and the imaginary. We argue that collectively these multisensorial performativities work to naturalize the gym as a gender dimorphic place that sets women and men on an unequal playing field. As such, the gym as an institution, can be seen to work to codify gender differences in ways that constrain possibilities for practicing physical activity to bifurcated ways of ‘doing gender.’ Critical geographies of physical activity should endeavour to expose and upend micro contextual features that routinize gender inequities in health opportunities in a variety of everyday fitness sites.

Key words: gender, gyms, health, performativity, place
4.1 Introduction

Men and boys around the globe are more physically active than women and girls (Hallal et al., 2012). The health benefits of meeting even the minimum recommended levels of physical activity are significant, including reducing risk of a range of chronic diseases and premature death (Lee et al., 2012; Warburton, Nicol, & Bredin, 2006), yet women continually fall behind men in meeting these guidelines (Azevedo et al., 2007; Colley et al., 2011; Gilmour, 2007; Statistics Canada, 2015). Geographies of physical activity have rarely attended to this gender gap, favouring instead a focus on the built features of neighbourhoods, in particular so-called ‘obesogenic environments’ (Townsend & Lake, 2009). While some of this work reports empirical differences by sex, it fails to undertake the type of comprehensive gendered analyses that can illuminate processes contributing to gendered health inequities. Indeed, this work has come under recent critique for verging on environmental determinism (Colls & Evans, 2013), inattention to human agency and subjective experiences (Blacksher & Lovasi, 2012), and overemphasis on some types of physical activities, such as walking (Andrews, Hall, Evans, & Colls, 2012).

Drawing on feminist conceptions of space as performative and everyday places as sites where gendered power relations (re)materialize in space, we propose addressing gendered inequities from the inside-out; that is, by examining micro-scale gendering processes at play within the very places where physical activities are taken up. In this article, we explore the gendered performativities of one common everyday physical activity place: the gym. Although gyms present opportunities for physical activity participation, they may also reinforce gender differences and stereotypes. Motivations for attending gyms are often gendered, with women
pursuing weight loss and men aiming to enhance musculature (McCabe & James, 2009). The spatialities of gyms can be gender-divisive, with weight-lifting and cardiovascular exercise areas respectively cast as masculine and feminine for their perceived role in attaining these gendered physique goals (Brace-Govan, 2004; Dworkin 2001, 2003; Johnston, 1995, 1996, 1998; Salvatore & Marecek, 2010). In particular, women’s avoidance of weightlifting has been linked to the influence of dominant feminine body ideals (Brace-Govan, 2004; Dworkin, 2001, 2003; Salvatore & Marecek, 2010). The gym can also be perceived as a hyper-masculine institution (Craig & Liberti, 2007; Pridgeon & Grogan, 2012), which can be a barrier to exercise continuity for both women and men (Pridgeon & Grogan, 2012). Although two studies in geography examined bodybuilding gyms and cultures (Andrews, Sudwell, & Sparkes, 2005; Johnston, 1995, 1996, 1998), to the best of our knowledge geographical inquiry has yet to consider everyday experiences of physical activity inside gyms. While Johnston (1996, p. 327) treats the gym as “a material and discursive environment that reworks bodies in the feminine/masculine binary,” she focuses on how elite women bodybuilders conform and transgress gendered bounds. Here, we focus on the experiences of non-competitive gym-going women and men from a health perspective.

4.2 ‘Doing’ gender, place, and health

From a feminist geographical perspective, gender is as much about places as people (Bondi & Davidson, 2003). Different places, such as home, work, or leisure settings, afford varied resources that we engage to do gender in contextually ‘appropriate’ ways (West & Zimmerman, 1987). This enactment of gender, famously framed by Butler (1988, 1990) as performative, sees gender as socially embodied, rather than biologically determined, through repetitive, stylized
speech and behaviours that render gender legible. Geographers have extended Butler’s conception of performativity to argue that space is also performative in that it does not pre-exist independently, but is rather continually “brought into being through performances and as a performative articulation of power” (Gregson & Rose, 2000, p. 434). Performativity is iteratively linked with place whereby, at a collective level, gender performances feed back into place as social structures of those very places and spaces (Bondi & Davidson, 2005; Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005; Gregson & Rose, 2000; Massey, 1994; Schippers, 2007). At the same time, gender is not bound by place and place boundaries are not impermeable. Places are overlays of social relations in time and space that draw from and feed into wider social orders, or what Massey calls “power-geometries” (Massey, 1994, p. 265). Still, places may be “sticky” in relation to gender identities in that they come to be associated with certain gender expressions and experiences (Pratt & Hanson, 1994, p. 25). Applying this concept of gender to the gym, we conceptualize the place of the gym as having its own cache of resources for doing gender and is, in turn, performative of particular gendered structures.

Feminist health geographers have argued that “‘doing gender’ is, in effect, ‘doing health’” (Dyck, 2003, p. 366). Despite this claim, and calls for consideration of gender in some of the seminal papers that helped to chart directions in health geography (Kearns, 1995; Parr, 2004), little work in the sub-discipline has investigated everyday behaviours related to health as a way of doing gender. Performativity has a long tradition in geographies of gender and sexualities (see for example, Bell, Binnie, Cream, & Valentine, 1994; Brown, 2008; Browne, 2004, 2005, 2007; Johnston, 1996; Thomas, 2004), but this has rarely crossed over to the performative intersections of gender, health, and space/place. A key exception is a body of work on the gendered geographies of alcohol consumption (Campbell, 2000; Holloway, Valentine, &
Jayne, 2009; Leyshon, 2005). There have also been several studies on health-related topics such as eating practices (Valentine, 1999), adolescent girls’ participation in physical education and sports (Evans, 2006), breastfeeding in public places (Lane, 2014), and the spatiality of identities of young women engaging in sex work (van Blerk, 2011). Rather, a wider multidisciplinary literature from the health and social sciences has theorized how everyday health-related behaviours, like eating, consuming alcohol, or accessing health services, become markers of masculinities and femininities (Courtenay, 2000; Galdas, Cheater, & Marshall, 2005; Lyons, 2009). This has implications for health equity because as Johnson and Repta (2012) note, “Health behaviour can thus be implicated in the construction and maintenance of the gender order” (p. 26). Connell’s (1987) concept of hegemonic masculinity, a culturally dominant form of masculinity that subordinates femininities and other masculinities, has been especially important to understanding how gender relations and structures influence health (Bottorff, Oliffe, Robinson, Carey, 2011; Connell, 2012). We take up the feminist contention that doing gender is doing health and situate health as part and parcel of the mutually constitutive gender-place relationship.

We take performativity along the lines of Gregson and Rose (2000) to conceptualize how place also does gender and, as such, does health. From this view, the gym is not a static ‘stage’ for equipment and exercising bodies, but rather the place of gym itself is performative of a particular gender regime, brought into being through power-laden constellations of performances. In considering how the performativities of the gym may be implicated in gendered inequities in physical activity participation, we look to what Browne (2004) has called genderist processes—the often unnamed processes that (re)form gender hierarchies in place. Browne’s (2004, 2007) work has shown how everyday places, such as restaurants and public toilets—
through a seemingly invisible assemblage of comments, gazes, and micro-encounters—are performative of binary configurations of gender and hetero-sexualized regimes of power in ways that (re)fix and routinize exclusion. From this perspective, addressing gendered inequities in physical activity participation requires thinking through the gendered performativities of the very places where physical activities are practiced.

The body is a pivotal place through which gender and health are done, yet ironically health geography has endured a longstanding critique for insufficient attention to bodies (Andrews et al., 2012; Andrews et al., 2005; Craddock & Brown, 2010; Dorn & Laws, 1994; Hall, 2000; Parr, 2002). Despite vibrant engagement with the body in areas of social, cultural, and feminist geographies, Longhurst and Johnston (2014) contend that even this has still not gone far enough:

We can write about and discuss emotion and affect, performativity, the unconscious, etc., but not menstrual blood, incontinence and other bodily fluids that are part of daily life. In some senses then, ‘real’ fleshy bodies still represent that which is too banal, too material, too feminised, too mysterious, too Other for geography. (p. 274)

Attention to the body is especially relevant in the gym as a place where the physicality of bodies is front and centre. Feminist geographer Robyn Longhurst (2001), in her landmark work calling for geographical scholarship to engage with the fleshy substance of bodies, argued that the sites where bodily boundaries breach are central to geographies of gendered power. In particular, she tied women’s subordination to the spatial construction of women’s bodily boundaries as insecure, with the potential to leak. Without acknowledging the messy materiality of bodies, she claimed that masculinist norms remain unchecked. As such, we conceive that part of our task in excavating the gendered performativities of the gym is to contend with bodily matter and the
multisensorial ways that bodies take up space. In doing so, we also aim to bring more bodily matter into health geography.

4.3 Methods

Our methodological approach is informed by the stream of health geography that takes a social conception of health, is concerned with the dynamic relationships between place and health, and holds the experiential elements of these relationships to be important (Dyck, 1999; Kearns, 1993). As such, we placed participant perceptions and the everyday experiences through which health is lived out at the fore (Dyck, 1999). Our research design thus encompassed a trio of in-depth qualitative methods, including interviews, participant-generated drawing, and journals, to explore men’s and women’s experiences of gyms from multiple vantage points and different sensory modes of experience.

The research was carried out in a mid-sized Canadian city with 34 women and 18 men (n=52) who self-identified as regular gym users, held a current co-ed gym membership, practiced exercise routines that included use of the weight and/or “cardio” areas, and were between ages 25 to 64. Recruitment, using print flyers on community bulletin boards and a paid Facebook advertisement, and data collection were undertaken in January/February 2015 with journals submitted on a rolling basis. This study was granted clearance according to the recommended principles of Canadian ethics guidelines and Queen's University policies by the University’s General Research Ethics Board. All names used are pseudonyms.

Most participants identified as white Canadians, while five identified with a visible minority group, and three described themselves as having mixed heritages. There was some sexual diversity with one gay-identified man, three lesbians, two pansexual women, and 46
heterosexual participants. Participants came from a range of socio-economic backgrounds. About 33 percent were employed in professional or skilled occupations that required specialized training, such as nursing or counselling; 13 percent worked in clerical or technical occupations; 13 percent were managers or supervisors in their places of work; and 20 percent were students, mainly at the graduate level. Three participants were receiving social assistance (public disability or unemployment insurance). In terms of education, 35 percent had a graduate degree, 33 percent had undergraduate degrees, 23 percent had earned a college diploma, and 10 percent had high school diplomas. Participants were currently members of 10 of the 11 gyms in the study area, including two associated with major educational institutions (21%), two embedded in city recreation centres (27%), three YMCAs (an international non-profit organization with fitness facilities) (21%), and three locations of a national commercial chain (31%). Participants spanned the full age range, from 25 to 64, averaging 40 years of age.

Interviews, lasting 24 to 105 minutes, followed a semi-structured guide that focused on participants’ relationships with the gym, their gym environments, their experiences in the gym, and their own ideas about gender in the gym. At the conclusion of the interviews, participants were provided a blank sheet of paper and pencil and invited to draw in response to “how do you feel in the gym?” taking as little or much time as they liked. They were then asked to then orally describe what they had drawn. Only one participant replied without drawing. By breaking the immediacy of the question-response interview dynamic, drawing affords another mode of expression and opportunity for reflection through the process of drawing, as well as a tool for talk (the finished product) (Guillemin, 2004). In line with an auteur theory approach, which takes drawers as experts of their images (Rose, 2001), we used participants’ descriptions of their drawings as another component of textual data and did not visually analyze images. Finally, with
an aim to capture aspects of the micro-geographies of gyms that might not be recalled in interviews (Filep, Thompson-Fawcett, Fitzsimons, & Turner, 2015). 37 interviewees completed 1-week “gym journals” reflecting on their thoughts before using the gym, their activities in the gym, and negatives and positives of their experiences. Journal data are presented as written, including any errors and shorthand. In appreciation of sharing their time and experience, interviewees received a $20 CDN gift card to a local shopping centre, and those who completed journals received an additional $30 CDN gift card.

We used a triangulated strategy integrating interviews, drawing descriptions, and journals to allow scrutiny of commonalities and contrasts across data types and within participant responses (Nightingale, 2009). To systematically identify patterns and meanings in the data, we undertook a thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) using a combination of deductive (axial) and inductive (open) coding in a three phase process (Cope, 2009). As a first level of deductive coding, we used the research questions pertaining to the larger project of which this study is a part to derive broad categories of data. We further organized the data by self-identified gender to allow exploration of any gender similarities, differences, and relationships. Next, within these first-level codes, we undertook detailed open coding to identify micro-level repeating ideas, using participants’ own words (in vivo) to form these codes (Auerbach & Silverstein, 2003). We then, in a third-phase, identified relationships among these micro codes to form meta-level concepts (Auerbach & Silverstein, 2003). Below we present the multisensorial gendered performativities of the gym identified in our analysis, while acknowledging they are not mutually exclusive.
4.4 Results: Sensing gender, performing place

4.4.1 Bodily materialities

Participants described several features at the scale of the body that collectively contributed to the gendered performativity of the gym environment. A particularly important dimension of this was gym clothing, which participants identified as markedly different for men and women. Specifically, men’s attire was unassuming and loose-fitting on the body; whereas women’s clothing was “what I would call workout gear” and “something that defines their shape more so than the men” (Ruth, woman, age 59, her emphasis). The visual distinction of women’s and men’s clothing projected a graphic representation of a gender binary onto the gym floor. Men’s clothing, for the most part, was referred to in unbranded terms, while women’s clothing was identified frequently by participants with a very specific label namely, Lululemon—a popular active-wear brand widely understood as synonymous with women’s gym clothing, as Adam (age 35), commented, “Women, um, it’s always the LuluLemons now, that’s all I see now.” This style was further associated with small, fit bodies, as Leah (age 30), who had been using the gym to lose weight, observed:

[Y]ou don’t find too many oversized women wearing the small spandex, um, sports tops, and the booty shorts, and the guys—I find guys will generally stick to the baggier, um, some guys—the younger guys I find wear like the basketball shorts, the baggy ones that go down to your knees.

The emphasis on fitting women’s bodies into small or revealing clothing, which Leah described using the sexualized language of “booty shorts,” circumscribes the types of women’s bodies that

---

3 In 2013, LuluLemon recalled some of its pants due to fabric sheerness. The CEO at the time, however, attributed this issue to the size of women wearing them, rather than to product quality. This explanation signaled to many customers that the clothing line was not inclusive of larger bodies. See: http://www.cbc.ca/news/business/lululemon-founder-chip-wilson-says-pants-don-t-work-for-some-bodies-1.2417980 (last accessed 9 May 2017).
can be stylized into normative feminine visual representations in the gym. These tight, small, and revealing parameters for women’s clothing contrasted with the relaxed, large, and covered characteristics of men’s clothing. This shows how clothing not only symbolizes a stark gender divide between women and men, but reifies a hierarchy of femininities whereby certain body types are more powerful in place. As Brooke, a 35-year-old woman using one of the commercial gyms, commented, “you walk into a place in sweatpants and a t-shirt and everybody’s wearing LuluLemon, you’re going to stand out like a sore thumb.” In this way, the gym perpetuated a very particular type of femininity as acceptable in place.

Clothing and appearance symbolized the differential effort that many women invested and expensed to enter and engage in the gym environment, implicitly locating men as simply part of the mundane surroundings of the gym. Gary, a 58-year-old man, echoed the impression of other participants that clothing was more of a feminine issue: “Guys really didn’t care too much about what they were wearing, shorts, t-shirts, black socks, didn’t matter, you know, they’d go. But I found most of the women, especially younger ones they were fully outfitted in really good gym clothing. It was kind of a style thing.” There was an overwhelming sense that men could more easily just show up, while women had to dress up. In this way, clothing was a gendered signifier of who is normalized in gym space, and who has to work to occupy that space. There was a further undercurrent that if women looked ‘too good’ they were not serious about working out and thus their legitimacy in the gym was undermined. Conversely, if they did not look ‘good enough,’ their femininity was compromised. Marie, a 27-year-old student who practiced weightlifting, explained:

I think women are kind of like a little bit in a catch 22 for appearance because if they wear frumpy clothes they feel bad about it ‘cause they don’t look cute but at the same
time sometimes I put on makeup or whatever in the morning and then I realize, ‘oh, I’m going to the gym’ and then I also feel bad if I’m too made up because then I feel like, ‘oh, I’m not a real gym person ‘cause I care too much about my appearance.’ It’s kinda weird, yeah, like there’s this really small middle ground that we’re supposed to shoot for and it’s hard to calibrate exactly, like you gotta look cute but you don’t, but you can’t look like you try too hard to look cute. […] I never wipe it [makeup] off, I always—but I know I a lot of my girlfriends bring baby wipes for that exact reason. So that they don’t look too made up, so. So yeah, like women are just a lot more self-conscious I think at the gym and they’re just, they’re thinking about that kind of stuff a lot more. Whereas guys are just like, whatever, I’ll just go and like pick up heavy stuff. They don’t have to put so much forethought into what they’re doing, I think.

In commenting about her friends carrying baby wipes to remove makeup, Marie conveys the painstaking extent to which women’s work to aesthetically fit in to the gym environment consumes time, planning, and preparation far beyond the gym. Clothing and appearance was a visual representation of the preparation invested by women outside of the gym for their participation inside the gym, articulating a binary about who was ‘naturally’ in place. Men’s bodies were more easily ready for the gym; whereas women’s bodies required extensive (re)working.

Although men rarely spoke of concerns about their clothing, it is important to note that not all men’s style of dress was devoid of the tension to fit in to the gym. Dev (age 33), for example, spoke of how he changed his apparel to adapt to the localized masculine code of dress when he moved to Canada:
I had to buy new shorts when I came here. Because I found that all my shorts were way too short for the gym. I just think that men [where I lived before] are a lot more showy, right, like even like heterosexual men. So like shorts are worn quite short and when I came here I was just like, I don’t know, I felt really self-conscious that my shorts were too short so I went and bought like big basketball shorts.

This speaks to the fact that there is nothing inherent about men’s and women’s attire in the gym, but that it reflects context-specific formulae of masculinity and femininity and the relationships between them.

Clothing was also implicated at even more intimate scales of the body as a mechanism to maintain gendered bodily boundaries, such as keeping sweat in or out. Simone, a 26-year-old woman who also worked as a fitness professional, explained how women’s clothing was designed to at least afford the appearance that women’s bodies were not leaking into the gym environment:

[I]f you think about Lululemon pants [scoffs], for example, and everyone talks about how it gives you a perfect butt or whatever. And it’s like you’re going to work out. You’re not there to like look nice. But all the sudden all this clothing is about making you look good as you sweat. Or so that you don’t look like you’re sweating.

Some women acknowledged that for women “it’s inappropriate to sweat” (Melissa, age 43). Given that sweat is a by-product of physical exertion, disguising or containing sweat has the performative effect of rendering women’s working bodies invisible. Certainly, if women restrict their exercise intensity to avoid perspiring, this has implications for women’s health. Conversely, men’s sweat flowed freely in the gym environment, often taken as part and parcel of the haptic
experience of place. Liz, for example, a 25-year-old learning how to powerlift, described how she felt that men’s sweat encroached upon women’s bodily boundaries:

\[Y\]ou have to know that like the dudes are going to be disgusting and gross and just for, as a woman, we wear smaller outfits as well than most of these guys so when their nasty sweatiness is all over our machines and then you have to go use one of those machines I would just recommend bringing a towel, right.

Further underscoring how bodily secretions contributed to the masculinization of place, Annie (woman, age 33), recalled a past gym where it was so common for men to spit on the gym floor, that the gym posted signage to deter this practice. Not only does this example highlight the elasticity of men’s bodily boundaries, but the performance of an outdoor behaviour indoors—a deliberate act of expelling bodily fluid—points to the underlying gendered power imbalances over boundary definition and control within the gym. This intentional breach of bodily boundaries stands in stark contrast with the concern articulated by Melissa that she might accidently do so in the period when her body was more elastic following childbirth:

[I]t’s like all the sudden I go back to the gym and the first time you do your workout that you used to do before your baby, you have incontinence and you’re leaking. It’s like, ‘Oh, I’m not going to go to the gym and do anything like that.’ ‘Cause you don’t really wanna be peeing in front of strangers and you don’t want to leave a puddle on the floor if you all the sudden have a lack of…

Some men were aware of gendered tensions in negotiating these bodily boundaries, with Jim (age 43) making the point that “I wouldn’t allow my sweat to splatter all over the place” in the presence of women. Three women also highlighted the lingering spatial presence of men’s body odours, with two explicitly referring to the need “go to another spot” (Amy, age 49) for this
reason. These examples reveal a context that dichotomizes women and men at the intimate scale of the body. Women bodies were to be contained, while men’s bodies could be extensive—extending, even deliberately, from the inside out—into the gym environment.

4.4.2 The soundscape

I think men tend to be more—aggressive isn’t the word I really want—I’m struggling to find the right word. Assertive? Louder? Possibly. More present—more, [changes to a louder, lower voice] ‘I’m here! You know, I’m workin’ out! Hey, buddy!’ you know. Where the women chat, but it—it’s more of a chat. It might be like you and I working out on two machines side by side, ‘Oh, how was your day?’ you know. ‘What’s going on at work?’ Where the guy’s like, [lowers voice] ‘I’m here!’ Is that awful? [laughing]… The macho versus whatever the antithesis of macho is, I don’t know.” (Ruth)

As Ruth’s quote makes clear, sound was a significant feature of the gendered performativity of place. For many men and women, the soundscape was experienced as signalling a particular hegemonic masculinity within the gym that inundated space. Sounds, such as vocalizations during exercise and instances when weights made contact with the floor or other equipment, were often categorized as exaggerated, aggressive, and perceived as unnecessary or not serving a functional purpose. As Richard (man, age 54), a nearly lifelong gym user, described, “You have the meatheads upstairs, you know, trying to do as big a weight as they can with as poor form as possible. And dropping weights whenever possible so everybody knows they just did something big.” While some participants acknowledged certain sounds as inherent in exerting intense physical effort, most of these types of noises were understood as immaterial to performing exercises and more about “the guys trying to be very macho” (Kyla, woman, age 37). When
asked about negative aspects of their gym experiences, women and men both frequently cited this masculine sonic interference as a significant factor.

Sound in the gym could travel, infusing other spaces. Hegemonic masculinity, in this way, could take up space in the gym in ways that femininities and other masculinities could not. Leah documented in her journal how an exchange between two men, which she felt was excessively loud, infiltrated her personal space and negatively affected her capacity to focus on her workout:

The thing that distracted me today was a couple of guys working out. The guy who was pushing weights was yelling YEA every time he extended his lifts while the other guy would be yelling at him saying “PUSH, COME ON, PUSH, KEEP GOING”. I am all for people spotting each other and encouraging each other, but, when the entire gym can hear you and turn their focus on you, it’s a little too loud. To me at that point it seems almost like an attention show off vibe. (February 20, 2015)

Sound in the gym constituted a transversal layer of the environment that cross-cut spaces and permeated to the level of individual experience, so much so that many participants often used their own music and headphones as way to intervene and separate themselves from the overall gym soundscape. Melissa, for example, went so far as to use “the big DJ headphones at the gym” so that she did not have to “listen to that grunting.”

The hyper-masculinized nature of sound in the gym had the effect of silencing others, contributing to another gender performative binary: loud/quiet. Women tended to feel that they could not or should not emit such sounds. While a few women noted they were comfortable making noise, others felt constrained by genderist processes that kept them muted. Emily, for
instance, a 27-year-old who engaged in heavy weightlifting, articulated how there was no space for her as a woman to be ‘loud’ in the gym:

There’s like some of these like super big buff strong guys who are lifting, you know, 3, 4, 5 plates, either deadlift or squat. They can go up to the bar and they can go ‘Raaaaaahhh!’ And they make these noises and there’s just so much testosterone and it’s just like, but it’s like, this is legitimate. Now, first of all, I don’t even know if I have that in me to do that, but I think I would actually be like, would I ever do that? Would I ever? Like would I ever go and be like, ‘Raaah! I am a woman!’ [laughs] That’s what it sounds like to me. It sounds very like, ‘Raah! I’ve got testosterone! I’ve got brute strength!’ And like, so there’s like a, it’s pretty like there’s a lot of masculinity, or a certain type of masculinity, which is like, I still think, within, under like a hetero-normative framework. Um, there’s like, um, like in the, on the whole, I think the space is pretty hetero-normative. I feel like it, like in some ways actually perpetuates gender binaries. So you’re either like either female or you’re male, like where is the space for continuum?

Emily’s commentary illustrates how the soundscape of the gym works to magnify the spatial impact of hegemonic masculinity and minimize the sonic presence of femininities.

In addition to the nature of the sounds arising from the exertion of effort and moving of weights, participants also noted how the very content of conversations could intensify the hegemonic masculine tenor of the soundscape. This often involved men challenging the status of other men, essentially re-positioning themselves along the hierarchy of gym masculinities, with comments such as, “how come you’re using the girlie weights?” (Joel, age 56). Even when in jest, this flavour of commentary could have a silencing effect on others. Richard, for example, noted a particularly extreme encounter with a gym member venting frustration by projecting
inappropriate language into space in a way that challenged the validity of Richard’s preferred exercises:

There’s one guy, that I see him. And he’s quite an amazing body builder. And you know, because I see him naked in the men’s change room, I get to see the whole thing, right. And he’s very, very fit. Like it’s obvious that he works very hard on this, but oh he’s got attitude. Like he swears a lot. [...] In conversation, yeah. Like fuck is every other word. Like literally. I actually sat and listened one time and I said, ‘it is every other word, wow.’ And he makes disparaging remarks. Like he’s sort of commenting on, ‘Gee, on could never get on that. Oh, I can’t go at that time of day I could never got on my equipment. I don’t know why they took away all our room. They got that fucking yoga thing in there and TRX.’ And he’s sort of looking at me ‘cause he knows I go to yoga. So I can see that sort of, you know, he knows I do that stuff and I can see that kind of thing.

His comments illustrate how particular sonic qualities can shape the place of the gym in ways that perform an exclusionary gendered structure. The prolific use of profanity can be read as a masculine aggression. Richard interprets the disapproving remarks about yoga and TRX (a type of suspended resistance equipment)—both activities outside the scope the traditional weight room—to be implicitly reproaching him as a man practitioner of those activities, even though he is not a direct party in the conversation. Although a seemingly ephemeral dimension of the gym environment, sound was a potent gendered structure delineating legitimacy and power in space.

4.4.3 Visual fields

Particular activities and behaviours in the gym visually contributed to the gendered performativity of place. For one, many women and some men perceived that men tended to
‘show off,’ engaging in behaviours that many viewed as vanity displays of men’s bodies. Referencing the colloquial term “the gun show,” used to describe a posture to flex arm muscles, Melissa mused about how men take up visual space in the mirror, in contrast to her use of the mirror for a functional role in her workout:

I think the men preen a lot more in front of the mirror. You really like, in my experience, sitting in front of a mirror, I never really like to sit there, and like I’d watch myself for form, but there are still seriously guys who will stand in front of the mirror and do welcome to ‘the gun show.’

Here Melissa draws a distinction between her consumption of visual space as delimited by a practical purpose versus men’s seemingly less circumscribed, and even self-indulgent, consumption. Although she questions the validity of this seeming exhibitionism, it nonetheless illustrates a form of performative masculine power in place whereby masculine bodies were not bounded by functionalism. Likewise, Frank, a 57-year-old man at the gym every day of the week, concurred that “men tend to strut, you know, and be—display more than women. I find women are more, try not to be noticed for the most part, except for the few that are, you know, hang out there a lot.” Masculinity was visually magnified in space, while femininity was minimized. These asymmetrical optics were reinforced when women enacted what might be conceived as similarly less ‘functional’ behaviours, such as “the valley girls that come in in their Lululemons talking about their weekend and not really doing anything” (Brad, man, age 29). Unlike masculine ‘strutting,’ however, these actions further decentred femininities and sidelined women as inauthentic participants in the gym.

A final visual element of the gendered performativity of the gym was, as Steven (man, age 43) put it, the general consensus that “women probably have to deal with a few more
eyeballs on ‘em than guys.” The collective potential for sexualized gazing to occur, to be always possible and prone within the gym environment, infused the gym context with a particular sexualized character. This worked to reify traditional gender binaries by emphasizing a heterosexual and oppositional relationship between men and women, and further positioning women as passive objects of men’s gazes. The potentiality of sexualizing or being sexualized in the gym was ever present. It is important to note, however, that both women and men expressed agency in pushing back against this structure; some men rejected participating in gazing and some women enjoyed undertaking gazing themselves (as discussed later in Chapter 6, section 6.4.3).

4.4.4 Physical environment

Participants overwhelmingly reported that the gym “almost automatically splits into genders” (Alexis, woman, age 25) where “the women are doing more cardio on the cardio side and the guy [sic] doing the big weight on the other side” (François, man, age 35). This split re-articulated the gender binary as the spatial separation and functional difference between cardiovascular exercise and strength training activities. This scenario also created a self-fulfilling prophecy because who was seen to be using what—or gendered patterns of usage—contributed and reinforced the gendering of gym equipment and spaces. For instance, when asked if there was anything she refrained from doing because of her gender, Shelby (age 26) confided,

At the beginning it was strength training, and especially because I was uneducated about it, and thought about just being one of those body builder women and that’s how I didn’t want to be. And that men were just always over there. And the first few times I went like
there weren’t a lot of women over there, so I’m like ok, that just reinforced women don’t
strength train.

As such, the perceived gendered nature of the bodies occupying and using those spaces
contributed to their gendered codification. This gender-divisive spatial structure was widely
understood as a hallmark of gyms, although a number of participants expressed optimism that
these boundaries were shifting.

Aside from the obvious gender split, participants observed a number of ways that gender
was inscribed in the availability, types, and design of gym equipment and spaces. The most
predominant manifestations of gendering equipment were spatial and design configurations
that—whether intentional or not—had the effect of aligning women with relatively lighter
weights. Janine (woman, age 41), who used one of the municipal gyms, observed,

I don’t know if it’s planned this way to be less intimidating, but there’s a section of
weights that has lighter weights where it seems to be that’s where the women do their
weightlifting. Like machines with weights. And then there’s kind of machines with
heavier weights on them and seems to be where the males [are].

Some gyms provided a women’s designated area that “doesn’t have a squat rack or anything in
it” (Jeff, man, age 29), further materializing the expectations of what women and men do in the
gym. This dichotomy between men using heavier weights and women using lighter weights was
so entrenched that some participants even identified equipment and spaces in gendered ways.
Sabrina (woman, age 38), for example, commented that “because mostly women work down in
where I workout, I wish they had more of the, the women-sized weights down there” (emphasis
added). Many participants identified cardiovascular exercise machines, particularly elliptical
machines, as feminine, as Tom (age 26), who had been lifting weights since his teens, explained,
“Some of the cardio machines I find a little more gender specific. Like the elliptical machines tend to be mostly females, and I don’t think that’s a coincidence—I think that’s sort of what—that’s a female machine—if you wanna—if machines have genders.” In other instances, the overlaying of gender onto equipment was literal hyperbole, with Joel, for example, noting that his past gym had “pink barbells.” These examples highlight how physical equipment and spatial arrangements are implicated in the hierarchical gendered performativity of the gym.

4.4.5 The imaginary

Geographical imaginaries involve bordering as well as ordering […] that derive not only from the cognitive operations of reason but also from structures of feeling and the operation of affect. As such, geographical imaginaries are more than representations or constructions of the world: they are vitally implicated in a material, sensuous process of ‘worlding.’ (Gregory, 2009, p. 282)

Participants spoke of the gym as a distinctly stereotyped place, recounting vividly gendered images specific to the gym that were seemingly taken-for-granted as known. The archetypal gym man was referred to in terms like “meathead,” “He-man,” or “steroid monster;” had a hyper-masculine body of built muscle, dedicated to lifting heavy weights; and possibly took steroids or supplements for muscle growth. The gym woman often anointed as “Barbie,” “princess,” or “cardio bunny;” was fit yet small, putting more effort into her appearance than actual exercise; always dressed to impress (desiring and inviting men’s attention); and practiced mainly aerobic exercise. These oppositional figures were summed up by Angela (age 32) as “generally the, um, overly built guy with huge muscles who’s bench pressing ridiculous sets of weight. You think
about the cardio bunny girl, who’s very—in all spandex, and hair in her big ponytail, full makeup, and there more to be seen, right.”

Although these caricatured portraits cast neither men nor women in a positive light, they had the net effect of reifying a rigid gender regime that dichotomized masculinity and femininity along the dividing line of the concept of work. ‘Hard’ work was a mechanism of masculine power in place, while femininities were subordinated in the gym by a presumed lack thereof. Several participants pointed out how when women were seen to transgress this binary and workout ‘hard’—a masculine quality—aspects of their gender and sexuality could be put into question, as Amir (age 35) noted: “Maybe if you—if you’re at the gym a lot, maybe, um, you think there may be—there’s gender is, uh, maybe they’re bisexual or lesbian.” These stereotypes were an imaginative ordering device that animated and legitimated the performance of masculine hegemony within the gym.

The imaginary thus acted as a filter through which participants made sense of their gym experiences. Reflecting on an interaction with a man whom he initially perceived to be “big, like massive, and really strong. And I always saw him as just intimidating.” Brad shows how the place of the gym informed his interpretation of masculinity: “it’s interesting that in that environment—like if I saw him in the street I wouldn’t feel that way, he’d just be another guy and he looks like a nice guy—but when he’s in that environment it’s kind of, he’s strong, he’s intimidating. But he’s a super cool guy.” This illustrates how the gym is performatively gendered in ways that transcend and feed back into the gym. Heather (age 40), for example, invoked the wider gym imaginary to qualify her particular gym environment when she said, “it’s not, everybody running around, with like little women in leotards and men walking around with shorts and buffed arms. Just normal people going about working out.” Thus, even when
participants did not encounter these stereotypes on the ground, the imaginary was a salient
experiential frame. At the same time, there is room to disrupt this performativity, as Brad later
found the man he described to be friendly and welcoming.

4.5 Discussion and conclusions

Collectively, we argue that these performativities construct the gym as a gender dimorphic place
that sets women and men on an unequal playing field for physical activity participation. Each of
these performative domains revealed a series of gendered dichotomies that, taken together,
contribute to an overarching gender binary of unbounded masculinity and bounded femininity.
Differences in the performances of bodily materialities (re)inscribed a carefree/careful binary in
which masculinity was ‘naturally’ in place. The soundscape drew similar polarities, where
masculinity dominated sonic space in terms of volume (loud/quiet) and tone
(aggressive/passive). In the visual fields of the gym, masculinity was exhibited through
seemingly willful displays of physique and strength, while femininity was contained and on the
receiving-end of the masculine gaze. In the physical environment, masculinity and femininity
were not only bluntly spatially divided (weights/cardio), but more detailed spatial arrangements
and equipment selection reinforced men as big and women as small. Finally, the powerful
stereotypes of the gym imaginary drew a line between masculinity as hard (associated with
intense physical work) and femininity as delicate (associated with little physical effort). The
place of the gym thus does not perform gender resistance, but fits into a mutually reinforcing
power-geometry (Massey, 1994) with wider gender orders that subordinate women. This is not to
say that these power relations remained unchallenged at an individual level (see Chapter 5,
section 5.4.4), or that they are not disrupted to varying degrees in specific gyms. Rather, the gym
as an institution codifies gender differences in ways that work to constrain the possibilities for practicing physical activity to bifurcated ways of doing gender.

We separated the gendered performativities of the gym in order to draw attention to their sensory diverse nature, yet the gender performativity of the gym is clearly more than the sum of its parts. Rather, these multisensorial performativities can also be seen to interweave in what Anderson has called an affective atmosphere to refer to the “affective qualities that emanate from but exceed the assembling of bodies” (Anderson, 2009, p. 80). Tom, for example, explained that “you can cut the tension with a knife sometimes, for sure. Again, not the [gym] I’m at now, but I’ve definitely felt it before where you kind of feel, ‘ok, who’s going to start fighting here.’ It’s a little uncomfortable.” This aggressive hegemonic masculinity was almost tangible to Tom. While not reducible to any one sense, this sharply gendered affective atmosphere—an ephemeral constellation of the multisensorial performances we outlined—illustrates how place is a performative articulation of power that, as per Gregson and Rose (2000), does not pre-exist its performance.

Masculinity took up space in the gym materially, sonically, visually, haptically, and imaginatively precisely because of the porosity of men’s bodily boundaries (e.g., emitting loud sounds, wearing loose-fitting clothes, being ‘allowed’ to sweat). This stands in contrast to Longhurst’s (2001) influential work on geographies of the body that sees the ‘leakiness’ of women’s bodily boundaries as a source of subordination in space. In the case of the gym, the ‘leakiness’ of men’s bodies did not jeopardize the hegemonic position of masculinity or render men’s bodies out of place, but instead was part of how masculinity was naturalized in place. Yet, as our participants made clear, women would be out of place if their bodies ‘leaked’ in these

---

4 The concepts of affect and emotion have been thoroughly discussed elsewhere and engaging with these debates is beyond the scope of this article. We refer readers to Pile (2010) and the responses that followed this piece.
ways. While men’s bodies, at times, literally spilled over with sweat (and even deliberately with spit) into the gym environment in ways that were understood as in place, women were expected to maintain firm bodily boundaries separating them from the gym. We argue that this finding surfaces the need to push feminist geographies to further interrogate and destabilize gendered dualisms about bodily boundaries, as well as to explore places where ‘leaky’ bodies can be sources of power.

These performativities reveal that the gym does gender by side-lining femininities in ways that delegitimized women as practitioners of physical activity. The genderist regulation (Browne, 2004, 2007) of women’s bodies—their size, style, bodily fluids—denaturalized femininities in the gym by requiring work on the body to be there. Women’s appearance-related labour (shopping, financial investment, preparation) extended the geographies of their gym use into aspects of women’s lives well beyond the gym, further decentring femininities from the gym. This finding expands on Browne’s (2004, 2007) work on genderist processes in specific places by revealing how a multiplicity of other spaces and scales of daily life can be brought into play in the genderist processes of those places. Importantly, this indicates that equity interventions in the gender regime of gyms must account for these more hidden and inter-scalar geographies of the gym. On the other hand, by not requiring this extra-curricular work to be in place, men were positioned as ‘natural’ gym participants by default; their clothing choices were mostly inconsequential and relatively unquestioned (with the noted exception of Dev).

The gender regime of the gym was also performed by the erasure of women’s exercise labour through the containment of sweat and sound. Given that sweat is a physiological response to physical exertion, the control of these bodily boundaries is also a control on the gendered limits of physical activity participation. This genderist regulation of sweat may play a role in
what Dworkin (2003) has referred to in her aptly subtitled article as a “glass ceiling on women’s muscular strength.” The material substance of sweat was an intimate, yet integral, means through which the gym performatively naturalized masculinity in place. The soundscape of the gym silenced women’s work, while normalizing noises perceived to be associated with masculine enactments of physical exercise. Women often interpreted particular dominant noises (grunting, weights hitting the floor) as superfluous, rather than as a result of intense physical exertion, and this fundamentally contributed to the role of sound as a performative enactment of masculine power in the gym. Sound was a territorial mechanism (Labelle, 2010) through which gendered bodies differentially took up space in the gym—a spatial disparity that worked to centre masculinity in place. The power of sound to perform gender was reinforced by its mobile capacity to traverse the gym into the intimate hearing space of individuals. Many women, and some men, found the soundscape abrasive and adopted strategies, such as Melissa’s “DJ headphones,” to dislocate themselves from the soundscape—a strategy to create a protective boundary that Davidson (2003, p. 120) has likened to Goffman’s notion of an “involvement shield.” Following in line with Duffy and Waitt’s (2013, p. 467) argument in their Australian study on sound and the processes of home-making that sound is an essential part of “‘doing home,’” our findings here show that sound is an integral feature of how the gym does gender. Moreover, sound is performative of how the gym does health, in that the soundscape largely precludes women’s bodies from emitting sounds that might occur as a physiological response to intense exercise. By marking women’s ‘natural’ reactions to intense exercise as transgressive, sweat and sound are part of how the performativity of the gym is implicated in gendered health inequity.
In sum, our research has shown how the multisensorial gendered performativities of the gym hierarchize place in ways that set up gender inequities in physical activity participation. Interventions that do not account for these multisensorial features of place may fail to make meaningful changes in people’s experiences or to substantially address gendered power relations. This means that gyms need to be conceptualized as more than just physical activity locations, but as places that have a productive role in the (re)creation of gendered inequities in physical activity participation. Our findings thus provide a critical counterpoint to the focus on the built environments of residential neighbourhoods currently in favour in the geographies of physical activity literature (Andrews et al., 2012; Rosenberg, 2016). The complex performativities of the gym would be missed at the neighbourhood level or without engaging with people’s experiences of place. We conclude that addressing gendered inequities requires action from the inside-out; that is, by examining micro-scale gendering processes at play within the very places where physical activities are taken up. It is in these everyday places that genderist processes cement into the foundations of daily life. Even in an era when arguably more spaces are opening up to gender fluidity, the gym largely remains a de facto a gender-dichotomous place much like Johnston (1996) observed twenty years ago. There is thus a role for more critical geographies of physical activity to expose and upend micro contextual features that routinize gender inequities in health opportunities in a variety of everyday fitness sites. As Emily asks, “where is the space for continuum?”

4.6 References


Bell, D., Binnie, J., Cream, J., & Valentine, G. (1994). All hyped up and no place to go. *Gender, Place & Culture, 1*(1), 31-47.


Dworkin, S. L. (2003). A woman’s place is in the... cardiovascular room?? Gender relations, the body, and the gym. In A. Bolin & J. Granskog (Eds.), *Athletic intruders: Ethnographic
research on women, culture, and exercise (pp. 131-158). Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.


Pratt, G., & Hanson, S. (1994). Geography and the construction of difference. *Gender, Place and Culture, 1*(1), 5-29.


Chapter 5 | “It’s gym, like g-y-m not J-i-m:” Exploring the role of place in the gendering of physical activity

Abstract
Physical activity is a highly gendered health behaviour, with women less likely than men to meet internationally accepted physical activity guidelines. In this article, we take up recent arguments on the potential of indoor spaces to illuminate processes shaping health, together with social theories of gender, to conceptualize the place of the gym as a window into understanding and intervening in wider gender disparities in physical activity. Using a triangulated strategy of qualitative methods, including semi-structured interviews, drawing, and journaling with men and women in a mid-sized Canadian city, we examine how gender influences exercise practices and mobilities in gym environments. Results of our thematic analysis reveal three socio-spatial processes implicated in the gendering of physical activity: 1) embodying gender ideals, 2) policing gender performance, and 3) spatializing gender relations. A fourth theme illustrates the situated agency some individuals enact to disrupt gendered divisions. Although women were unduly disadvantaged, both women and men experienced significant limitations on their gym participation due to the presiding gendered social context of the gym. Gender-transformative interventions that go beyond engaging women to comprehensively contend with the place-based gender relations that sustain gender hegemony are needed. While gyms are potentially sites for health promotion, they are also places where gendered inequities in health opportunities emerge.

Key words: gender, gyms, health inequities, physical activity, place
5.1 Introduction

Women are less likely than men to meet internationally accepted guidelines for the minimum levels of physical activity required to attain a measurable health benefit (Azevedo et al., 2007; Colley et al., 2011; Statistics Canada, 2015). This gender disparity holds across muscle strengthening recommendations (Caspersen, Pereira, & Curran, 2000; Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2006; Chevan, 2008) and moderate to vigorous levels of physical activity (Colley et al., 2011; Grzywacz & Marks, 2001; Hallal et al., 2012; Livingstone et al., 2001) where the greatest health benefits are accrued (Tremblay et al., 2011). Moreover, there are significant differences in the types of leisure-time physical activities practiced by women and men (Coen, Subedi, & Rosenberg, 2016; Gilmour, 2007; Livingstone et al., 2001).

In this study, we conceptualize the place of the gym as an under-explored potential window into understanding and intervening in the processes underlying wider gender differences and disparities in physical activity. Gyms are common everyday places to engage in physical activity, but they may also potentially reinforce gender differences. Evidence points to the significance of gendered factors in shaping gym-related behaviour and opportunities. Motivations for gym attendance have been tied to weight loss for women and enhancing muscularity for men (McCabe & James, 2009) and weight training and cardiovascular exercise spaces can be typecasted as masculine and feminine, respectively (Brace-Govan, 2004; Dworkin 2001, 2003; Johnston, 1996; Salvatore & Marecek, 2010). Gendered body ideals have been linked to women’s limited engagement with weightlifting (Brace-Govan, 2004; Dworkin, 2001, 2003; Salvatore & Marecek, 2010)—what Dworkin (2001) has called a glass ceiling on women’s strength. The gym itself can be perceived as a hyper-masculine institution (Craig & Liberti, 2007; Pridgeon & Grogan, 2012), which can be a barrier to exercise adherence for both women
and men (Pridgeon & Grogan, 2012). Still, little is known about the socio-spatial processes in gyms that might contribute to the inclusion or exclusion of people from various workout spaces and practices.

Geographical research on physical activity has largely been subsumed within a focus on obesogenic neighbourhood environments (Rosenberg, 2016), an emphasis that has recently drawn critique for veering uncomfortably close to environmental determinism (Andrews, Hall, Evans, & Colls, 2012; Blacksher & Lovasi, 2012; Colls & Evans, 2013). Moreover, neighbourhood does not tell us about the micro built aspects and social dynamics within physical activity places. Here, we take up calls to examine the everyday sites and facilities where physical activities are undertaken (Andrews, Sudwell, & Sparkes, 2005; Hopkins, 2008). Given the centrality of the indoors in our everyday lives, Biehler and Simon (2010, p. 174) caution that “the pervasive fallacy of enclosure and the privileging of the Great Outdoors” leaves us with an incomplete picture of the spaces and processes implicated in shaping health. Indoor environments hold potential to provide insight into and transform human-environment relations across multiple scales (Biehler & Simon, 2010). Taking this argument onboard, it is possible to imagine how interventions within the gym have the potential to reshape gendered inequities in physical activity more widely. To the best of our knowledge, there are only two studies of gyms in geography (Johnston, 1996; Andrews et al., 2005), and both focused on bodybuilding rather than everyday physical activity.

In this study, we examine how gender disparities and differences in physical activity participation are (re)produced, reinforced, and challenged within gym environments by focusing on how gender influences women’s and men’s gym-based exercise practices and mobilities; that is, what people do and how they move through and inhabit gym spaces. In doing
so, we aim to provide insight into the contextual barriers and facilitators of gender equity in physical activity and extend geographies of physical activity to the ‘Great Indoors.’

5.2 Gender, health, and place

Health geographer Isabel Dyck once lamented that “divorcing women’s health from other aspects of women’s lives is mistaken, for ‘doing gender’ is, in effect, ‘doing health’” (Dyck, 2003, p. 366). Now, a growing cross-disciplinary body of work has theorized how everyday health-related behaviours—be it eating, consuming alcohol, or accessing health services—can take on meanings as signifiers of masculinity and femininity (Courtenay, 2000; Galdas, Cheater, Marshall, 2005; Lyons, 2009). Yet, gender has as much to do with places as with people. Different contexts, such as places of work or leisure, provide variegated resources that people draw upon to ‘do’ gender in ‘appropriate’ ways (West & Zimmerman, 1987). Butler (1990) famously described the enactment of gender as performative, rather than pre-given or pre-determined by biological bodies. This view of gender is particularly relevant to considering the gym as a place with its own stock of resources for doing gender and norms for what is gender-appropriate or transgressive. Not only is gender performed contextually, but these performances feed back into place (Bondi & Davidson, 2005; Massey, 1994). Gender is thus both social category and social structure—a social product of the interactions and activities in particular places and spaces that, at the same time, shapes those very places and spaces (Bondi & Davidson, 2005; Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005; Schippers, 2007). Moreover, places are not isolated gender islands, but are rather composed of the overlap of wider scales of gender and social relations in space and time—what Massey calls power-geometries (Massey, 1994, p. 265; see also Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005; Connell, 2012).
Moving beyond binary configurations of gender differences, Connell (2012) conceptualizes gender structures as the hierarchical patterning of relations between and among women and men. *Hegemonic masculinity*, at the pinnacle of the hierarchy, is a dominant and culturally idyllic version of masculinity that subordinates femininities and other possible masculinities, ultimately maintaining patriarchy (Connell, 1987). Oppositional gender relations, in which the characteristics of masculinities and femininities are polarized and fitted together via heterosexuality, maintain gender hegemony. Hegemonic masculinity does not refer to essential qualities of a person, but rather to a collection of archetypal features that men may or may not take up. Schippers (2007) extends Connell’s framework to conceptualize how women can enact hegemonic masculine characteristics, such as desiring women or exercising authority, as *pariah femininities*. Because these femininities ‘contaminate’ the masculine-feminine ordering relationship they are subject to social sanction. Institutions, organizations, and places may thus have particular *gender regimes* (localized hierarchies) that operate locally, yet relate to and draw from the broader gender orders in which they are situated (Connell, 2012; Massey, 1994).

Using this relational approach, it is possible to conceive of the gym as an institution with a particular gender regime. Following the work of Kath Browne, such seemingly unremarkable places play an important role in how gender is (re)produced and becomes ‘common-sense’ in everyday life. Browne’s work on microlevel ‘othering’ processes in public toilets (2004) and restaurants (2007) has illuminated how mundane institutions are implicated in naturalizing dichotomous differences in gender and sexuality. She uses the term *genderism* to refer to “(often unnamed) discriminations that are based on not conforming to the rigid categorisation of man/woman, male/female” (p. 343). By policing gender binary transgressions, ‘genderist’ processes demarcate who is in/out of place, including, we suggest, in ways that may constrain
health and health opportunities. This is important because intervening in gender relations and regimes can be a way to improve health (Connell, 2012) and, by extension, health equity.

5.3 Methods

5.3.1 Data collection

This was study was carried out in a mid-sized Canadian city that, at the time of data collection, was home to 11 gyms. Participants (n=52) were recruited using print flyers and a paid Facebook advertisement over a 4-week period in January/February 2015. Eligibility criteria included: (1) identifying as a regular gym user, (2) holding a current co-ed gym membership, (3) engaging in exercise routines that included use of the weight and/or “cardio” areas, and (4) being between ages 25 to 64. This age bracket was selected to focus on the working age population while accounting for the local city context with a large undergraduate university and college population, a group with arguably distinct social circumstances.

Our research design incorporated three forms of qualitative data. First, semi-structured interviews, averaging 51 minutes in length, focused on participants’ relationships with the gym, their gym environments, their gym experiences, and their own views on gender in the gym. Second, at the conclusion of each interview, participants were invited to draw in response to the question “how do you feel in the gym?” and then to verbally describe their drawing as a continuation of the interview. Only one participant declined to draw, instead verbalizing her response. As a method that breaks the question-response dynamic of interviews and offers a stepping stone for talk (the finished drawing), we employed drawing to facilitate critical reflection about aspects of the gym that might be perceived as commonplace and thus not immediately raised by interviewees (Coen, 2016; Guillemin, 2004). We treated participants’
descriptions of their drawings as textual data rather than performing a separate compositional or visual analysis of the images, consistent with auteur theory which holds the maker’s intention as the authoritative interpretation of images (Rose, 2001). Third, all participants were invited to complete one-week ‘gym journals’ documenting their thoughts before using the gym, activities in the gym, and negative and positive aspects of their gym experiences. This method aimed to capture more immediate observations and reflections on the micro-geographies of exercise experiences not necessarily possible in interview recall (Filep, Thompson-Fawcett, Fitzsimons, & Turner, 2015). Forty-nine interviewees expressed interest and accepted journals; thirty-seven journals were returned. Journal excerpts are presented as written, including any typographical errors and shorthand. All participants also completed a brief questionnaire to provide socio-economic details. In recognition of sharing their time and experience, interviewees received a $20 CDN gift card to a local shopping centre and those completing journals received an additional $30 CDN gift card. This study was granted clearance according to the recommended principles of Canadian ethics guidelines and Queen's University policies by the University’s General Research Ethics Board.

5.3.2 Analysis

Interviews, drawing descriptions, and journals were inter-linked in a triangulated strategy for rigour in which we interrogated areas of commonality and contrast across data types and within participant responses (Baxter & Eyles, 1997). We used thematic analysis to systematically identify patterns and meanings in the data in a three stage coding process (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Conceiving of gender as a multi-dimensional construct, ranging from individual-level identities to broader structures (Johnson, Greaves, & Repta, 2009), we inductively identified the
aspects of gender that mattered for gym practices and mobilities through our analysis of participants’ experiences. First, we formed broad categories of data corresponding with the research questions from the larger project of which this study is a part. We also separated women’s and men’s responses to explore gender-specific themes, gender differences, and gender relationships. Second, within these codes, we performed fine-grained open coding to identify micro-level repeating ideas (Auerbach & Silverstein, 2003). Third, we identified relationships among these repeating ideas to form meta-level concepts (Auerbach & Silverstein, 2003).

5.3.3 Sample characteristics

Thirty-four participants self-identified as women and eighteen as men. Reflective of the study location, our sample was relatively ethnically homogenous with most identifying as white Canadians, five identifying with visible minority groups, and three citing mixed heritages. Participants were overwhelmingly heterosexual; one man identified as gay and five women as lesbian or pansexual. Our sample was more socio-economically diverse, with participants employed in a range of occupations including: managerial or supervisory positions (13%); professional or skilled occupations (33%); clerical or technical jobs (13%); and students (20%). Three individuals were receiving social assistance (public disability or unemployment insurance). In terms of education, 35 percent had a graduate degree, 33 percent had undergraduate degrees, 23 percent had earned a college diploma, and 10 percent had achieved a high school diploma. Of the 11 gyms in the area, participants were members of 10, including two gyms associated with major educational institutions (21%), two municipal gyms run by the city (27%), three YMCAs (international non-profit community centres with fitness facilities) (21%),
and three locations of a national commercial chain gym (31%). Participants averaged 40 years old, spanning the full age 25 to 64 age range. All names used are pseudonyms.

5.4 Results

5.4.1 Embodying gender ideals

Participants made direct connections between their desires to attain particular gendered ideals and their chosen gym activities. For instance, Gary, a 58-year-old man attending one of the municipal gyms, linked his preference for heavy weightlifting to his sense of strength as a masculine trait: “We like to be able to pick up heavy objects, you know [laughs]. It’s a manly kind of thing I suppose, you know. So, yeah, I think that, that, uh, yeah, my gender, you know, predisposes me to wanting to do more of the heavy lifting kind of stuff.” Similarly, Leah, a 30-year-old woman, described how she specifically designed her weightlifting routine in a way that she believed would yield her preferred physique, explaining that “because I don’t wanna build too much muscle, I just wanna tone, I kind of stick to the lower weights.” Even when men and women distanced themselves to varying degrees from the influence of dominant masculine and feminine ideals, many were nonetheless affected by them in determining their exercise practices. Helen (age 48), for instance, was quite adamant that gender did not affect her exercise practices, yet contemplated in her journal how she used a piece of equipment because it was “good” for a body part associated with feminized aesthetics:

I began with the side glide machine (still don’t know what it’s called.) I did this for 5 min. and asked myself ‘why do I pick this machine’ because I really don’t like it. Then it dawned on me - someone told me it was good for my inner thighs. (February 18, 2015)
This illustrates the scalar dimension of how gender in the gym operates, connecting individual-level practices in specific places with wider socially constructed images of desirable masculinity and femininity.

The consequence of gender ideals crystallized when participants were asked to imagine whether they would do things differently in the gym if they were of a different gender. Many women pointed to the stereotype of adopting a more exclusive focus on strength training, in particular heavy lifting; whereas men pointed to the likelihood of aligning their activities with stereotypically feminine practices, such as stretching. Vivian, a 52-year-old woman with a gym history spanning more than 30 years, conceded that “I might feel if I was male, I might feel like I had to, like I wouldn’t feel good doing light weights.” Some women also spoke of how they would perform exercises differently if they were men, such as increasing levels of intensity or vocalizing effort (the spatiality of sound is a point discussed in Chapter 4, section 4.4.2). Thirty-eight-year-old Sabrina, for instance, pointedly reflected on how gender is embodied in an oppositional fashion in the gym, remarking on her own self-realization of the pervasive and performative effect of gender as she spoke hypothetically about the strength that a masculine body might confer: “I’d probably work out—so funny that I can’t even believe it would come out of my mouth—I’d probably work out harder. Which is ridiculous as soon as it comes out, because what is, what is—a penis won’t make me work harder.”

Even men and women who did not identify as subscribing to traditional gender norms in their own practices envisioned conforming to conventional gender stereotypes when asked to imagine embodying another gender in the gym. Nathan, a man in his 20s who worked as a fitness professional and prided himself in engaging with the full spectrum of gym activities in conscious defiance of gendered patterns, reflected that “hypothetically from a female perspective, I think I
would probably fall into that exact same… just doing cardio.” When asked why he might feel more susceptible to gendered pressures if he were to imagine himself as a woman, he was not exactly sure why but mused on the point: “Come to think of it, yeah absolutely. No, it’s true, I think I would. That is interesting, yeah, the more I think of it.” The acceptance on the part of many participants that they would simply do things differently if they were of a different gender highlights how pervasive and incipient body ideals and gender norms are in the gym for regulating exercise behaviour in place.

### 5.4.2 Policing gender performance

Many participants experienced perceived—and sometimes overt—social sanction by others for crossing what one woman called “the gendered lines”—the social and material boundaries separating men’s and women’s activities and spatialities in the gym. Participants overwhelmingly confirmed these gendered lines are known and experienced; several even used unprompted gendered language to refer to different areas, such as “feminine sections” or the “male area.” Joel, a 56-year-old gym-goer for over 25 years simply put it: “you’ve got all the guys on the weight side and the girls are on the cardio side.” Women and men understood these gendered lines to delineate “a separation where women are supposed to be and where men are supposed to be” (Marie, woman, age 27).

Men and women responded to pressures to conform to more normatively gendered behaviours in the gym by limiting the range of activities and spaces they were prepared to engage in. These participants engaged in self-policing by circumscribing their gym practices to conform to more normative expressions of masculinity and femininity. Tom, for example, a 26-
year-old man who began using the gym as a teenager, was keenly aware of the limits of his masculinity in the gym:

Gender definitely defines the stereotypes of what people do at the gym. Um, you could even go as far as to say what people are allowed to do at the gym, depending on what the norm is. I try not to constrain myself to those things, but there are, you know, typical female exercises or activities that I don’t—I don’t want to do. But it’s not because I don’t want to do them. I wouldn’t mind doing them. But, uh, it’s just because I feel like I can’t. (his emphasis)

Tom expressly chose not to partake in seemingly feminized activities, despite any potential interest in doing so, citing his identity as a man and the socially inscribed boundaries on his behaviour. Dev, the only gay-identified man in this study and one of the few visible minorities, echoed the notion that there is “an accepted form of working out” (his words) for men when he described a stark instance of overt policing when his activities seemingly contravened hegemonic masculine gym practices: [These guys] made some sort of snide remark about like a group of three gay guys doing circuit training. […] I guess what we were doing was kind of out of the ordinary.” Likewise, Annie, a 33-year-old woman who self-described as “pretty confident” in the gym, was attuned to how the limitations of femininity affected her engagement with particular exercises:

I think of the, like, the pull up machines that, I would say that I don’t try that very often because, uh, because I, I feel like that’s not something women are good at, or I feel like a woman trying to do that would draw attention because you never see women, or very rarely, see women doing those types of things.
This form of self-gender policing was a mechanism through which gender operated as a constraint as men and women would avoid or refrain from attempting certain activities. At the same time, this avoidance reinforced normative masculinities and femininities in the gym by reifying the divide between what men and women were observed doing.

Femininities also presented a double liability in the gym whereby women were policed both for breaking with and conforming to normative gendered practices. With regards to the former, several women talked about social repercussions for challenging traditional feminine practices in the gym. Most women were not overtly sanctioned—although this did happen—but rather this policing was experienced as perceived judgements by others. For example, Emily (age 27) spoke of how if she were to enact a masculine display of confidence in navigating the gym or show authority by correcting breaches in gym etiquette, she would be negatively categorized in gendered terms:

I watch even my male friends walk into the gym and their shoulders are back and their heads tall and they walk up to a rack—and if they’re unhappy with how things are going, if people are being like disorganized, they’ll go and call them out… But if I were to do this, I would be a bitch.

Despite being one of the few women who lifted heavy weights, Emily disclosed how these potentially punitive consequences qualitatively affected the way she moved through the gym, often in a manner that emphasized conventional feminine characteristics: “I find myself like tip toeing around and like almost apologizing.” This comportment strategy to minimize potential gender transgression contrasts with Emily’s more characteristically masculine exercise practice (heavy weightlifting). This underscores the gender-precarious position of femininities in the gym.
because engaging in a seemingly more masculine practice does not confer other privileges, like ease of mobility or access to equipment.

The other prong of this double feminine liability was that women were also subject to sanction by other women for conforming seemingly too closely to normative feminine activities or stereotypes in the gym. Women could be highly critical of other women whom they perceived to be participating in the gym for aesthetic reasons alone or not visibly exerting effort, as Leah put it, “I don’t wanna say princess, but I guess that’s the best way to describe it. Just to get the look.” Highlighting the incipiency of this form of intra-gender policing, Vanessa (age 25) realized when describing her drawing for this study that she was essentially policing herself for a negative feminine stereotype (Figure 5.1): “As I was drawing it I was like, ‘I look like a cardio bunny.’ And then I thought, ‘Oh, that’s a totally a gendered thing.’ Men aren’t really called cardio bunnies if they go on the cardio’.” ‘Cardio bunny’ connotes a woman more concerned with appearance than physical effort, typically performing ‘excessive’ cardiovascular exercise. Although Vanessa is happy doing what she is doing on her “side,” she feels her legitimacy in the gym is “a bit judged” by the man in her drawing “for not being as involved as he is,” as well as by herself in the moment when she approximates herself to a hyper-feminine stereotype. These dual forms of gender sanctioning indicate how the boundaries of femininity in the gym can be narrow and rigidly policed.
Figure 5.1. Drawing by a participant that prompted her to reflect on how her femininity is implicated in the policing of her practices and spatial presence in the gym.

5.4.3 Spatializing gender relations

Collectively, men and women engaged in a constellation of spatial practices that reinforced gendered hierarchy in favour of a hegemonic form of masculinity. Men described avoiding or leaving spaces where hegemonic masculinity was at play, while women described experiences of being crowded out of spaces by masculine performances as well as actions they undertook to minimize their consumption of time and space in the gym. The net effect of these spatial practices was to cede and reinforce spatial privilege to hegemonic masculinity in a way that had an exclusionary effect on some gym users.
Men and women described how gym space became hyper-masculinized in ways that made it unappealing to use and sometimes inaccessible. Men often spoke of a type of amplified masculinity emerging among groups of men that gave the space an intense quality that, for some, triggered an urge to abandon their workout or “get it done as quick as possible and then leave” (Eric, age 30) or altogether avoid “where the big guys generally hang out at” (Frank, man, age 57). Although at certain moments, these masculine dynamics could provide a positive source of motivation for some (see Chapter 6, section 6.4.4) Brad, a self-described “burly man who’s 6’1 and 240” explained how this quality was an affront to his workout experience:

Nice guys. But they’re strong and it’s intense. So it kind of changes the mentality in there and I’m a little, ok, well, I’m not intimidated, but I’m kind of, it’s busy and there’s a lot of energy…It kind of makes me want to turn around and leave, to be honest. I kind of just want to get out of there. I don’t want to deal with it, to be, yeah, to be completely honest. The fact that a man who might be perceived by others to embody hegemonic masculinity himself was negatively affected, underscores both the power of this form of masculinity and its capacity to exert exclusionary effects among a diversity of people.

Relatedly, women often perceived that men were disproportionately “taking up space” (Lillian, age 57). In particular, women spoke of how men consumed more space than women materially in terms of the exercises performed (bigger exercises with bigger weights) and sonically in terms of exerting sounds of effort or noises from the weights themselves (hitting the floor or stack). (The performative role of sound is a point elaborated in Chapter 4, section 4.4.2.) Amy (age 49) summated this as, “when you go in there and there’s a bunch of guys standing around, you know, or grunting and groaning, it’s, you know, [laugh] it’s not as— I don’t
necessarily want to stick around there as long.” This, along with the perception that men tended to “hog a piece of equipment” (Shawna, age 50), left many women feeling crowded out.

In counterpoint to men’s consumption of space, many women undertook strategies to take up less time and space in the gym, particularly in the presence of men and individuals perceived to possess greater expertise. A number of women echoed the sentiment “my attitude is stay over out of their way and then I don’t feel like I’m a nuisance” (Linda, age 55). Janine (age 41), whose tight schedule working three jobs was already a time constraint, reflected in her journal how she felt impelled to compromise the pace of her own workout in deference to others:

“It is intimidating, particularly when you are the only women there and you are lifting sml weights compared to everyone else there. It makes me feel like I need to rush cause I don’t want to be holding up equipment others may want to use and makes my workout feel rushed.” (February 12, 2015). This shrinking of women in space and time works to maintain power imbalances in the gym. Paradoxically, women engaged in these strategies in response to men’s consumption of space, yet these very practices permit men’s consumption of space to go unchecked.

Women additionally described what amounted to a series of micro-aggressions on the part of men that could literally crowd or rush them out. One type of micro-aggression was refusal or reluctance to share equipment or space, at times resulting in women abandoning activities or spaces. In a stark example, Paula (age 52), a gym-goer for all of her adult life, recounted in her journal how she felt compelled to relocate when a man in the gym directly obstructed her access to equipment:

[…] male moved my weights & workout bench to the side & arranged the area for himself. I approached & stated I was partway thru a circuit - his response was he was on
a time limit & his workout was more important than mine could possibly be - to find another area of the gym to do my girl exercises in. Yes - no kidding. Rather than have a huge scene - I moved to a different area. (February 11, 2015)

It is noteworthy that this individual feminizes Paula’s workout in a pejorative way to delegitimize her right to the equipment. In a second form of micro-aggression, women perceived that men seeking access to equipment approached women prior to approaching men in the same space. This resulted in some women feeling pressured to complete their exercises quickly, as Emily did frequently: “I will have just gotten on to a squat rack or the bench and there’ll be other guys on all the other racks or whatever, I’m the only one approached and asked how much longer I have. So there’s this pressure to get off.” A third form of micro-aggression occurred when men offered unsolicited advice or critique to women, effectively demoting women’s status in the gym. Marie, who was a regular in the weight room, explained that

[U]sually it’s guys who will come up and like say, ‘don’t do it that way,’ so it’s more annoying than de-motivating, but it is a little bit like, you know, which I think is the reason why women don’t like to go lifting because they’re scared that, you know, all the guys are gonna be scrutinizing them and like criticizing their techniques and go and give unsolicited advice.

Finally, some women cited sexualized gazes and interactions as intruding upon their workouts and mobilities within the gym (a point further discussed in Chapter 6, section 6.4.3 in terms of the emotional implications). Liz made clear the extent to which this intrusion is normalized in the gym when she described relocating to avoid a man who was looking at her:

If I have to go and take, you know, 15 minutes in the change room to just sit and chill out and maybe, you know, ponder around on my phone and just kill time [until he’s moved
on], yeah it’s unfortunate but I think that’s kind of the role that women—not the role—but it’s just something that we have to deal with. It’s like an occupational hazard.

Together, these micro-aggressions were a reductive force on women’s time and space in the gym.

5.4.4 Breaking gender binaries

A contingent of women, and a handful of men, consciously, and sometimes vigorously, rejected the gendered lines of the gym and configured their practices and mobilities to this end. For some women, breaking with binaries involved embracing aspects of both traditional femininity and alternative femininities to express their gendered selves in more complex and nuanced terms. Emily, for example, enthusiastically described how she planned to perform a 315-pound deadlift wearing a tutu as a way to celebrate the multiple dimensions of her femininity and reclaim the derogatory notion “you lift like a girl” with the response, “‘yes, I do, and I lift 315 pounds’.” For other women, breaking gender binaries involved an active political challenge—an attempt to discredit, reject, dissociate from stereotyped ideas of femininity, as Angela (age 32) explained, “I want to move beyond gender—and you know, just be as strong as possible without my gender being a part of it.” Later, writing in her journal, Angela noted that she deliberately refrained from engaging in a seemingly feminized activity as a challenge to gender conformity: “Was going to do the elliptical, but hate to use it because of its connotations with ‘cardio bunnies’, lack of fitness + being seen as a ‘woman’s’ workout machine” (January 25, 2015). A few men spoke of the potential for gender fluidity in the gym and distanced themselves from the dictums of hegemonic masculinity. Tom, for example, explained how he located himself in-between the binaries: “I think if I was way more toward the masculine side, if it’s a spectrum, then I would be
doing more the man, masculine type activities or exercises in the gym. Likewise, the, the feminine side. I think I’m somewhere in the middle, roughly.” For the men who unsubscribed from hegemonic norms, doing so was less of a political statement, but rather reflected more upon their interests, shifting exercise goals, and changes relationship with dominant masculine ideals through the life-course.

5.5 Discussion

Overall, we argue that socio-spatial processes within gym environments help to set the stage for the normalization of gender differences in exercise participation in the gym, and possibly beyond. Collectively, the three processes we identified—embodying gender ideals, policing gender performance, and spatializing gender relations—demonstrate that the gender regime of the gym (re)produces and reinforces wider gender disparities and differences in physical activity. These findings advance geographies of physical activity by demonstrating how the indoor scale of the everyday exercise environment is implicated in the physical activity gender gap.

Embodying gender ideals was a key driver dichotomizing the gym participation of women and men, in line with other studies (Brace-Govan, 2004; Dworkin, 2001, 2003; McCabe and James, 2009; Salvatore & Marecek, 2010). The fact that participants were quick to imagine conforming to gender norms when asked if they would do anything differently in the gym if they were of a different gender underlines the magnitude of this effect in place. Since ‘doing’ physical activity in the gym is clearly inseparable from ‘doing’ gender (Courtenay, 2000; Dyck, 2003), our findings suggest that efforts to address gender inequities need to account for this synonymy. Moreover, the materialization of these wider gendered body ideals in the gym’s gender regime articulates a power-geometry of inter-scalar social relations (Massey, 1994). This connectivity
highlights the potential in Biehler and Simon’s (2010) proposal that interventions at the indoor level can transcend other scales of impact for health.

Gender also operated as a constraint on participation in the gym through the policing of gender performance. The external and internal regulation of gender-norm adherence reinforced men’s and women’s gym participation expressed as a duality—occupying distinct spaces and equipment in a form of oppositional gender relations. Participants in this study described instances of social sanction, akin to Browne’s (2004) concept of genderism, whereby participants’ performance of masculinities and femininities was punitively regulated. Genderist processes worked to embed hierarchical gender relations in the gym environment in ways that directly impeded what participants did and where they went. For some, the potential of social sanction alone kept them from participating in certain activities, such as Tom who refrained from so-called feminine exercises because he felt it was not permissible as a man. Both women and men restricted the scope of their exercise practices to remain within the bounds of ‘acceptable’ masculinity and femininity. Femininities, however, were doubly policed in the gym, as women also felt scrutinized for being too feminine if their activities aligned with stereotypically feminized practices. This made women’s place in the gym even more precarious by narrowing the range of ‘acceptable’ femininities.

Exclusionary processes were further ensconced in a set of spatial practices which, in concert, yielded spatial power to hegemonic masculinity. Both men and women avoided spaces or altered workout practices to avoid encountering hegemonic masculinity, but women additionally performed a series of more deferential practices to further minimize their consumption of space in the gym. Women’s diminutive role in the process of spatializing gender relations can be seen as a pre-emptive response to potential genderist sanctions; however, these
Manoeuvres to avoid encountering hegemonic masculinity had the unfortunate effect of reinforcing its power by forfeiting space. Women were also on the receiving end of micro-aggressions that effectively crowded them out. The additional dimension of spatial disadvantage experienced by women makes sense in light of Connell’s theory of gender relations where, although some men are marginalized by hegemonic masculinity, women are always subordinated by patriarchy. Indeed, the way that some women accepted spatial displacement as an “occupational hazard” speaks to the common sense status of these gendered power imbalances within the gym (Browne, 2007).

Importantly, a fourth theme—although reflective of a smaller group of participants—demonstrated the agency some women and men enacted in re-drawing gendered lines. Several women in particular engaged their gym practices as a way to consciously contest traditional femininities and express their gender identities on their own terms. This agency, however, was not without constraints. Recall Emily who, despite engaging in traditionally masculine heavy weightlifting, behaved on the understanding that she would be enacting a form of ‘pariah femininity’ (Schippers, 2007) if she asserted herself with regards to equipment sharing. Likewise, Angela refrained from engaging in a feminine stereotyped activity in rejection of gender categories, but in doing so paradoxically circumscribed limits on her own participation. These tensions highlight the situated nature of this agency in that while participants consciously pushed back against the gendered structures of the gym, they were not entirely autonomous of them (Gregson & Rose, 2000; Nelson, 1999)

This study makes clear that mitigating gender inequities in physical activity is not as simple as women versus men. Men also experienced significant limitations on their gym participation due to the presiding gender regime of the gym. Interventions for gender equity in
the gym therefore need to go beyond engaging women to comprehensively contend with the sets of situated gender relations that sustain gender hegemony. This requires thinking further than fitting women into so-called men’s spaces or merging men into spaces of hegemonic masculinity. Likewise, gender-specific gyms or women’s only training spaces in co-ed gyms are not a sufficient solution for gender equity. Such approaches leave hegemonic gender relations intact rather than transforming the gender relations that come to define those spaces (cf. Salvatore & Merecek, 2010). While women-only environments undoubtedly play a valuable role for some women, they may more widely reinforce gender stereotypes about what activities women, and men, should be doing. Despite our focus on co-ed gyms, a number of women recalled unsatisfactory past women’s-only experiences, often emphasizing a lack of equipment, as Hannah (age 32) put it: “I think that’s really ridiculous that a woman shouldn’t be able to go and do the weight workouts she needs to do at a gym because apparently they’ve decided that women don’t need those weights.” We therefore suggest that interventions following from our findings take their cue from gender-transformative approaches to health—adopted with success in fields such as HIV/AIDS and gender-based violence—that seek to reshape health-damaging aspects of gender relations to improve equity and health for women and men (Dworkin, Fleming, & Colvin, 2015; Gupta, 2000). Noting that the gym is a highly stereotyped place with regards to gender (as reported in Chapter 4, section 4.4.5), it is especially important for such interventions to take care to avoid co-opting aspects of masculinities and femininities in ways that reinforce harmful stereotypes (Fleming, Lee, & Dworkin, 2014). At the institutional level of the gym this could involve communications campaigns, such as posters or social media, to disrupt gendered patterns of taking up space and the gender-coding of activities.
There are two main limitations to this study. Reflective of our research setting, our sample was relatively ethnically homogenous and did not include many participants with diverse sexualities or any with gender-diverse identities. Future research should purposefully sample a more diverse population to permit a more intersectional analysis. Relatedly, our study focuses on the gender regime of gyms in a Western English-speaking context and does not necessarily extend to other cultural milieu.

5.6 Conclusions

Although gyms are potentially sites for health promotion, they may also be places where gendered inequities in health opportunities emerge and are sustained. Our findings demonstrate that micro-level processes at the scale of the everyday exercise environment work to routinize gender disparities and differences in physical activity. Public health efforts to close the gender gap in physical activity must account for the socio-spatial processes that reproduce, as well as challenge, gender hegemony in everyday exercise places such as the gym.

5.7 References


Chapter 6 | “I felt like such a girl:” Gender and the emotional geographies of the gym

Abstract

In this article, we examine how gender matters in the emotional geographies of an everyday exercise environment—the gym—in order to begin to unpack the role of place in the gendering of physical activity. Geographies of physical activity have been largely quiet about gender, despite the fact that men and boys are more active than women and girls around the world. Health geographers have focused on exterior built environments, but have yet to contribute to our understanding of indoor spaces and physical activity. We argue that addressing gender inequities requires a critical geography of physical activity attending to the socio-spatial processes that normalize, as well as challenge, gender differences and disparities inside the very places where physical activities are undertaken. Drawing on a triad of in-depth qualitative methods, our analysis reveals that the gym environment is generative of three in-situ processes of dislocation, evaluation, and sexualization that collectively configure an unevenly gendered emotional architecture of place. Through this interstitial structure, the boundaries of localized hierarchies of masculinities and femininities become felt in ways that create tensions and anxieties, which in turn, reinforce these boundaries. Two additional themes reveal how gendered motivation and individual factors can mediate some negative emotional outcomes. The intimate, and sometimes invisible, nature of this emotional architecture suggests that interventions for gender equity might benefit from being empathetically attuned to the subtleties of place-based experiences. Critical geographies need to interrogate how other types of fitness places may be implicated in social inequities in physical activity participation.

Key words: emotions, gender, gyms, health, physical activity
6.1 Introduction

Geographies of physical activity have been largely quiet about gender, despite the fact that men and boys are more active than women and girls around the world (Hallal et al., 2012). Women are less likely than men to meet international guidelines for physical activity (Colley et al., 2011; Statistics Canada, 2015), to engage in recommended levels of muscle strengthening activities (Caspersen, Pereira, & Curran, 2000; Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2006; Chevan, 2008), and to participate in moderate to vigorous physical activity (Colley et al., 2011; Grzywacz & Marks, 2001; Hallal et al., 2012; Livingstone et al., 2001)—where the greatest health benefits stand to be gained (Tremblay et al., 2011). At a population level, these disparities indicate women are not reaping the health benefits of physical activity—from reduced risk of a variety of chronic conditions to premature mortality—to the same extent as men (Lee et al., 2012). Furthermore, types of leisure-time physical activities often differ significantly by gender (Gilmour et al., 2007; Livingstone et al., 2001), underscoring the qualitative differences linked to these inequities. In this article, we examine how gender matters in the emotional geographies of an everyday exercise environment—the gym—in order to begin to unpack the role of place in the gendering of physical activity.

The gym is a conspicuously missing place in geographies of physical activity. While several studies consider issues of gym access (Evans, Cummins, & Brown 2013; Pascual, Regidor, Martínez, Calle, & Domínquez, 2009), little geographical work has ventured inside the gym. The only two studies of which we are aware focused on bodybuilding gyms and cultures (Andrews, Sudwell, & Sparkes, 2005; Johnston, 1995, 1996, 1998) as opposed to non-competitive everyday exercise experiences. Nonetheless, Johnston’s (1995, 1996, 1998) work on women bodybuilders has called attention to the gendering of bodies vis-à-vis the gender-
dimorphic spatialities of gym environments. Gyms are also emotionally fraught places. Frew and McGillivray (2005, p. 173) went so far as to characterize gyms as “spaces of fear” in that they encapsulated a gap between body expectations and the lived experiences of gym users. Women in particular are reported to experience psychological distress in gym environments related to social comparisons, body evaluation concerns, and social physique anxiety (Kruisselbrink, Dodge, Swanburg, MacLeod, 2004; Pridgeon & Grogan, 2012; Salvatore & Marecek, 2010; Wasilenko, Kulik, & Wanic, 2007). Calls have been made for geographical attention to everyday fitness places (Andrews et al., 2005; Hopkins, 2008), but these have yet to be substantively taken up in health geography. Health geographers have focused on exterior built environment influences on physical activity, particularly in terms of obesogenic environments and walkability, with little attention to indoor spaces. We argue that addressing gender inequities requires a critical geography of physical activity that considers the socio-spatial processes that normalize, as well as challenge, gender differences and disparities inside the very places where physical activities are undertaken.

6.2 Towards a critical geography of physical activity

Despite growing work on critical geographies of obesity (Colls & Evans, 2013; Evans, 2006), there has been little conceptualization of what critical geographies of physical activity might look like. This may be because geographical research has largely subsumed physical activity into anti-obesity-oriented research agendas. This entanglement reflects growing research and policy concern with obesogenic environments; that is, built features of residential settings understood to promote weight-related behaviors (Townsend & Lake, 2009). Yet, the obesogenic environments thesis delimits physical activity to the prescriptive role of ‘calories out’ in a biomedical model of
energy balance (Guthman, 2012), relegating physical activity as a means to an end rather than a topic of geographical study in its own right. This is not to say that physical activity does not play an important role in obesity, but rather the potentially positive implications of physical activity range well beyond body weight, from physical health benefits like chronic disease prevention to mental health benefits such as reduced risk of depression (Lee et al., 2012; Warburton, Nicol, & Bredin, 2006). In the same vein that Colls and Evans (2013) argue that critical geographies of obesity should challenge the coupling of body weight and disease, we contend that critical geographies of physical activity can productively unshackle physical activity from the obesity priority in geographical research. This opens up the possibility for geographies of physical activity to be skeptical of health orthodoxies and assumptions that moralize about individual behaviour (Brown & Duncan, 2002; Colls & Evans, 2013), foreground questions of equity, agency, and experience (Andrews, Hall, Evans, & Colls, 2012; Blacksher & Lovasi, 2012; Colls & Evans, 2013), and attend to the socio-spatial processes and factors that work to support or exclude people in being active (Colls & Evans, 2013; Hopkins, 2008).

Critiques levied at the obesity and walkability literature caution that the spatial privilege afforded to neighbourhood built environments veers on environmental determinism (Andrews et al., 2012; Blacksher & Lovasi, 2012; Colls & Evans, 2013; Rosenberg, 2016). Moreover, recent studies indicate that neighbourhood is not necessarily the most salient geography for all types of physical activity (Troped, Wilson, Matthews, Cromley, & Melly, 2010; Zenk et al., 2011). Neighbourhood-level analyses do not capture the dynamics within physical activity places, such as gyms, that may impact upon people’s engagement with health-related opportunities. Biehler and Simon (2010, p. 174) argue that “the pervasive fallacy of enclosure”—the assumption that indoor environments are bounded-off from other scales—has contributed to an incomplete
picture of the spaces and processes implicated in shaping health. Rather, they claim that it is precisely because of the centrality of the indoors in our daily lives that interventions inside can transform human-environment relations across multiple scales. From this perspective, it is possible to situate the gym as a physical activity place with the potential to (re)shape gendered inequities in physical activity more widely. We take up gender and emotions to advance a more critical geography of physical activity—one that attunes to experience while centring on the socio-spatial processes and power structures enabling and constraining physical activity participation in an everyday place.

Emotional geographies, by taking emotions as a lens to understand relationships between people and place, help us to engage agency and experience in a critical approach to physical activity. In their foundational paper, Davidson and Milligan (2004) envision emotions as “a form of connective tissue that links experiential geographies of the human psyche and physique with(in) broader social geographies of place” (p. 524). From an emotional geographies perspective, emotions are articulated and mediated through socio-spatial processes (Bondi, Davidson, & Smith, 2005). This means that emotional responses are always contextual and relational, emerging in transactions between people and places and among people within places (Bondi, Davidson, & Smith 2005; Davidson & Milligan, 2004). Still, place does not impose emotions upon people; individuals can enact agency in managing emotions (Colls, 2004). From this perspective emotions are an invisible driver, with potential material effects, on how people participate in and experience gyms.

Bodies are at the fulcrum of the emotions-place nexus. Emotions are experienced through the body (Davidson & Milligan, 2004) and bodies can be conceived as “emotionalized sites” (Johnston 2009, p. 330). As a setting designed for exercising the body, the gym may be a place
where bodies are especially emotionalized sites. The gym is situated in a wider public health context often conflating health and aesthetics (Brown & Duncan, 2002)—aesthetics that are entangled with gendered with ideals associating femininity with slenderness and masculinity with muscularity (Craddock & Brown, 2010).

If emotions are the “connective tissue” (Davidson & Milligan, 2004, p. 524) between people and place, they are invariably bound up in the mutually constitutive relationship between gender and place (Bondi & Davidson, 2005; Massey, 1994). Gender, as with emotions, is relational and situational in that it comes into being through social interactions amongst people and within settings (Bondi & Davidson, 2005; Massey, 1994; West & Zimmerman, 1987). The notion “doing gender,” coined by West and Zimmerman (1987), frames gender as a social product that we enact in concert with others, as opposed to a biological or fixed fact of individuals. In this way, the gym can be conceived as a particular environment with its own cache of resources to do gender in socially acceptable ways (West & Zimmerman, 1987).

Still, gender is more than social category; it is also social structure comprising collective norms, ideals, expectations, and relations that broadly confer power, roles, and status to the dualistic labels of woman and man (Bondi & Davidson, 2005; Connell, 2012; Massey, 1994). A particular form of patriarchal privilege—what Connell famously called hegemonic masculinity—is maintained by hierarchical constellations of gender relations that subordinate femininities and other possible masculinities (Connell, 1987). This culturally idealized rendition of masculinity defines its apex position by polarizing women and men via heterosexuality. By centring on gender relations, rather than categorical gender differences, masculinities and femininities frameworks put into focus the relational and power-laden processes by which gender shapes health and health opportunities (Bottorff, Oliffe, Robinson, Carey, 2011; Schippers, 2007).
Importantly, a gender relations perspective extends beyond binary differences between men and women to also contend with differences among men and among women (Bottorff et al., 2011).

Recent theoretical work has explicitly placed emotions in the relationship between gender and health in geography. Citing the feminist challenge that emotional geographies pose to the masculinist notion of emotion-less subjects, Thien and Del Casino Jr. (2012, p. 1149) argue that the field “demands that we think through how the gendering of health and health care is simultaneously about the processes of emotion.” Tying together research on an HIV awareness campaign and a post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) program, Thien and Del Casino Jr. illustrate how attention to emotions reveals some of the nuanced and paradoxical ways gender is mobilized in prevention and recovery, such as masculine identities being reclaimed through seemingly feminine emotional practices. This demonstrates how emotions are an avenue to move beyond gender binaries and gender monoliths to probe the complexities and contradictions linking gender and health. Taking this deconstructive potential onboard, we locate emotions as central to understanding the role of place in the gendering of physical activity.

Empirical work outside of geography points to how emotions in the gym intersect with gender. Frew and McGillivray (2005, p. 173), in their qualitative study of UK fitness clubs, concluded that gyms perpetuated negatively reinforcing cycles of body dissatisfaction by ‘selling’ unattainable idealized physiques. Evaluation concerns—worries about body scrutiny or competence judgements by others—can be barriers to women’s participation in weightlifting (Salvatore & Marecek, 2010). Likewise, upward social comparisons—perceiving someone to be more fit—in the gym can be discouraging for women experiencing body dissatisfaction (Pridgeon & Grogan, 2012) or even lead women to shorten their duration of exercise (Wasilenko et al., 2007). Kruisselbrink et al. (2004) found women were more likely to plan shorter workouts
in the presence of mostly men, but not in more evenly gendered or all-women settings, due to social physique anxiety. For men there was no compositional gender effect. Our critical geographical perspective builds on this work by focusing on how gender and emotions on the gym floor relate to how place is implicated in gendered inequities in physical activity.

6.3 The study

To gain insight into men’s and women’s gym experiences from multiple vantage points, we employed a triad of in-depth qualitative methods, including semi-structured interviews, participant-generated drawing, and journaling. Our study was situated in a mid-sized Canadian city that was home to 11 co-ed gyms. We recruited 52 participants using flyers at gyms and community bulletin boards, as well as a paid Facebook advertisement, over a 4-week period in January/February 2015. All participants self-identified as regular gym users, were currently members of co-ed gyms, engaged in individual exercise activities that included the weight room and/or cardiovascular spaces, and were between ages 25 to 64. This age range allowed us to focus on working age adults while accounting for the local city context with a large undergraduate and college student community—a population with arguably distinct social circumstances.

Our semi-structured interviews, averaging 51 minutes in length, focused on participants’ relationships with the gym, their current gym environments, their experiences in the gym, and their own views on gender in the gym. We embedded a drawing activity as the final interview question. As demonstrated in Chapter 3, participant-generated drawing can facilitate engagement with emotional aspects of experience not readily arising in traditional interviews. By interrupting the interview question-response rhythm, drawing affords a qualitatively different mode of participant interaction (the process of drawing), as well as another tool (the finished drawing
product) for participants to talk about their experiences (Guillemin, 2004). We invited participants to respond to “how do you feel in the gym?” using a pencil and blank sheet of paper, and then to orally describe their drawing. Only one participant declined to draw. Taking an auteur theory approach, which holds the drawer’s intention as the authoritative meaning of images (Rose, 2001), we did not perform a separate compositional or visual analysis, but treated participants’ descriptions of their drawings as textual data. All participants self-identified their gender, ethnicity, and sexuality, as well as provided details related to their socio-economic status, in a brief demographic questionnaire at the time of the interview.

We additionally invited all interviewees to journal about their gym experiences for a 1-week period. Our aim was to gain insight into emotional geographies at the scale of the workout activity space with more immediate observation and personalized reflection than afforded by interviews (Filep, Thompson-Fawcett, Fitzsimons, & Turner, 2015). A series of prompts guided participants to document their thoughts before using the gym, their activities in the gym, negative and positive aspects of their gym experiences, and any other reflections. Only three participants declined the journals at the time of the interview and 37 journals were completed. Journal quotes are presented as written, including all shorthand and spelling errors. In appreciation of sharing their time and experience, interview participants were provided a $20 CDN gift card to a local shopping centre and those completing journals received an additional. $30 CDN gift card. This study was granted clearance according to the recommended principles of Canadian ethics guidelines and Queen's University policies by the University’s General Research Ethics Board. All names are pseudonyms.

All participants identified as either women (n=34) or men (n=18) and spanned the full age range, averaging 40 years. Reflective of our study location, participants predominantly
identified as white Canadian; only five identified with visible minority groups and three self-described as being of mixed heritage. Most were heterosexual, with only one man identifying as gay and five women with diverse sexualities (three lesbian, two pansexual). There was greater socioeconomic diversity, with 13 percent of participants employed as managers or supervisors, about a third working in occupations requiring specialized training such as nursing, 13 percent employed in clerical or technical work, and 20 percent were students, mainly at the doctoral level. Three participants were unemployed and receiving social assistance (public disability or unemployment insurance) at the time of interview. Educational backgrounds were similarly varied with about a third possessing a graduate degree, another third had undergraduate degrees, 23 percent earned a college diploma, and 10 percent completed high school only. Of the 11 gyms in the study area, participants were members of 10, including three commercial gyms from a national chain, three Young Men’s Christian Associations or YMCAs (international co-ed non-profit community centres), two municipal recreation facilities with fitness centres, and two gyms at large educational institutions open to the public.

Our analytic approach comprised a triangulated strategy for rigour in which we interrogated similarities and contrasts across data types (Baxter & Eyles, 1997). We used thematic analysis to systematically identify patterns in the data in a three stage process combining axial (deductive) and open (inductive) coding (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Cope, 2009). As a first tier of axial codes, we created broad categories of data mapping onto our research questions from the larger project of which this study is part. We also separated women’s and men’s responses to consider gender-specific themes, gender-related differences, and gender relationships. Next, we performed detailed open coding within these axial codes to identify micro-level repeating ideas. Finally, we traced relationships among these open codes to form and
identify meta-level concepts (Auerbach & Silverstein, 2003), which are the themes reported below.

6.4 Results: Feeling gendered in/out of place

6.4.1 Dislocation

Many participants described cognitively wrestling with their gendered locations in the gym, as Brad (man, age 29) put it, “it’s almost like the public school dance, right. You know, the music’s on, but the guys are on this side, the girls on this side and they’re just too afraid to meet in the middle.” Citing fear at the centre of this gender binary, Brad’s analogy captures the tension embedded in a set of placed-based gender relations that polarized women and men. Women and men experienced an anxious sense of gendered dislocation in perceiving that their masculinities or femininities were not congruent with, and even subordinate to, those dominant in the gym environment. This misalignment created a gap in place-belonging that necessitated emotional negotiation to fit in to place.

For women, this often came down to feeling like, “I am the only girl here and it’s weird” (Alexis, age 25, her emphasis). There was often a recognition that certain spaces in the gym, namely the weight room, were perceived and experienced as men’s spaces. Indeed, the masculine-coding of these spaces was so entrenched that several women referred to weightlifting areas as the “boy’s club” or “men’s section,” casting women as the odd gender out. Many women traced their discomfort to the friction they felt when their femininities clashed with masculinized space. As Sarah (age 33), an experienced gym-goer and fitness professional, pointed out in reference to the weight room, even mentally coaching herself could not extinguish
the unease, “I’ll go in there and just be like, ‘No. You guys don’t own this place,’ but it doesn’t feel that comfortable” (her emphasis).

The spatial mismatch between women’s gendered sense of self (as feminine) and the gendered ways space was experienced (as masculine) was an enduring discomfort that many women simply tolerated as part of the emotional price of the gym. Still, this gendering of spaces, and the emotional fallout from it, was not always fixed, but could shift depending on who was perceived to be there and the types of masculinities at play. Lillian (age 57) qualifies certain masculinities as more noxious than others, and notes how they differentially affected her comfort:

[I]f you go to the [gym] at 5 o’clock or something it’s a lot more like big guys lifting weights and that can be—I think it could be intimidating and I think it was for me at one time. But then if you go at 9 or 10 it’s all the old fellas […] [which] feels more benign to me like, well they, they take up less space.

Lillian echoed the sentiment shared by many that it is a particular hegemonic type of masculinity, and how it consumed space, that contributed to women’s dislocation. For many women, the masculine normalization of certain gym spaces created an emotionally taxing backdrop they had to cognitively work against in participating in the gym.

To minimize discomfort, some women chose not to invest such emotional labor and instead withdrew from space. Emotions could thus be a significant determinant of the micro-geographies of women’s gym use. For women like Chloe, a 28-year-old student, this resulted in circumventing certain areas entirely to evade the disquiet they evoked:

I tend to avoid, sort of where people do like their big heavy lifts, and they’re screaming, and I don’t know, slapping each other on the back, and that sort of thing. And I feel like
that’s their area and I don’t really feel comfortable entering that area, so I like—it’s kind of a high testosterone region maybe.

She went on to explain how a sense of “confinement” characterized her gym experience, depicting in her drawing that “there is sort of a dark wall, which is I guess sort of like the limit, or the boundaries of, of her space and of her, yeah. Yeah, there’s confinement” (Figure 6.1).

Chloe’s example illustrates how, for some women, emotional preservation could drive a material shrinkage in gym space, which in turn has the emotional consequence of feeling constrained in place.

A number of women persisted in exercise routines that utilized the full scope of gym space, but their experiences were often replete with examples of gendered dislocation. Women described moments of encounter that reinforced their sense of having a tenuous position in particular gym spaces and triggered scenarios that exacted a decisive emotional toll, often shaking their self-confidence and self-esteem—even for the most experienced women in the gym. Emily (age 27), a skilled recreational weightlifter, put this into sharp focus when she described being subjected to gendered ridicule in the weight room:

[A] guy came and he wanted to butt in and I actually was like, ‘Oh, no I’m next.’ So then [these guys] took a step back and they stood there for 5 minutes while I couldn’t undo the knob [to adjust the equipment]. And they’re laughing at me. […] It was just this experience of feeling like—{pause}—I felt like such a girl. And I mean that in like a—in how it sounds. When you’re like into like the situational, cultural sense of being weak, being, um, unable to be self-sufficient, and this is what—I hate feeling like this.

In one moment, Emily feels a sense of accomplishment having rightfully asserted her place in the equipment queue among a group of men; in the next, her femininity becomes an emotional
Figure 6.1. “There’s confinement.” Drawing by a participant who limited her use of space in the gym to avoid discomfort in the “high testosterone region.”
liability when her success is undercut as her brief struggle becomes the focal point of masculine attention and mockery, leaving her feeling demoralized. Many women described the weight room as unstable ground that heightened insecurities about their self-confidence and competence about exercising, precisely because their legitimacy in these spaces was never certain. As Jeff, a 29-year-old man with a great deal of empathy for women in the gym, said, “it’s probably more ok for a guy to be in, uh, like the feminine sections than the other way.”

Men also described feeling out-of-place due to hegemonic masculinities in the gym. Even if men did not necessarily desire to embody hegemonic characteristics, they were often self-aware of how their own masculinities contravened dominant masculine traits the gym. Frank, for example, a 57-year-old using the gym seven times per week, sometimes more, attributed his uneasiness in the weight room to feeling alienated by the ascendant masculinity in that space: “I have to say sometimes I feel a bit sheepish? In there? Because I’m not one of these, uh, manly grunters, right.” Other men similarly felt like outsiders when they came up against manifestations of hegemonic masculinity, as Tom (age 26), who had been lifting weights since he was a teen, recounted in a visit to a gym in a different city:

It was totally the Arnold Schwarzeneggers of Ottawa that were there and I was the smallest guy for sure, and I was working out, so I wasn’t like, you know, like, uh—it was, and you could just, you knew it. I wasn’t welcome there. I wasn’t…. you know, like, ‘who’s the pip squeak?’ kinda thing. So, but I mean it’s the—they’re intense, and they’re—it’s like a job for some of them and they take it seriously. And in that case I respect it. But when they’re being jerks about it, it’s not very nice. […] I didn’t join [the gym]. Yeah, I dropped out. I’m not doing this.
These masculine attributes, in particular the callous behaviour like “jerks,” left Tom feeling relegated to the pejorative role of “pip squeak,” despite being experienced with weightlifting.

Even men who might be perceived by others to embody hegemonic masculinity could be just as affected by dislocation. When asked to describe how gender matters in the gym, Brad, a frequent gym-goer, paused for a considerable moment before responding:

It does matter. I just—I need to think about how I phrase this. I really do think it does matter. ‘Cause even as a burly man who’s 6’1 and 240 [pounds] I can still walk into the gym and feel very intimidated. Um, and I know a lot of my friends who are in the same boat. So I feel like, you know, walking into a gym full of loud, sweaty, screaming guys is intimidating for me as a man.

His confession makes clear how widespread the emotional cost of gender hierarchy in the gym is to a diversity of gym participants. This highlights the extent to which hegemonic masculinity is the gender default in certain gym spaces, rendering femininities and other masculinities as out of place and making the gym an emotionally precarious place for a range of gym users.

### 6.4.2 Evaluation

The gym can be an emotionally-trIGGERING place with regards to in-situ comparisons that prompted negative self-evaluations and anxieties about being evaluated negatively by others. Among women, there was a common sentiment that “you have to go looking hot to the gym, if you’re a girl” (Hannah, woman, age 32). Clothing was a powerful social differentiator of femininities. Women understood the gym to dictate a specific normative femininity embodied as a thin physique donning form-fitting clothing. By signifying which women’s bodies were socially acceptable within the gym, clothing was a mechanism to (de)value femininities in place. (As discussed in Chapter 4, section 4.4.1, clothing also played a significant role in the gendered
The inflexible unwritten rule about what women *should* wear in the gym was so strong that diverging from this norm compromised women’s comfort levels and self-esteem. For example, Marie, a 27-year-old woman, described how she would prefer to wear looser clothing at times, but doing so negatively impacted her sense of feminine desirability in a way that she could not tolerate, even though it troubled her ideologically:

Girls have more of a specific—like you wear tight pants and then like a LuluLemon tank top basically. And I mean I fall in that category as well. And actually I started saying to myself, ‘Ok, like I should be able to wear sweatpants if I want sometimes.’ And I’ve started wearing them every once and a while ‘cause sometimes you don’t want to wear really tight pants and I felt a little bit weird when I wore the sweat pants. I felt like I looked frumpy and I thought to myself, ‘Well, what does it matter if I look frumpy in the gym?’ and, like, it bothered me that I looked frumpy. I was disappointed in myself that it bothered me, but it did bother me that I looked frumpy.

Appearance comparisons with other gym bodies were also a source of negative emotions for many women who felt they did not embody the archetypal gym femininity. Leah (age 30) spoke about her gym journey from feeling previously “very uncomfortable in my own skin” to persevering in the gym by employing a “nobody else is around me type of attitude to try and push myself to go.” Still, she reflected in her journal on how old body insecurities surfaced in the gym from on-the-ground reminders:

The other thing that discouraged me was seeing some of the girls who are in great shape who wear the small workout sports tops and small spandex pants. I am all for women and men who are completely self confident and like to show off their hard work, I applaud them; however, sometimes it just sits in the back of my mind that I will NEVER have that
type of body. I will never look that good in those outfits. (February 20, 2015, her emphasis)

Despite pride in improving her level of fitness, clothing in the gym was a reminder of any lingering body dissatisfaction. For Leah, normative feminine gym clothing symbolized an unattainable physique that infused her gym experience with a sense of resignation to self-perceived bodily limitations. Leah was hardly alone, as many other women shared the feeling summed up by Hannah, “I don’t look awesome in my gym clothes like they do, so sometimes—most of the time I’m fine with it, but sometimes you’re kind of like, ‘I’d rather not be here’.”

Clothing was an intimate mediator of the link between gender, emotions, and place in ways that put contingencies on women’s participation in the gym.

Men’s evaluation concerns, on the other hand, did not revolve around clothing specifically, but several men expressed similar anxieties and discomfort in relation to body image and fitness-level comparisons with other men in the gym. For these men, the gym heightened dissatisfaction with aspects of their physical appearance, especially body size and shape. Thirty-three-year-old Dev, for example, in describing his drawing (Figure 6.2), spoke of how the gym amplified his sense of feeling physically small:

This is a gym and this is like a bench press bar. This is me sitting on it. There is a mirror there and I can see a reflection of myself. Um, it’s essentially me seeing a slightly skinnier version of myself, at least my partner tells me I have like body dysmorphia or something [laughs] […] I think I see myself as smaller than I am, maybe. Yeah, I don’t see myself as a particularly big person. I’m not a big person, but I think he always says that I see myself as like being this like tiny little scrawny kid […] I want to be bigger. I want to be considered bigger.
Figure 6.2. “I want to be considered bigger.” Drawing by a participant depicting how the gym environment magnifies body insecurities.

For Dev, reflecting on his “scrawny” figure in the mirror, the gym environment emotionally intensified the gap between his own body image and his desire to increase his body size. In expressing his wish not only to be “bigger,” but for others to deem him as bigger, Dev speaks to the emotional significance tied to men’s bodies taking up space in the gym, with bigger bodies ascendant in the hierarchy of masculinities. Likewise, Joel, a 25-year gym veteran, directly linked his happiness to his body size and shape relative to other men in the gym: “The guys that have big wide shoulders and the huge chest that, you know, I wish I could flash around my body... I wish I could do that and if I could lift that weight, I’d be so much bigger and so much happier.” Joel sees a bigger body as enabling him to “flash” or celebrate his physique,
highlighting how a bigger body would positively shift his emotional positioning in the gym by socially and spatially (re)positioning him in the hierarchy of masculinities. Thus, for men, as for women, the gym environment could act as a magnifying glass on contentious aspects of their body image in emotionally charged ways.

A number of women and men stated that they enjoyed their current gym environments precisely because they perceived appearance to matter less than in their past experiences. These gyms tended to be non-commercial and offer programs to mitigate income barriers, thereby engaging a potentially more socially diverse clientele. Gary (man, age 58) who attended one of the municipal gyms, noted that “I could walk down [Main] Street here and I would not be surprised to see any of those people I pass on the block at the gym.” A more heterogeneous and seemingly relaxed atmosphere helped to diffuse potential evaluation concerns for some individuals. Abby, a 52-year-old woman using one of the city gyms with a subsidized membership, rated her current comfort level at a “9 or 10” as opposed to feeling “very, very intimidated” in a previous gym:

They’re all competitive at the [other gym]. They’re all like, ‘Oh, I see you and you’re lifting this, so I’ll lift that. And I’ll run faster than you.’ Like, it’s like these women are in their mind thinking they need a smaller body when they already have this perfect body and in their mind they’re insecure. So it makes you feel insecure yourself. I go to somewhere where everybody is just down to earth, friendly. You’re not competing. If you can run on the treadmill without falling off, good for you. I don’t care. I’m doing my own program.

Abby’s experience illustrates that links between gender, emotions, and place are not immoveable, but rather can be subject to (re)negotiation.
Women in particular expressed a fear of being judged for poor exercise performance in the gym, or as Linda (age 55), put it, “I don’t want to look foolish on the playground.” Linda’s infantilizing “playground” metaphor captures the extent of her vulnerability in gym, almost feeling reduced to the role of a child. The prospect of being viewed by others as incompetent in the gym was a pervasive source of discomfort for many women. When contextualized by the view that “men are supposed to be [in the gym]. Women still don’t feel like they’re supposed to be there” (Marie, her emphasis), bearing this pressure to perform ‘correctly’ can be understood as emotional weight tied to women’s seemingly less legitimate position in the gym.

Embodying femininity on the masculinized playground required significant emotional work on the part of some women who bore this burden of perfection as a strategy to render difference (their femininity) less visible and thus less subject to negative evaluation. For some women, these were momentary clouds, but for others it shaded their entire gym experience with a tinge of doubt about their legitimacy in the gym. Vanessa, a 25-year-old who mainly engaged in cardiovascular exercise, illustrated the latter when she spoke of feeling as though the validity of her presence in the gym was continually subject to question:

[T]here’s also just a little bit of fear that I would be doing something wrong, or like doing an exercise incorrectly and that, you know, they’d be like, ‘Oh, look at that rookie. She doesn’t know what she’s doing. She only comes twice a week. She’s not a real—she’s not a real gym member,’ or something.

The gym for her was experienced as a place where she was precarious and other gym members were positioned as more rightful occupiers of space. Even the potentiality of performing ‘incorrectly’ weighs women down emotionally in the gym.
To lessen the emotional risk, some women altered their practices to pre-empt making any seeming mistakes. Linda, for example, took care to avoid situations that could undermine her self-efficacy and jeopardize her sense of belonging in the gym:

I would never pick up anything that might be too heavy ‘cause I didn’t want to look stupid or not be able to do a full set. … But, yeah, just not wanting to look out of place or whatever. I just want to look comfortable. I don’t want, I don’t want to have people laugh, you know, kind of thing.

Two other women admitted to practicing exercises at home or in uncrowded areas before attempting them in the gym, underscoring the interconnection between how women feel and their concern with how they are perceived by others in the gym. Indeed, while several men spoke broadly about avoiding activities they did not know how to do or for which they would need assistance for safety reasons, there were actually only two men who spoke explicitly about performance anxieties and one who noted more general discomfort when feeling observed. In contrast, about two-thirds of women were concerned with their performance in the gym. This trepidation speaks to the extent to which gym knowledge and skill are naturalized as masculine, which heightens the emotional stakes of women’s participation in the gym by setting up an unequal premise for participation.

6.4.3 Sexualization

Women and men described experiencing the gym as a hetero-sexualized space, but this had different gendered effects. Simone (age 26) summed up the sentiment of many women when she said, as though speaking to men in the gym, “I’m not here for you to eye candy me.” Many women described experiences of feeling sexualized by men in the gym as an unpleasant, but
almost expected, by-product of working out. A number of men also confirmed they were aware of these dynamics, and were sympathetic to women’s experiences, as Adam, a 35-year-old man, noted, “I see those guys and I feel bad, sometimes feel bad for girls, um, in the gym ‘cause, yeah, um, there can be, there can be some guys there that objectify women and that whole piece.” This sort of attention was not only a nuisance, but occupied significant mental space for women, who had to work through this perceptual layer of tension to pursue their activities. Recognizing the emotional labour this entailed, Chloe was proactive in avoiding areas of the gym where she was susceptible to feeling sexualized:

I would much rather avoid that [area] than sort of always have to cognitively like fight and say, ‘Well I do have a right to be there and if I want to,’ and I, you know, I can contextualize like feeling self-conscious about like getting stares and stuff… I could if I wanted to, but I chose just not to spend that emotional energy.

Here, Chloe is managing her emotions using a spatial strategy for self-preservation—the same strategy that simultaneously contributes to her feeling of confinement. The negative emotional cost of direct unwanted advances or perceived sexual gazes factored prominently into many women’s experiences in the gym.

Furthermore, the directionality of the flow of sexualization, from men to women, added to the gendered asymmetry of women’s sense of legitimacy in the gym by bypassing their consent. Sarah was one of the few queer-identified women we spoke with and she highlighted how indiscriminate this was, pointing out that “ultimately it doesn’t matter, like whether you look gay or not. Boys still check you out.” She went on to articulate how violating this experience was for her:
I call it like ‘rapey’. Like literally with their eyes, there’s different parts of like—so the downtown [gym] you have to walk right by all these machines to get to the women’s change rooms and there’s like mirrors. Like on both sides going like this [gestures]. And there are guys that will just sit there and just like watch you do your thing and it’s just, ‘rapey.’ [laughs] Like I don’t like it. It feels gross.

There was also self-awareness on the part of women about the potential to be viewed in a sexual manner depending upon the exercise being performed and how it positioned their body or their clothing. This worry layered a sense of caution onto some women’s workouts in the gym, for fear of inadvertently attracting sexual surveillance. William (age 32), for example, explained that his friend “specifically says that she doesn’t do butt work, glute work at the gym because she feels like people might stare at her more.” Despite women’s negative experiences feeling sexualized, it is important to note that this was not to the exclusion of women’s sexual agency in the gym; women of diverse sexualities noted taking pleasure in seeing attractive people at the gym, but disliked being involuntary objects of sexualized staring.

For men, on the other hand, sexualization in the gym created anxieties, but for different, albeit related, reasons than for women. Several men described feeling pressure to be perceived favourably by women. This desire to present themselves in a pleasing way to women created continuous tension for some men, who felt they could not be entirely at ease. A few men felt vulnerable in the gym because it was difficult to regulate their appearance while exercising. This heightened self-awareness led some men to alter their comportment, as illustrated by Jim, a 43-year-old man who was guarded about his behaviour in the presence of women:

I think as a guy it’s always, um—you’re not—how to say that—you’re not perfectly relaxed. No, no, that’s not the right word. The awareness of having females around you—
you do really think more about things—not that you’re 100 percent thinking only about that, but you have that awareness of the presence, and maybe you wouldn’t do stuff like, I don’t know [laughs], like… I think for me, I tend to—because of that awareness—I tend to be more conscientious of maybe how I behave, maybe [laughs]. I wouldn’t allow, like if I’m, let’s say, running on the treadmill, and I wouldn’t allow my sweat to splatter all over the place.

This conscientious behaviour could, however, simultaneously contribute to reinforcing gender hegemony in place by positioning femininity as delicate, to be shielded from men’s fluids and gazes.

Because many men were aware of women’s negative sexualized experiences, a number of men were concerned about the potential for themselves, as men, to be perceived by women as perpetrating this objectification. In response, some men monitored their spatial proximity to women, even going as far as to consider where they could potentially—inadvertently—intersect women women’s fields of vision, as William explained,

I think I’m more cognizant of where I’m at in relation to the females in the gym. So if someone’s on a machine, or if someone’s doing weights and I’m on a machine that might, might give the impression that I’m like looking at her as she’s working out, I think I’m much more cognizant of that than with the guys.

This is not to say that there were not some men who noted taking pleasure in viewing women’s bodies as a “another reason why you go to the gym” (Amir, man, age 35); yet, on the whole, men grappled with competing pressures in relation to sexuality in the gym. On the one hand, men felt pressure to appear attractive to women; on the other, they wished to project a platonic disposition to position themselves counter to masculinities contributing to sexualization.
6.4.4 Motivation

Both women and men identified specific intra-gender situational dynamics that positively supported their gym participation by bolstering motivation to intensify physical effort or try new things. Some women derived positive reinforcement by measuring their performance against other women whom they perceived to be physically similar to themselves. Alexis, for instance, drew inspiration to pursue new goals when witnessing other women’s strength: “It’s always nice just to have a competitive edge, never really like mean, but it’s kind of just if I see someone, you know, a girl my size doing bench press then I’m going to try to see if I can match her.” At the same time, it is this very competitiveness that can conversely activate participants’ insecurities in terms of evaluation concerns. These motivational comparisons may be most beneficial when individuals perceive themselves to occupy the upper tier of the comparison. Women additionally described motivational comparisons with bodies perceived as less directly comparable. For some women, these comparisons functioned to re-position themselves in the gender hierarchy of the gym; that is, by out-performing those appearing to occupy more privileged positions. Liz (age 25), for example, enjoyed “seeing what the guys can do and if I can do it too, that’s a bit of a motivation.” This form of motivation points to the potential for on-the-ground emotional situations to be mobilized in re-drawing the boundaries of women’s gym participation.

Men’s motivational competition tended to be cultivated in a masculine group dynamic that Tom described as “competition over status, I guess, if you will. Sort of an archaic way to say it, I guess, but it’s sort of, it’s like it’s true. It’s, um, everybody wants to be the biggest guy in the gym.” In contrast to gendered dislocation, however, several men cited this mode of vying for rank in the masculine hierarchy as constructive. Eric, for example, a 30-year-old man attending
one of the commercial gyms, explained how the situational opportunity to observe other men created an internalized sense of competition he used to increase his effort:

[I]f there’s three people on [the benches] at the same time, it’s kind of like a little competition, might be subconsciously, but where you’re trying to out-lift those other two people. So, I guess that type of stuff does, would motivate—or even doing squats, like the squat rack or dead lifts and stuff like that, yeah. […] I think it’s positive.

For some men, these in-the-moment opportunities to (re)position themselves within the masculine hierarchy had a motivational effect, especially when successful. This was particularly profound for Joel, who spoke fondly about his experiences in previous a gym. When sharing equipment with men who were lifting heavier weights than he used, rather than lighten the load, Joel would “talk myself into it as opposed to talk myself out of it,” knowing the other men would assist if necessary. This sense of camaraderie, along with some underlying competition, was part of what made the gym feel supportive for Joel and contributed to achieving his “most physical success as far as size was concerned.” There are thus situations where masculinities in the gym were mobilized in beneficial ways. The same competitive attributes that at times leave some men feeling out of place, can conversely be positively taken up as a source of encouragement.

6.4.5 Attenuation

There were four main individual-level factors that women and men identified as mitigating some of the negative feelings associated with dislocation, evaluation, and sexualization. First, several participants cited their longstanding histories with feeling at ease in the gym, as Vivian, a 52-year-old woman, explained, “I’ve just been going into gyms for so long, and I’m from, and as I said from high school, so I, for many, many years I would have been the only woman or one of
the only few women in a gym environment doing some weights so I’m completely comfortable.”

Second, a few women credited experience in masculine-dominant environments as facilitating their emotional navigation of the gym. Marie, while unnerved about the constraints on women’s clothing and deliberately manoeuvring to manage those emotions, still felt that overall, “[gender] matters less for me because I’m in a science discipline so I’m really used to being the only girl around.” Third, both men and women emphasized how increasing self-confidence over the life course—not necessarily chronological age—diminished evaluation concerns, as Jocelyn, a 49-year-old woman, summed up:

[W]hen you get to a certain age, there’s a realization you really don’t care what other people think to that extent anyway. I mean obviously you wanna make sure you look good but it’s more about how you feel as opposed to how other people see you, I think. And that makes a big difference. Confidence I think.

This went hand in hand with shifting personal goals, as Melissa (age 43) described, “When I was younger like I wanted to have that physique type of thing. But, when I got older, it’s not something that interests me anymore.” These shifts highlight how individual biographies mediate the emotional experiences of gyms; they are not fixed. Finally, women and men maintained emotional equanimity by adopting specific spatio-temporal strategies, such as using gyms at certain less busy times when the potential for triggering certain anxieties and stresses was less likely because of the perceived qualities of who was there.

6.5 Discussion: Emotional geographies and the gendered boundaries of physical activity

Our analysis reveals that the gym is generative of three in-situ processes of dislocation, evaluation, and sexualization that collectively configure an unevenly gendered emotional
architecture of place. Through this interstitial structure, the boundaries of localized hierarchies of masculinities and femininities become felt by men and women in ways that create tensions and anxieties, which in turn, reinforce gender boundaries on physical activity participation. On one level, participants felt a sense of dislocation due to their perceived marginalized positions in the gender regime of the gym with regards to their own expressions of masculinity and femininity. Feeling gendered-out-of-place was not only a matter of feminine subjugation, but men also described feeling marginalized when their masculinities misaligned with hegemonic masculinity. While both women and men experienced self-consciousness and displeasure with physique comparisons, women’s evaluation concerns were additionally layered with pressure to demonstrate belonging in place through normative feminine clothing and ‘proper’ exercise performance. Both women and men experienced the gym as a (hetero)sexually-charged environment, which threaded their gym geographies with apprehension and occasional pleasures. Although sexual tensions reinforced gender relations in an oppositional and binary format, their impact was not unidirectional; rather, both women and men cited these dynamics as significant sources of discomfort, albeit for reasons that were differentially gendered. The net effect of this emotional topography was to catch women and men in a web of cognitive wrangling over their legitimacy in the gym vis-à-vis localized hierarchies of masculinities and femininities.

Given the gendered asymmetries of these emotional contours, we argue that emotional geographies are one way in which gender disparities in physical activity are (re)produced and naturalized at the scale of the everyday exercise environment. Our findings empirically advance Thien and del Casino Jr.’s (2012) proposal that the gendering of health is simultaneously about the processes of emotion. Importantly, the emotional processes of gendered inequity we identified are not detectable at the neighbourhood level, evidencing the need to unsettle the
privilege afforded to obesogenic environments in the geographical literature (Andrews et al., 2012; Colls & Evans, 2013). Indeed, without looking indoors, geographies of physical activity miss significant gendering processes altogether. Kath Browne’s work has shown how seemingly mundane indoor places, like restaurants (2007) and public toilets (2004), are implicated in maintaining gendered and heterosexualized regimes of power. This speaks to the importance of continuing to disrupt the “fallacy of enclosure” and venture inside everyday physical activity places to advance health equity (Biehler & Simon, 2010).

Our findings demonstrate that the role of place in the gendering of physical activity is more complex than binary gender differences. This is significant because while the walkability literature may distinguish empirical differences by sex, it misses insights that a relational approach to gender can reveal; namely, important similarities between women and men, as well as differences among women and among men (Bottorff et al., 2011; Thien & Del Casino Jr., 2012). We identified several similarities in men’s and women’s emotional experiences, such as shared dislocation in relation to hegemonic masculinity and evaluation concerns. Moreover, emotional processes interwove with gender relations in ways that had the greatest overall negative cumulative effect for women due, in part, to hierarchical differences among women. Women’s emotional geographies were additionally wrapped up in a fine-grained hierarchy of femininities that served to further delegitimize women’s participation in the gym overall by narrowing the scope of ‘appropriate’ gym femininities. This was particularly clear in the case of evaluation where women described feeling that fitting into place meant signaling the ‘correct’ femininity with their clothing and exercise performance, pointing to the significance of the body as an “emotionalized site” in the gender and place relationship (Johnston, 2009).
Women and men made conscious choices about how to preserve emotional wellbeing and conserve emotional energies, underscoring Colls’ (2004) point that emotions are not imposed by context. The sequelae of this, however, was in some instances to circumscribe women’s and men’s engagement with the gym in ways that narrowed the scope of gym participation for some users. This was most apparent in gendered dislocation whereby some women and men strategically mapped their gym geographies to avoid encountering hegemonic masculinity. This had the material effect of delimiting the nature of some participants’ engagement with the gym, but also conversely reinforcing a hegemonic hold on certain spaces and activities in the gym. The complex role of agency in the emotional geographies of the gym underscores the importance of attending to experiential accounts of physical activity and provides a counterpoint to the overly deterministic work on the built environment (Andrews et al., 2012; Blacksher & Lovasi, 2012).

Despite the overall veneer of discomfort, some participants cited motivation from gendered comparison and competition as a positive aspect of their gym experience, encouraging them to increase their efforts or try new activities. This points to the potential of gender relations to be harnessed in supportive ways that expand, rather than contract, the scope of physical activity participation. Indeed, for some men in particular, there was a sense of masculine solidarity that was emotionally beneficial; however, in some instances, this motivation had a positive effect precisely because it resulted in privileged re-positioning in the gender hierarchy of the gym that subordinated others. This paradox raises the question as to how we can mobilize potentially supportive aspects of gender relations while de-hierarchizing their structure.

The intimate, and invisible, nature of this emotional architecture suggests that interventions for gender equity would benefit from being empathetically attuned to the subtleties of place-based experiences. Taking these emotional geographies into account could extend
public health messaging to show what taking up physical activity guidelines looks and feels like within particular places. Such messaging could use first-hand testimonials to expose gendered anxieties and tensions, thereby challenging and disrupting their routine embeddedness. In addition, specific environmental changes could be explored to intervene in these emotional geographies. While these emotional geographies cut across the specificities of different gym environments, there were instances where participants credited contextual features with ameliorating emotionally negative effects, as in the case of more socio-economically diverse gyms.

We wish to point out that our study was limited to an English-speaking Western context, which may express a particular cultural relationship with the gym that differs elsewhere. Our sample was relatively ethnically homogenous and future research should explore the emotional geographies of physical activity from a more intersectional perspective. Finally, we also recognize that due to gender norms, men overall may have been less vocal than women about emotionality in the gym. Even if this were the case, this potential silence points to a quality about men’s emotional geographies of the gym that warrants further investigation.

6.6 Conclusions
In this article, we proposed the notion of a critical geography of physical activity to expose the socio-spatial processes implicated in gendered inequities in physical activity. Our research demonstrates that such a critical approach, centering gender and emotions, productively opens up geographies of physical activity to places and scales foreclosed by favouritism of neighbourhood built environments. Emotions are an intractable part of how place is implicated in the gendering of physical activity. The emotional geographies of the gym collectively contributed to an anxious
sense of gendered displacement that not only positioned women and men as unequal players on
the gym floor, but (re)formed gender hierarchies in ways that circumscribed the participation of
both men and women. As such, emotions and gender must be incorporated not only into our
understandings of the geographies of physical activity but also into our wider geographical
analyses of everyday life, health, and place. Moving forward, critical geographies of physical
activity need to interrogate how other types of fitness places may contribute to social inequities
in physical activity participation.

6.7 References

ethnographic case study of the gym in British bodybuilding culture. Social Science &
Medicine, 60(4), 877-891.

potential of health geography. Social Science & Medicine, 75(11), 1925-1932.

Auerbach, C. F., & Silverstein, L. B. (2003). Qualitative data: An introduction to coding and

‘rigour’ in interview analysis. Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers, 22(4),
505-525.

environments as active political-ecological spaces. Progress in Human Geography, 35(2),
172-192.


Chapter 7 | “Ok, gender! Where are you?” Conclusions

7.1 Introduction

*Stephanie:* So how do you think gender matters or doesn’t matter in the gym?

*Liz:* It’s a hundred percent. Like the guys are over in the weight section. They do a small little bit on the treadmill and that’s where they’re supposed to be. Like every guy I’ve ever talked to about going to the gym—I haven’t seen many of them there. Like I don’t workout with many of my friends, but they’re always like, [changes voice] ‘Yeah, I was lifting, I was doing this.’ [...] [men] associate endurance with femininity because women are on the treadmills all the time. Like you go in, 9 times out of 10 the treadmills and the ellipticals are filled with ladies. There might be a dude, maybe, uh, they’ll be on a bike before they’d be on a treadmill and then it’s all guys over on the weight side. I would say over the last year I’ve seen a huge shift in the amount of women that are over lifting weights as well and I’m, I’m part of that shift. I’m part of the people getting off the treadmill because I feel like nowadays it’s become more attractive for women to be strong rather than be thin. And the ideology has always been cardio makes you thinner. You burn more calories. So if you want to be like a runway model you’re going to go run your buns off. Whereas now everybody’s like, ‘no I want a big ass.’ I’m gonna go put the buns on, right, by lifting the weights. It’s really nice to see that the separation has become less, but you definitely do still see guys doing weights, women doing cardio, and women doing classes.

In this thesis I set out to answer the central question: What is the role of the gym in the gendering of physical activity? In doing so, I have sought to advance a more critical geography of physical activity—one that attunes to experience and agency while centring on the socio-spatial processes and gendered power structures enabling and constraining physical activity participation. My goal was to expand our possibilities for intervention to the scale of the everyday exercise environment to improve gender equity in physical activity participation. I employed a multi-method qualitative research design combining semi-structured interviews, participant-generated drawing, and journaling with 52 women and men in a mid-sized Canadian city, allowing me to excavate the gender regime of the gym as an institution and to assess the implications for gender equity in physical activity participation. This thesis demonstrates that the gender regime of gyms
contributes to the naturalization of gender differences in physical activity. My findings indicate that efforts to close the gender gap in physical activity must account for the place-based sets of gender relations and structures that work to routinize gender differences in physical activity participation in everyday life.

In Chapter 2, I developed a conceptual framework linking together feminist geographies, health geographies, and emotional geographies to consider how gender and emotions connect with health and place. Within this, taking up critiques that existing geographical work on physical activity has been overly deterministic and failed to account for agency and experience (Andrews, Hall, Evans, & Colls, 2012; Blacksher & Lovasi, 2012; Rosenberg, 2016), I conceptualized what a critical geography of physical activity might look like. Drawing inspiration from critical geographies of obesity, which uncouple fatness and disease (Colls & Evans, 2013), I argued that critical geographies of physical activity should challenge the alignment of physical activity and obesity objectives. Doing so opens up the possibility for geographical work to more inclusively consider the environmental and spatial factors that shape a range of health and social benefits accrued through physical activity, not limited to body weight.

Critical geographies are broadly concerned with issues of justice and use social theory to unmask power dynamics within the status quo and disrupt taken-for-granted categories (Blomley, 2009; Painter, 2000). I proposed that critical geographies of physical activity be skeptical of health orthodoxies and assumptions that moralize about individual behaviour (Brown & Duncan, 2002; Colls & Evans, 2013), foreground questions of equity, agency, and experience (Andrews et al., 2012; Blacksher & Lovasi, 2012; Colls & Evans, 2013), and attend to the socio-spatial processes and factors that work to support or exclude people from being
active (Colls & Evans, 2013; Hopkins, 2008). From this perspective, I took up gendered inequities in physical activity as a critical geographical concern and focused on the role of an everyday exercise place in their (re)production.

To develop a methodology for a critical geography of physical activity, in Chapter 3, I explored the potential of participant-generated drawing as method for surfacing emotions, supporting a participant-centred research process, and reinforcing rigour. Findings from my pilot study supported the methodological utility of drawing, in terms of some participants valuing its reflective function and acquiring new self-knowledge. At the same time, my analysis pointed to the importance of the deployment of drawing critically and flexibly, with attention to the communicative preferences of participants and the particular limitations of different sensory modes of expression. Taking together these findings with insights from qualitative health research outside of geography, I argued that drawing is a useful method to add to critical health geography’s qualitative palette as a way to diversify the array of communicative options available to participants and to challenge some of the traditional power dynamics of research by affording participants room for reflection and exercise ownership over research time. With regards to critical geographies of physical activity and the gym specifically, my findings demonstrated that participants credited drawing with generating new insights into their own experiences. Based on this pilot work, I incorporated drawing as a method within my research design to foster reflection about aspects of gym experience that may be perceived as too common-sense to mention in interviews or do not become apparent without further reflection.

In Chapter 4, I addressed the question: How does gender manifest in the gym environment? Here I teased apart the various features of the gym that contributed to the gendered performativity of place. My findings illustrated that the gym, as a place, forms gender in ways
that are trans-scalar and multisensorial, characterized by bodily materialities, the soundscape, visual fields, the physical environment, and the imaginary. I showed how collectively these structures work to (re)form the gym as a gender dimorphic place that sets women and men on an unequal playing field. As such, the gym as an institution, can be seen to work to codify gender differences in ways that constrain possibilities for practicing physical activity to bifurcated ways of ‘doing gender.’

Next, in Chapter 5, I examined how gender influences what women and men do in the gym and the micro-geographies of their gym use; that is, their gym practices and mobilities. This question was particularly important in order to ascertain how wider gender disparities and differences in physical activity participation are (re)produced, reinforced, and challenged at the scale of the gym. My findings revealed three socio-spatial gender processes at play (embodying gender ideals, policing gender performance, and spatializing gender relations) that shaped practices and mobilities, along with a fourth theme illustrating the agency some individuals interject to disrupt gender hegemony. What this chapter made clear is that mitigating gender inequities in physical activity requires relational, rather than binary (men-only, women-only), approaches. It was not only women, but men too experienced significant limitations in their gym participation due to the presiding gender order of the gym. Interventions for gender equity in the gym therefore need to go beyond engaging women to comprehensively contend with the sets of situated gender relations that sustain gender hegemony.

Finally, in Chapter 6, I explored how gender matters in the emotional geographies of the gym. Taking my cue from the emotional geographies literature which see emotions as mediating the relationship between people and place, I conceptualized emotions to be embedded in the mutually constitutive relationship between gender and place. Here, I found three processes
(dislocation, evaluation, and sexualization) that generated feelings of gender displacement and configured an unevenly gendered emotional architecture of place—although individual factors could mediate some negative emotional outcomes. It was through this interstitial structure that the boundaries of localized hierarchies of masculinities and femininities became felt by men and women in ways that created tensions and anxieties, which in turn, reinforced the hegemonic gender regime. While both women and men were caught in a web of cognitive wrangling over their legitimacy in the gym vis-à-vis localized hierarchies of masculinities and femininities, these emotional processes had the greatest overall negative cumulative effect for women. Women and men made conscious choices about how to preserve emotional wellbeing, but the sequelae of this had a material effect of circumscribing women’s and men’s engagement with the gym in ways that narrowed the scope of gym participation for some users. At the same time, several similarities in men’s and women’s emotional experiences, such as shared dislocation in relation to hegemonic masculinity, demonstrate that the role of place in the gendering of physical activity is more complex than binary gender differences.

### 7.2 Contributions

Overall, based on these findings, I argue that gyms set the stage for the normalization of gender differences and disparities in exercise participation. While gyms are potentially sites for health promotion, they are also places where gendered inequities in health opportunities emerge. For one, my research shows that the place of the gym is performative of gender binaries in ways that ultimately delegitimize women’s participation (Chapter 4). The everyday (re)production of gendered polarities in the gym naturalizes gender differences as part of the exercise environment. This highlights the mutually constitutive relationship between gender and place as
connected *through* physical activity, in contrast to obesogenic environments work that takes
environmental features as determinants of behaviour (Townsend & Lake, 2009). Next, in line
with gender and health approaches that conceptualize health behaviour as a way of ‘doing’
gender (Courtenay, 2000; Dyck, 2003; Lyons, 2009; Saltonstall, 1993), physical activity
practices in my study were taken up as signifiers of masculinity and femininity in the specific
context of the gym. As demonstrated in Chapter 5, ‘genderist’ socio-spatial processes acted as a
constraint on physical activity participation by delimiting participants’ activities and uses of
space to those that corresponded with the ‘correct’ masculinities and femininities in place. In this
way, the ‘doing’ of gender vis-à-vis the ‘doing’ of physical activity continually (re)formed the
social hierarchies of place. Finally, as revealed in Chapter 6, practicing physical activity in the
gym is tied to the emotional work of avoiding displacement from gendered categories. Taken
together, these findings indicate that physical activity is a gendered practice that has a
multilayered and mutually constitutive relationship with place. The question is not *if* gender
matters for physical activity participation in other places—be it the neighbourhood, the park, or
the pool—but *how*. This means that geographies of physical activity that fail to account for
gender may miss significant features of the links between place and physical activity.

This thesis illustrates the productive possibilities of intersecting health and emotional
geographies as a way to counter deterministic directions and place agency into geographies of
physical activity (Andrews et al., 2012; Blacksher & Lovasi, 2012). Specifically, my work
advances both the fields of health and emotional geographies by empirically substantiating Thien
and del Casino Jr.’s (2012) argument that emotions are imbricated in the gendering of health.
Emotional geographies are integral to understanding how, why, and where people engage in
physical activity. The micro-geographies of women’s and men’s gym use were driven, to a
significant extent, by a desire to *feel* ‘in place’ in the gym. To feel ‘in place’ involved establishing one’s position in the institutionalized hierarchy of masculinities and femininities as signified by workout practices and bodily appearances. Exercise and gym spatial practices were a mechanism by which “bodies were used to (re)place individuals within the category ‘woman’” (Browne, 2005, p. 225) and ‘man.’ This (re)placing—even when a conscious choice on the part of women and men to conserve emotional energies and avoid potential social sanction—had the adverse material side effect of delimiting and differentiating women’s and men’s participation in the gym.

Taking geographies of physical activity indoors—to the place of the gym—revealed how seemingly mundane physical activity places are sites where ‘common-sense’ assumptions about gender become part and parcel of how physical activity is ‘done,’ and filter into aspects of everyday life more widely (Browne, 2004, 2007). My findings thus evidence the importance of upending the spatial privilege afforded to neighbourhood in geographies of physical activity. The critical approach I have advocated for in this thesis challenges the notion of indoor environments and other physical activity places as bounded, instead recognizing their interconnections with other places and scales (Biehler & Simon, 2010). This was evident in the way that the gym ‘does’ gender in ways that naturalize masculinity in place by relying on the geographies of women’s labour *outside* the gym for women’s participation *inside* the gym. The ‘genderist’ regulation of the performance of women’s bodies—their size, style, bodily fluids—in the gym required work on the body that stretched the geographies of women’s gym use outside, into other aspects of their lives (Chapter 4). In addition to this appearance-work, some women admitted to practicing exercises at home or in uncrowded areas before attempting them in the main gym for fear of performing ‘incorrectly’ (Chapter 6). These findings speak to the paradox that while the
geographies implicated in women’s gym participation are expansive beyond the gym, their
geographies within the gym are often contracted, as illustrated by the minimizing of women’s
consumption of gym space and time (Chapter 5). This spatial asymmetry further decentres
femininities from the gym, and articulates a problem of equity in access to physical activity
participation. These hidden geographies of women’s gym use empirically highlight how indoor
spaces maintain a “fluidity with other scales along with their active, relational character”
(Biehler & Simon, 2010, p. 176), and points to the need to further consider inter-scalar relations
in geographies of physical activity.

One of the unique findings of my research is the multisensorial nature of the gendered
performativity of the gym (Chapter 4). The gendered binary materialized because masculinity
took up space visually, sonically, affectively, and haptically, while femininity was muted,
minimized, and contained. It is especially significant that masculinity took up space because
men’s bodily boundaries were porous (e.g., emitting loud sounds, wearing loose-fitting clothes,
being ‘allowed’ to sweat) and this fluidity was part of the performance of masculine hegemony.
This stands in contrast to Longhurst’s (2001) influential work on geographies of the body that
sees the ‘leakiness’ of women’s bodily boundaries as a source of subordination in space. In the
case of the gym, the ‘leakiness’ of men’s bodies did not jeopardize the hegemonic position of
masculinity or render men’s bodies out of place, but instead was part of how masculinity was
naturalized in place. Indeed, in the place of the gym, women would be out if place if their bodies
‘leaked’ in these ways. Recall Emily who, in Chapter 4, felt that she could not vocalize effort
during exercise and be ‘loud’ as a woman in the gym. A loud woman in the gym would be a
form of what Schippers’ (2007) calls a ‘pariah femininity’ (see Chapter 5), when a woman enacts
hegemonic masculine traits. This suggests that in feminist geographies we need to further
interrogate and destabilize our own gendered dualisms about bodily boundaries (women/leaky versus men/contained), as well as explore places where ‘leaky’ bodies can be sources of power.

In addition, we might push feminist geographies to think beyond sensory dualisms. For example, in her progress report on gender and geography, Lynda Johnston (2016) asks us to think about how places can work to “dismantle dualisms” (p. 669) and points to examples of her work on female body building, Browne’s work on women being mistaken for men, and Longhurst’s work on men with breasts. These examples, however, are limited to a focus on the physical, ‘fleshy’ body. Despite there being more work to do on material corporeal geographies (Longhurst & Johnston, 2014), we might also ask: what about the sonorous body or the olfactory body? Given the multisensorial performativity of gendered binaries in the gym, I suggest that there is more work to be done in feminist geographies to engage with the sensorial diverse ways that place is performative of gender. Sound was an especially significant dimension of the gender binary of the gym; thus, engaging with sonic geographies in particular may be necessary to unpack the gendered power relations of place. For example, Duffy & Waitt (2013, p. 470) conceive of the capacity of sound to alienate or include because “sound connects us to uneven networks of power. Sound coheres subjectivities, places and a sense of ‘togetherness’.”

Despite the place of the gym being overall performative of a gender binary, my research shows complexity beneath the binaries in the form of the micro level socio-spatial processes that hierarchized masculinities and femininities. My relational approach to gender (Bottorff, Oliffe, Robinson, & Carey, 2011; Connell, 1987; Connell, 2012) revealed important similarities between women’s and men’s experiences, as well as differences among men’s and among women’s experiences. Although overall taking the greatest toll on women’s participation, hegemonic masculinity in the gym constrained the potential health opportunities of both women
and men. Therefore, closing the gender gap in physical activity requires reworking these hierarchical sets of gender relations. Interventions following from my findings could take the form of gender-transformative approaches to health—adopted with success in fields such as HIV/AIDS and gender-based violence—that aim to reshape health-damaging features of gender relations to improve health (Dworkin, Fleming, & Colvin, 2015; Gupta, 2000). These types of interventions work to redefine aspects of unhealthy masculinities and inequitable gender relations in their messaging and delivery to encourage changes in health behaviour and norms (Gupta, 2000). There is a risk, however, of co-opting aspects of masculinities and femininities in ways that reinforce harmful stereotypes (Fleming, Lee, & Dworkin, 2014; Haines, Johnson, Carter, & Arora, 2009). This caution is particularly germane to the gym, given the saliency of the vivid gender stereotypes I described in Chapter 4.

At the institutional level of the gym, gender-transformative interventions could involve communications campaigns, such as posters or social media, to disrupt gendered patterns of taking up space and the gender-coding of activities, as well as to affirm the legitimacy of all gym participants with positive messages that de-emphasize performance and appearance. Another type of intervention to explore could include dispersing traditionally gendered activities throughout gym environments to spatially challenge ‘the gendered lines,’ as suggested by two of my participants. Tom, for example, suspected that interspersing cardiovascular and weight training equipment “would allow men and women to sort of merge a little bit more.” Such arrangements could help to coax more gender diverse movement through gym spaces and, by encouraging greater gender proximity, promote gender cross-over in use of equipment. There are examples of gyms doing things differently. For instance, the online news outlet Bust recently profiled a gym called “Liberation Barbell” in Portland, Oregon that brands itself as an “intersectional feminism-
focused gym” (Gunz, n.d.) and literally “invites you to take up space” (Liberation Barbell, 2017, n.p.)

On an optimistic note, interventions at the micro-level of the gym hold promise to improve gender equity in physical activity more widely. As Biehler and Simon (2010, p. 186) contend, transformations indoors have the potential to transform society-environment relations outdoors, noting that “ecologies in indoor spaces seldom stay there.” My research makes clear that interventions to improve gender equity in physical activity participation can be strengthened by accounting for the place of the gym in geographies of physical activity.

7.3 Unanticipated observations: Tensions, contradictions, and interventions in gender talk
Throughout this research I have strived to centre participants’ agency, in particular through my use of methods such as drawing and journaling to offer diverse modes of communication and foster a participant-centred research process. It was clear across methods that participants responded with critical reflection about gender in the gym generally and specifically in relation to their own experiences. At the same time, I noted several seeming tensions and contradictions in the ways some participants spoke about gender within and across data types. These incongruities suggest a disconnect between how some participants perceive or are willing to identify gender as influencing their gym practices and what I, as a researcher, conceptualize as gendered.

When asked directly in interviews about how gender affected their exercise practices, a number of men and women responded that gender did not affect what they did in the gym. The majority of these participants, however, elsewhere in their interviews and journals described gendered experiences, particularly in terms of the spatializing gender relations and policing
gender performance themes discussed in Chapter 5. Frank, for instance, provided a clear example of this tension when he stated that his gym practices were not affected by his gender:

Obviously I do what I wish to do. I’m gonna do exactly what I have in mind. It’s my body type, determines what I do, right, not my gender, right, and what sport I’m interested in and what I want out, you know, the results that I want, right. It doesn’t, you know, I’m not intimidated by the stereotype.

Yet, as revealed in spatializing gender relations (Chapter 5, section 5.4.3), when I asked Frank “Are there any exercises or machines that you specifically avoid or pursue for any reason?” he responded that he avoids “where the big guys generally hang out.” Frank did not connect his sense of masculinity to his decision to avoid spaces dominated by hegemonic masculinity and how this, in turn, led him to circumscribe his mobility in the gym. This seeming discrepancy is similar to what Haines and colleagues (2009) observed in relation to asking young people about gender and marijuana use. They found that participants did not describe their practices as gendered when the question was posed explicitly in gendered terms. When participants were asked about the social activities surrounding their marijuana use, however, participants articulated a gendered social context and masculine and feminine ways of using marijuana. This mirrors what I observed when I posed a broader question to Frank about his equipment choices, without mentioning gender. Haines et al. (2009, p. 2035) contend that this scenario may actually be a reflection of agency in that this “reluctance to ‘stereotype’ use and users and operates to cloak the idea that social categories matter in personal choices.” Some of my participants may have similarly been reluctant to attach gender categories to their own experiences.

Another explanation is that gender may operate in ways that participants do not immediately recognize or categorize as gendered. Indeed, Butler’s (1990) conception of gender...
performativity claims that gender is not something we can always know we are doing. This explanation, however, poses a challenge to my commitment to honour participants’ agency as authors of their experiences in that it does not allow for a subject that is “potentially able to reflect upon and actively negotiate, appropriate or resist [gender discourses]” (Nelson, 1999, p. 332). Geographer Lise Nelson (1999) argued that we can “still conceive of a conscious, thinking subject without necessarily invoking the autonomous subject” (p. 341) by “[a]ccepting that ‘conscious action’ is not unmediated, that it is always encumbered with and influenced by (conscious or unconscious) constitutive discourses” (p. 348). Indeed, Butler (2004), in her later work, seems to agree with Nelson (1999) that a form of situated agency with which we can be critically reflective about gender is possible:

> That my agency is riven with paradox does not mean it is impossible. It means only that paradox is the condition of its possibility. As a result, the ‘I’ that I am finds itself at once constituted by norms and dependent on them but also endeavors to live in ways that maintain a critical and transformative relation to them. (Butler, 2004, p. 3)

From this perspective such seeming contradictions are not contradictions at all, but are to be expected and part of the unstable positions we occupy in relation to gender.

These types of tensions in individual responses may also make more sense when we contextualize them within socio-spatial processes. From an individual vantage point, it may not be possible for any one participant to view the constellation of practices that together spatialize hegemonic gender relations, but when pieced together with those of other people in place, the picture becomes clear. For example, an individual woman singularly minimizing her consumption of space in the gym is not necessarily a gendered social practice, but when fitted together in relational context with the practices of other men and women it takes on gendered
signification and can be understood as part of the web of socio-spatial relations that underpin the gender regime of the gym.

Some participants also actively situated themselves outside of the effects of gender, even using specific language that de-gendered their experiences, such as identifying as a gender “anomaly” (Alexis) or labelling their experiences as “gender neutral” (Angela). Angela, for instance, explained: “my experience has sort of almost been gender neutral. I do as much cardio as I do weight lifting.” She even expressed concern about her capacity to contribute to this study because of her perceptions of having a gender-free perspective, proclaiming at the end of the interview, after I thanked her for her valuable contribution, “That’s really great ‘cause I was really worried, I feel like I’m gonna be the one who’s like ‘gender’s not important in the gym, everyone’s the same’.” It is striking that she believes that she has not added any insights on gender, when her interview was one of the most gender-salient, particularly in terms of her resolve to break gender stereotypes, as revealed in my discussion of breaking binaries in Chapter 5 (section 5.4.4). This also highlights differences in our conceptions of gender. Angela felt that because she did not perform a stereotype and held an egalitarian worldview about gender, her experience would be outside of my focus. At the same time, Angela exemplifies the challenge that Nelson poses to Butler’s earlier treatment of agency, in that she makes conscious choices about her femininity (via her exercise practices) to push up against gender boundaries; yet, her experience is still constrained by them. Overall, these examples highlight the fraught and fluid nature of gendered agency in the gym, and more widely.

Other participants expressed difficulties talking about gender. Adam, for example, indicated that he had never refrained from doing something because of his gender, but later, when asked how his gender affected what he did in the gym, found it awkward to comment on:
Um, wow, these are tough questions. [laughs]… Um… I guess, yeah, I guess there are certain things that you don’t know because you think maybe guys shouldn’t be doing that kind of stuff like the, um, you know, that inner thigh machine, you know, like those—guys, you don’t tend to see guys using those machines. So maybe those sorts of things, like, ‘Oh, no maybe I shouldn’t do that.’

It is noteworthy how Adam initially expressed difficulty in addressing the question, yet upon further reflection commented critically about gendered policing that limited men’s participation. In the moment it was unclear whether the content of the question was challenging or he found it awkward to talk about; however, Adam’s comment at the conclusion of our interview suggests he may have been surprised by the gendered issues I was asking about versus what he conceived as gendered:

**Stephanie:** Well, is there anything you would add to what you’ve already told me in the interview that we didn’t cover that you think is important about your gym experience at all?

**Adam:** I don’t think so. No, I don’t know. That was very in-depth, yeah. That was, not what I was expecting, but it was good.

**Stephanie:** Oh really, what were you expecting?

**Adam:** I don’t know. I wasn’t sure what I was expecting, but I wasn’t expecting that, but it was very interesting. So thank you.

That fact that Adam found the interview “interesting” and expressed appreciation for that, highlights how the interview encounter itself can be a reflexive moment for engaging with the tensions between gender as in-between something ‘done’ to us and something we actively chose to ‘do’ (Nelson, 1999). Indeed, others have argued that the interview encounter itself is
performative (Haines et al., 2009; Latham, 2003). For Pini (2005, p. 202), in her interviews with men leaders about women’s (lack of) involvement in an agricultural association, “the gender focus of the research, and the gendered context of the research environment are also critical factors in mediating the relationship between interviewer and interviewee.” My positionality as a woman asking about gender undoubtedly played a role in the performative construction of the interview encounter.

These incongruities also highlight the instabilities of the processes gendering place and space. Browne (2007, p. 1011), for instance, speaks of how diversity in the ways that women reacted to othering processes in the spaces of restaurants illustrated that “there is slipperiness, fluidity, disjunctures, and noise, such that the (re)formation of heterosexual space is never secure. Within these mutualities women may or may not ‘give a shit,’ their reactions as slippery as the power relations that heterosexualize space.” This provides a way to think about the ways that some people in the gym may challenge gendered othering processes in certain ways, yet be complicit or overlook them in others—and the latter may be an expression of agency, or resistance, or embeddedness in gendered structures. Gregson and Rose (2000, p. 441) also acknowledge this potential for “slippage” in the performativity of space in that spaces may at once re-inscribe dominant forms of power while disrupting others. For example, they reflect on how the spaces of carboot sales reproduced traditional forms of gender relations, while challenging dominant retail structures.

Evidence from my research indicates that participant-generated drawing and journaling can be useful methods in a critical geography of physical activity in terms of supporting participants to critically reflect on gender and their environments. Corroborating findings from my pilot study (Chapter 3), more than half of participants in my primary research indicated that
the drawing activity sparked them to think about aspects of their experience that they had not thought of previously or did not mention in the interview. The following exchange with Simone illustrates not only the efficacy of drawing and journaling for fostering reflection and generating new knowledge about gender, but also the potential for these methods to serve as interventions themselves into gender-awareness:

**Stephanie:** So did doing this [drawing] make you think of anything you hadn’t really thought about before?

**Simone:** Um, I hadn’t really, let’s see... Never really thought about how I felt compared to, to like how I feel compared to other people when I, when I more when I looked down upon, is it is more, yeah, I’m not as comfortable as some people. It reflects on what kind of stuff I’m willing to do. [...] 

**Stephanie:** So is there anything you would add to what you’ve already told me based on your drawing?

**Simone:** I don’t know, I feel like now when I go to the gym I’m going to think about this.

**Stephanie:** Cool!

**Simone:** And it’s gonna make me like, ‘Ok, gender! Where are you?’ like, you know, that sort of thing. Yeah, I’ll be intrigued. Like, I don’t know, I’m intrigued to see how it impacts how I look at things now or if it will. We’ll see.

**Stephanie:** I’ll be intrigued as well.

Simone proclaims that she will be looking for gender in the gym, and she did go on to reflect at length in her journal, with comments such as, “It seemed like Sunday afternoon was more a “guy” training time whereas the day before I had seen more women” (February 1, 2015). For Simone, drawing surfaced dimensions of her experience that she had not explicitly considered.
prior to our research encounter and journaling provided a platform to further consider these new realizations and ideas about gender. Several other participants commented to me that following the interview that gender was something they would be more attuned to in the gym and noted observations to this effect in their journals. Journaling itself then was an intervention into participants’ self-knowledge about gender—an area I intend to further explore in future work.

7.4 General limitations

There are two inter-related limitations to my study. For one, largely reflective of the research setting, my sample was relatively homogenous. Although my participants represented a great deal of socioeconomic and age diversity, they were primarily white-identifying Canadians. Six participants identified as gay, lesbian, or pansexual, but there were no participants of gender-diverse identities (e.g., transgender); all identified as either men or women. I have endeavoured to highlight diverse perspectives where possible in my presentation of results. Future research should purposefully sample a more diverse population to permit a more intersectional analysis. My primary concern was gendered inequities in physical activity participation, but there are also disparities in physical actively along other axes of difference, such as race/ethnicity (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2007), sexuality (Calzo, Roberts, Corliss, Blood, Kroshus, & Austin, 2014), and disability (Caroll et al., 2014). Second, I focused on the gender regime of gyms in a Western English-speaking context, and it is likely that specificities of gender relations differ within other cultural milieus.

Finally, on a methodological note, despite instructions asking participants to complete the journals with as much detail as possible, the extent to which this was taken up varied. While the purpose of the journals was to provide an open ended way for participants to reflect on the
observations and experiences most salient to them, and thus heterogeneity was expected, in the future I would explore additional ways to encourage participants’ to take a detailed approach without being overly prescriptive.

7.5 Future directions

Based on my findings, I foresee five primary future directions for geographical research into gender and physical activity. First, more work is needed into critical geographies of physical activity that seek to identify the processes implicated social inequities in physical activity, including and intersecting with gender, across places and scales. This includes taking an intersectional approach to better understand how physical activity inequities along the lines of race/ethnicity, sexuality, disability status, and other features of social difference are (re)produced in various physical activity places, including the gym. Second, research is needed into the roles that other types of fitness sites, such as pools or running tracks, play in the gendering of physical activity. The gym is only one particular place for being active and other types of environments may engender distinct socio-spatial processes of exclusion or inclusion. Third, geographers should consider how non-fitness related everyday places may be related to gendered inequities in physical activity in terms of their roles in routinizing gendered physical activity norms. For example, it was clear in my study that the gendered imaginary of the gym lived well-beyond everyday experiences on the gym floor. Fourth, research is needed into how gendered processes of inequity are interconnected with geographies outside the gym. In particular, we need to better understand how the hidden geographies of women’s gym use—that is, how some women’s participation was predicated on preparation outside the gym related to appearance—create barriers to access. Finally, we need to explore what can be learned from other types of physical
activity environments where gender divisions may be less pervasive, as Melissa mused about the pool:

Like, ok it sucks those 5 minutes from the bathroom to the pool, but once you’re in the pool, all you see, you’re looking at the bottom of the pool with the line or you’re looking at the person’s feet in front of you. It’s like you’re not really checking anyone out. It’s kind of impossible. So maybe it is rather, uh, an equal opportunity environment, the swimming—you know, ‘cause nobody sees you’re fat giggling.

There may be insights to glean from other types of physical activity environments to inform ways of designing gyms differently to more effectively promote inclusivity.

7.6 Conclusions

Place matters in the gendering of physical activity. My research demonstrates that an everyday exercise environment, specifically the gym, is implicated in gendered inequities and differences in physical activity participation. Through a range of performativities, socio-spatial processes, and emotional geographies, the gender regime of the gym hierarchized masculinities and femininities in ways that circumscribed the participation of men and women in both different and similar ways. One of the key messages from my research is that interventions for gender equity in physical activity need to go beyond binary approaches to engage with the complex sets of gender relations sustaining gender hegemony in place (Connell, 2012). It was not only women but men, too, who were negatively affected by hegemonic masculinity in the gym. Although gyms are ostensibly sites for health promotion, my findings indicate that they are also places where gender disparities in physical activity participation are naturalized as common-sense. Contravening the gendered norms of the gym can exact social and emotional costs, which creates barriers to participating in the full scope of potential gym-based health opportunities. Moving
forward, critical geographies of physical activity should work to expose and upend micro contextual features that routinize gendered ways of ‘doing’ physical activity in a variety of everyday environments.

7.7 References


A: Research ethics board approval

May 27, 2013

Ms. Stephanie Coen
Ph.D. Candidate
Department of Geography
Queen's University
Mackintosh-Corry Hall, Room D316
Kingston, ON K7L 3N6

GREB Ref #: GGOE-153-13; Romeo # 6009836
Title: "GGOE-153-13 Evaluating the utility of drawing as a method for geographical research on gym environments: A pilot study"

Dear Ms. Coen:

The General Research Ethics Board (GREB), by means of a delegated board review, has cleared your proposal entitled "GGOE-153-13 Evaluating the utility of drawing as a method for geographical research on gym environments: A pilot study" for ethical compliance with the Tri-Council Guidelines (TCPS) and Queen's ethics policies. In accordance with the Tri-Council Guidelines (article D.1.6) and Senate Terms of Reference (article G), your project has been cleared for one year. At the end of each year, the GREB will ask if your project has been completed and if not, what changes have occurred or will occur in the next year.

You are reminded of your obligation to advise the GREB, with a copy to your unit REB, of any adverse event(s) that occur during this one year period (access this form at https://eservices.queensu.ca/romeo_researcher/ and click Events - GREB Adverse Event Report). An adverse event includes, but is not limited to, a complaint, a change or an unexpected event that alters the level of risk for the researcher or participants or situation that requires a substantial change in approach to a participant(s). You are also advised that all adverse events must be reported to the GREB within 48 hours.

You are also reminded that all changes that might affect human participants must be cleared by the GREB. For example, you must report changes to the level of risk, applicant characteristics, and implementation of new procedures. To make an amendment, access the application at https://eservices.queensu.ca/romeo_researcher/ and click Events - GREB Amendment to Approved Study Form. These changes will automatically be sent to the Ethics Coordinator, Gail Irving, at the Office of Research Services or irvingg@queensu.ca for further review and clearance by the GREB or GREB Chair.

On behalf of the General Research Ethics Board, I wish you continued success in your research.

Yours sincerely,

John Freeman, Ph.D.
Professor and Acting Chair
General Research Ethics Board

cc: Dr. Joyce Davidson, Faculty Supervisor
    Dr. Mark Rosenberg / Dr. Anne Godlewska, Co-Chairs, Unit REB
    Joan Knox, Dept. Admin.
October 21, 2014

Ms. Stephanie Coen
Ph.D. Candidate
Department of Geography
Queen’s University
Mackintosh-Corry Hall, Room D316
Kingston, ON, K7L 3N6

GREB Ref #: GGeo-181-14; Romeo # 6013928
Title: "GGeo-181-14 Barriers and Facilitators of Physical Activity: Investigating the Role of Gender in Gym Environments"

Dear Ms. Coen:

The General Research Ethics Board (GREB), by means of a delegated board review, has cleared your proposal entitled "GGeo-181-14 Barriers and Facilitators of Physical Activity: Investigating the Role of Gender in Gym Environments" for ethical compliance with the Tri-Council Guidelines (TCPS) and Queen’s ethics policies. In accordance with the Tri-Council Guidelines (article D.1.6) and Senate Terms of Reference (article G), your project has been cleared for one year. At the end of each year, the GREB will ask if your project has been completed and if not, what changes have occurred or will occur in the next year.

You are reminded of your obligation to advise the GREB, with a copy to your unit REB, of any adverse event(s) that occur during this one year period (access this form at https://eservices.queensu.ca/romeo_researcher/ and click Events - GREB Adverse Event Report). An adverse event includes, but is not limited to, a complaint, a change or unexpected event that alters the level of risk for the researcher or participants or situation that requires a substantial change in approach to a participant(s). You are also advised that all adverse events must be reported to the GREB within 48 hours.

You are also reminded that all changes that might affect human participants must be cleared by the GREB. For example you must report changes to the level of risk, applicant characteristics, and implementation of new procedures. To make an amendment, access the application at https://eservices.queensu.ca/romeo_researcher/ and click Events - GREB Amendment to Approved Study Form. These changes will automatically be sent to the Ethics Coordinator, Gail Irving, at the Office of Research Services or irvinggg@queensu.ca for further review and clearance by the GREB or GREB Chair.

On behalf of the General Research Ethics Board, I wish you continued success in your research.

Yours sincerely,

Joan Stevenson, Ph.D.
Chair
General Research Ethics Board

c: Dr. Joyce Davidson, Faculty Supervisor
   Dr. Joyce Davidson, Chair, Unit REB
   Ms. Joan Knox, Dept. Admin.
B: Permission waiver for published material in Chapter 3

Stephanie Coen

From: Davey, Sarah <Sarah.Davey@tandf.co.uk>
Sent: April-27-17 10:55 AM
To: Corbett, Pris
Cc: Stephanie Coen
Subject: RE: Seeking permission to include my book chapter in my doctoral thesis

Further to your email, permission is granted for re-use of your own material as requested, subject to the following conditions:

1. The material to be quoted/produced was published without credit to another source. If another source is acknowledged, please apply directly to that source for permission clearance.

2. Permission is for non-exclusive, English language rights, and covers use of your own material only. Any further use shall be the subject of a separate application for permission.

3. Full acknowledgement must be given to the original source, with full details of figure/page numbers, title, author(s), publisher and year of publication.

Best Regards

Sarah

UK Book Permissions
THE GYM STUDY

Do you workout at the gym?

We want to hear from you!

We are seeking a diversity of men and women to participate in a Queen's University study about people's experiences in gyms.

You may be eligible for this study, if:
• you are between the ages of 25-64,
• consider yourself a regular gym user,
• are a member of a co-ed gym in Kingston, and
• your gym routine includes use of the weight room and/or cardio area.

Please note: Gym users who only participate in group classes and do not undertake any individual gym exercise are not eligible for this study.

Participation will take about 1 to 1 ½ hours and you will be compensated for your time.

More information is available at www.gymstudy.ca

Please contact the principal researcher Stephanie Coen, Ph.D. Candidate, Dept. of Geography, Queen's University if you have any questions or are interested in participating at stephanie.coen@queensu.ca or (613) 533-6000 ext. 78857.
D: Letter of information (Interviews and drawing)

LETTER OF INFORMATION AND CONSENT FORM

PROJECT TITLE
Barriers and Facilitators of Physical Activity: Investigating the Role of Gender in Gym Environments

RESEARCHERS
Stephanie Coen, Ph.D. Candidate, Department of Geography, Queen’s University (Supervisor: Dr. Joyce Davidson, Associate Professor, Department of Geography, Queen’s University)

ABOUT THIS STUDY
The purpose of this research is to better understand people’s experiences in gyms. Specifically, this study explores how women and men experience and use the weight rooms and “cardio” areas of gyms. This project is being carried out by Stephanie Coen in order to complete her Ph.D. in Geography and is supported by a Doctoral Research Award from the Canadian Institutes of Health Research.

WHAT YOUR PARTICIPATION INVOLVES
If you choose to participate in this study, you participation will involve a semi-structured interview covering topics including your relationship with the gym, your current gym environment, your personal experiences in the gym, and your perspectives on gender and the gym. As part of the interview, you will be asked to draw in response to an open-ended question about your experiences of the gym and to engage in a brief discussion of your drawing. Please note this is NOT an artistic activity. NO artistic skill whatsoever is required to participate. There is no right or wrong way to draw for this activity. Finally, you will be asked to complete a short demographic questionnaire. These activities will take approximately 1 to 1.5 hours to complete, depending upon your preferences and how much detail you would like to provide. At the conclusion of these activities, you will be asked whether you are interested in participating in a follow-up activity at a later date.

Your participation in this study is completely voluntary and the information you share is at your discretion. You are free to skip any aspect of the interview, drawing, or questionnaire if you feel uncomfortable or if there is something you prefer not to discuss. You may discontinue the interview, drawing, or questionnaire at any time.

There is a possibility that we might discuss some personal or sensitive issues for you in relation to your exercise practices and experiences in the gym. In particular, if you have had negative experiences in the gym, it is possible that this research might prompt reflections about those experiences which could be psychologically or emotionally unpleasant. If this occurs, please remember that you are welcome to pass on any aspect of, or discontinue, this research at any time.

If you wish to withdraw from this study, you may do so within 1 month of the date of your interview and your data will be removed and destroyed. After the 1-month period, it will not be possible to withdraw because the data may already be included in manuscripts prepared for publication or chapters of Stephanie Coen’s thesis. To withdraw, please contact Stephanie Coen at stephanie.coen@queensu.ca.

COMPENSATION
You will be compensated for your time with a $20 gift card for your participation in this study.

PRIVACY AND CONFIDENTIALITY
Your privacy and confidentiality will be protected. With your consent, the interview and drawing discussion will be audio-recorded. Your responses will be encrypted on all electronic devices; paper files will be stored in a secured location at Queen’s University. Only Stephanie Coen and her supervisor (Dr. Joyce Davidson) will have access to this information. Pseudonyms will be used in all reports of this study. If any potentially identifying details are detected by
the researcher, they will be removed from the data. Reports of this study may present your individual responses, but you will not be identifiable.

If you provide consent, your completed drawing may be re-printed in publications and presentations, but your identity will not be disclosed. To ensure the public anonymity of your drawing, please do not provide or draw any details that could be used to identify you (e.g., a self-portrait that matches your physical likeness).

All original project data will be destroyed 5 years after the end date of the grant that supports this research.

Results of this study will be reported in Stephanie Coen’s doctoral thesis. Research findings may also be presented at scholarly conferences and published in academic media, such as scholarly journals and books. In an effort to share results of this study with the public, reports may also be prepared for non-academic media, such as relevant websites or newspapers. Please feel free to request copies of these publications and they will be provided to you.

CONTACT INFORMATION
Any questions about study participation may be directed to the Principal Investigator Stephanie Coen at stephanie.coen@queensu.ca or 613-533-6000 ext. 78857. Any ethical concerns about the study may be directed to the Chair of the General Research Ethics Board at chair.GREB@queensu.ca or 613-533-6081.

This study has been granted clearance according to the recommended principles of Canadian ethics guidelines, and Queen’s University policies.

CONSENT
If you choose to participate in this study, please indicate that you have read this Letter of Information and that you consent to participate in this study by checking the following:

☐ Yes, I have read this Letter of Information and have had any questions answered to my satisfaction.

☐ Yes, I consent to my responses being audio-recorded.

☐ Yes, I consent to participate in this study as described in the Letter of Information.

Name (please print clearly): ________________________________

Signature: ________________________________________________

Date: (DD/MM/YYYY): ________________________________

PERMISSION TO PUBLISH DRAWING
This section can be completed after your drawing is done.

Please indicate whether or not you grant permission for your drawing to be published for the purpose of disseminating research findings by checking the corresponding box below. Publications may include scholarly journals, books, presentations, as well as non-academic media, such as newspaper articles or websites, in an effort to communicate research findings to the public.

Your choice does not affect your eligibility for this study.

☐ Yes, I grant permission for my drawing to be published in scholarly publications and presentations for academic audiences and in non-academic media for the purpose sharing the results of this research with the wider public.

☐ No, I do NOT grant permission for my drawing to be published.

Signature: ________________________________________________

Thank you for your participation.
E: Letter of information (Journals)

Queens University
Department of Geography
Mackintosh-Corry Hall, Room D201
Queen's University
Kingston, Ontario, Canada K7L 3N6
Tel 613 533-6030
Fax 613 533-6122

LETTER OF INFORMATION

PROJECT TITLE
Barriers and Facilitators of Physical Activity: Investigating the Role of Gender in Gym Environments

RESEARCHERS
Stephanie Coen, Ph.D. Candidate, Department of Geography, Queen’s University
(Supervisor: Dr. Joyce Davidson, Associate Professor, Department of Geography, Queen’s University)

ABOUT THIS STUDY
The purpose of this research is to better understand people’s experiences in gyms. Specifically, this study explores how women and men experience and use the weight rooms and “cardio” areas of gyms. This project is being carried out by Stephanie Coen in order to complete her Ph.D. in Geography and is supported by a Doctoral Research Award from the Canadian Institutes of Health Research.

WHAT YOUR PARTICIPATION INVOLVES
Thank you for your interest in participating in this follow-up activity. If you choose to participate, this portion of the research asks you to keep a 1-week “gym journal” about your experiences in the cardio area and/or weight room of your gym. The purpose of the gym journal is to record your immediate reflections about your gym experiences. You are asked to write in your journal as soon as possible after each workout in response to 5 questions. You also are invited to record any gym reflections you wish. If you choose to participate, you are kindly asked to return the journal in the envelope provided within 3 weeks of the date of your initial interview.

Your participation in this study is completely voluntary and the information you share is at your discretion. By taking a journal, you are under no obligation to complete it. If you complete the journal and deem the information too sensitive to share, you do not need to submit the journal for inclusion in the study. Should you decide not to participate, you are welcome to keep the journal and do not need to return it. You do not need to inform me of your choice.

There is a possibility that this journaling exercise could stir up some personal or sensitive issues for you in relation to your exercise practices and experiences in the gym. In particular, if you have negative experiences in the gym, it is possible that this research might prompt reflections about those experiences which could be psychologically or emotionally unpleasant. If this occurs, please remember that you are under no obligation to record these in your journal, and you are welcome to discontinue this research at any time.
If you wish to withdraw from this study, you may do so within 1 month of submitting your journal and your data will be removed and destroyed. After the 1-month period, it will not be possible to withdraw because the data may already be included in manuscripts prepared for publication or chapters of Stephanie Coen's thesis. To withdraw, please contact Stephanie Coen at stephanie.coen@queensu.ca.

COMPENSATION
You will be provided a $30 gift card, mailed to an address that you provide on a separate form, for your completion of the journal activity.

PRIVACY AND CONFIDENTIALITY
Your privacy and confidentiality will be protected. Your journal will be stored in a secured location at Queen's University and any electronic copies will be encrypted. Only Stephanie Coen and her supervisor (Dr. Joyce Davidson) will have access to this information. Pseudonyms will be used in all reports of this study. If any potentially identifying details are detected by the researcher, they will be removed from the data. Reports of this study may present your individual responses, but you will not be identifiable.

Your name will not be attached to your journal. Please do not record your name on your journal. Your journal will be assigned a code that will allow the researcher to match it to your interview.

This address that you provide on a separate form will be used solely for the purpose of mailing your $30 gift card, if you choose to complete the journal. This form will be returned to you along with your gift card if you submit the journal. If you decide not to participate, this form will be securely disposed of (i.e., shredded) by the researcher.

All original project data will be destroyed 5 years after the end date of the grant that supports this research.

Results of this study will be reported in Stephanie Coen's doctoral thesis. Research findings may also be presented at scholarly conferences and published in academic media, such as scholarly journals and books. In an effort to share results of this study with the public, reports may also be prepared for non-academic media, such as relevant websites or newspapers. Please feel free to request copies of these publications and they will be provided to you.

CONTACT INFORMATION
Any questions about study participation may be directed to the Principal Investigator Stephanie Coen at stephanie.coen@queensu.ca or 613-533-6000 ext. 78857. Any ethical concerns about the study may be directed to the Chair of the General Research Ethics Board at chair.GREE@queensu.ca or 613-533-6081.

This study has been granted clearance according to the recommended principles of Canadian ethics guidelines, and Queen's University policies.

CONSENT
By submitting your journal, you indicate that you consent to participate in this study.

Thank you for your participation.
F: Interview guide

Introductory text
Thank you for participating in this study. This is part of my PhD research that is looking into people’s experiences in gyms. Specifically, I’m interested in how men and women experience and use the weight rooms and cardio areas. My goal is to identify some of the things in the gym that both help and hinder our workouts. In this interview I will ask you questions about your relationship with the gym, your current gym environment, your experiences in the gym, and your thoughts about gender and the gym. I want to remind you that you are free to skip any question that you prefer not to answer and to end the interview at any time. You do not need to share anything with me that you are not comfortable sharing. You are also welcome to raise any points that you think are important in addition to what I ask. At the conclusion of the interview I will ask you to draw in response to an open ended question about the gym. As a reminder, this is not an artistic exercise at all. It can be as abstract or literal as you wish; as elaborate or simple as you wish. Once you are done, we will talk about your drawing. Finally, I will ask you to complete a brief demographic questionnaire.

Remember, although you may participate in group exercise activities, I am interested in your individual training experiences in the cardio and/or weight room.

Your perspective is very valuable. Thank you for sharing your insights with me!

Your relationship with the gym
First, it would be great if you could tell me a bit about your relationship with the gym.

1. How long have you been exercising in gyms? Could you please tell me a little bit about how you came to start using a gym? How has your gym use changed over time?
2. Why do you work out? Why do you come to the gym? In general, how do you feel about the gym?
3. Can you tell me a bit about the kinds of workouts that you do? Why do you do these types of workouts? What might a typical week look like?
4. How do you decide what workout routines you will do? What factors into your decisions?
5. Are there any exercises or machines that you specifically avoid or purposefully do/do not use? Why?
6. On a scale of 1 to 10 (1 being extremely uncomfortable, 10 being totally at ease), how would you rate your comfort level in your gym overall? Why?
7. How would you rate your level of skill (or know-how) in the gym on a scale of 1 to 10 (1 being total beginner and 10 being expert)? Can you tell me about why?
Your gym environment

Now, let’s talk a bit about your gym.

8. What gym do you currently belong to? How long have you used this gym? Why did you choose this gym? What distinguishes this gym from others you have used?

9. Would you say your gym has a particular culture? How would you describe this culture? How do you see yourself in relation to this culture? How does it affect what you do in the gym?

10. Are there spaces at the gym where you might say that you feel comfortable or at home or empowered? What are they and why?

11. Are there any spaces in the gym that you avoid? If so, why? Are there any spaces where you feel uncomfortable? Please describe.

12. If I were a brand new member at your gym, is there anything you would say that I definitely need to know about working out there? What would that be?

Your gym experiences

Now I’d like to ask you some questions about your experiences in your current gym. Again, please remember your can skip any questions you’d like, and only share what you are comfortable sharing.

13. Have you ever have any experiences in your gym that really motivated you or gave you an extra boost? Could you describe these to me? Did these experiences affect what you did/do in the gym and/or how you felt/feel?

14. Have you ever have any experiences or encounters that negatively affected you in your gym? What were these? Did these experiences affect what you did/do in the gym and/or how you felt/feel? What could have prevented these negative experiences?

15. Could you tell me about some of your greatest accomplishments in the gym? Was there something you achieved that you are proud of—for example, mastering a certain exercise or meeting a particular goal? How did this affect you? Can you tell me about what helped you to achieve this?

16. Have you ever done something in the gym that you wished you hadn’t—for example, trying a new exercise you weren’t totally comfortable with yet or attempting to lift a weight that might have been too heavy? What was the outcome of this? Can you tell me about the situation in which this occurred?

17. What about the other members in your gym—do they affect your workouts in any way (for example, your interactions with them, sharing equipment or space)? How?
18. What are some changes you would make to your gym, if you could, that would improve the quality of your experience there? What are some things that already exist that you like?

Gender and the gym

Now, I’d like to hear some of your thoughts about what gender has to do with the gym.

19. How do you think gender matters (or doesn’t matter) in your gym? How would you describe the gender dynamics in your gym? Do these affect you at all? If so, how? Can you provide some examples of instances where these dynamics affected you?

20. Do you think men and women have different/similar experiences in your gym? How? Why?

21. Could you identify anything that helps to encourage exercise participation for women and for men at your gym? Please explain. How can the gym environment be more inclusive?

22. Could you identify any barriers to participating in gym exercise for men and for women at your gym? Please explain. How could these barriers be overcome?

23. How do you see yourself in relation to the gender dynamics in the gym? Do you challenge them? Go along with them? Ignore them? Support them?

24. What are your observations about men’s and women’s behaviours in your gym? Are you content with things as is? Or if you could change something about these, would you? What would you change? How could this change be accomplished? Is there anything the gym could do to facilitate this?

25. When we think of the gym, it might conjure up stereotypes about men and women. What stereotypes do you think of? What specifically have you noticed in your gym? Do any of these play out in your gym? Are any of these stereotypes challenged in your gym?

26. How do you think your gender affects what you do in the gym? Are there things you do or don’t do because of your gender? Hypothetically, would you do things differently if you were a different gender?

27. Have you ever felt like you compromised or refrained from doing something you wanted to do in the gym because of your gender? Please explain.

28. Do you ever compare yourself to other women/men? Do you ever feel uncomfortable around other men/women? Please explain. How have these experiences affected what you do in the gym?

Drawing

We’ll now turn to the drawing question. Remember, no artistic skill is necessary. There is no right or wrong way to draw for the purposes of this activity. Your drawing may take
any form you see fit, whether it is something abstract, a real-life scene, or anything in-between. To protect your privacy, please do not include any identifying details in your drawing. Here are some blanks sheets of paper and pencil. I will wait outside/over there while you draw. Please take as much or as little time as you like; you can signal to me when you are done and then we’ll discuss your drawing.

Please draw in response to the question: “How do you feel in the gym?”

Discussion questions
29. Please tell me about what you have drawn and why. [I will probe and ask about various aspects of the drawing depending upon participants’ descriptions.]
30. Did doing the drawing help you to think of anything that didn’t occur to you before? Based on this, is there anything you would like to add to what you’ve already told me?
31. Is there anything else you would like to tell me about your experiences with the gym? Anything that we have not covered or that I should have asked about?
GYM JOURNAL INSTRUCTIONS

Thank you for participating in this “gym journal” activity. The purpose of the gym journal is to document your immediate reflections about your experiences in the “cardio” area and/or weight room of your gym.

Please keep the journal for a 1-week period that you consider to be rather typical of your use of the weight room and/or cardio room at your gym. If you do a group class during the week, please note this but keep your journal entries to your experiences using the weight and cardio areas.

It is best if you can write your journal entries as soon as possible after each workout so that your experience is fresh in your mind.

Please do NOT record your name directly on your journal.

If you prefer to type your journal, you are more than welcome to type and print your entries instead. Please feel free to keep the notebook.

You are kindly asked to return the journal in the envelope provided within 3 weeks of the date of your initial interview. If you choose to participate, please put your journal in the mail by ____________________.

For each entry, please address the questions listed below. When journaling, keep in mind your interactions with other gym members, your use of the equipment, the sights and sounds of the gym, and any other aspects of the gym environment that stand out for you. In addition to the questions below, any other reflections about your gym experience that you wish to share will be valuable and are most welcome. It is helpful if you can be as detailed and honest as possible, but please only share within your comfort level.

For each entry, please include the following:

1. Entry details:
   a. Date:
   b. Workout start time:
   c. Workout end time:
   d. Time of journal entry:

2. How would you describe how you were feeling before your workout? What was going through your mind in anticipation of going to the gym?

3. What did you do in the gym today? Please describe your workout step by step.

4. What happened in the gym today that encouraged you, motivated you, or improved the quality of your gym experience? Please describe with as much detail as possible.

5. What happened in the gym today that discouraged you, bothered you, or detracted from your gym experience? Please describe with as much detail as possible.

Please record anything else about your gym experience today that you would like to share.

Thank you for participating in this study! If you have any questions please don’t hesitate to contact me at stephanie.coen@queensu.ca or 613-533-5000 ext. 78857.