SPORTSWOMEN’S CONSTRUCTIONS OF IDENTITY AND LEARNING THROUGH PERSONAL NARRATIVES: A POSTSTRUCTURAL FEMINIST ANALYSIS FOR CREATING HISTORY AND SOCIAL CHANGE

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this qualitative study was to gather and analyze the discourse of the stories, images, and artifacts that sportswomen used to narrate their athletic careers, bodies and lives to determine the discourse sportswomen use when discussing themselves. The study is grounded in two theoretical frameworks: poststructural feminist theory and narrative adult learning theory. Poststructural feminism is a marriage of poststructuralism and feminist theory to discuss discourse, language, meaning making, power, and knowledge in terms of how it can end women’s oppression. Narrative adult learning theory assumes that adults are able to narrate their experiences and/or their identities in order to interpret their stories and make sense of them. The study’s design combines narrative autoethnography to gather and present data and feminist critical discourse analysis to analyze the collected data. Data collection consisted of two sets of interactive interviews, which are collaborative efforts between the researcher and participants that discuss a particular topic—in this case competitive athletic careers, lives, and bodies.

Data analysis revealed three themes of findings related to the participants’ discourse when discussing their athletic careers. First, the study found that the participants only moderately assimilated and/or subverted the dominant discourse related to sports participation or neither assimilated nor subverted it. Second, all participants used alternative narratives, which neither reproduced the dominant discourse nor deliberately subverted it. The alternative narrative most common among the participants was engaging in a community of athletes. In addition, most athletes used a humble discourse, which was not mentioned in any of the current literature on sportswomen. The study concluded with a discussion of the findings in light of poststructural feminist theory and narrative adult learning as they relate to identity development.
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“Do you have an extra pair of pants?”

A friend whispered this in my ear before gym class on the day we were playing volleyball with the 9th grade boys.

I handed her a pair of crunchy Adidas pants I kept in my gym locker. I had worn them—sweated in them—but hadn’t washed them all year.

“You’re a lifesaver!”

She propped her foot on the locker room bench, leg bent, and pointed to some black hairs on her knee. “Forgot to shave.”

I propped my leg on the locker room bench in the same way and pointed to my leg, which was covered in dark hair that had been growing out for so long that it started to get soft.

She scrunched up her nose and said “ew.”

“Can’t shave during swim season until Districts.” In my era of swimming, competitive female swimmers did not shave their legs until the championship meet each season. Growing leg hair creates natural drag while swimming, and when a swimmer shaves it off, she feels faster in the water.

“I should just tell people I’m a swimmer, too,” my friend said. “Then I wouldn’t need to wear these smelly pants.”

***
I sat at one of the round wooden tables in Hamilton College’s dining hall with a bowl of made-to-order pasta filled with chicken and veggies and a plate with two slices of pepperoni pizza on my tray. My hair was still damp from swim practice. The lines from my swim cap still creased my forehead and the suction from my goggles had made dark circles under my eyes.

Two female classmates on either side of me glanced at my tray, and then back at theirs, which housed bowls of leafy salads.

One woman’s upper lip curled a bit when she asked, “How can you let yourself eat so many carbs?”

“It’s OK,” explained the other woman. “She’s a swimmer.”

“Oooh.” The woman’s face relaxed. “I wish I were a swimmer, so I could eat like you do.”

***

“What’s the first thing you noticed about me?”

I was reminiscing with a boyfriend, now an ex, on the anniversary of our first date in which we went to a minor league baseball game on City Island but sat by the river under a dusting of mayflies all night and talked.

“Definitely your shoulders,” he said. “You were wearing that one tank top.”

I remembered exactly which shirt I was wearing—a black racerback that showed off the definition in my shoulders and much of my lats, too. I loved that shirt.

“I was, like, wow, this girl is pretty masculine,” he said. “When my roommate saw you from behind, he thought you were a dude. I had to explain.”

“Explain what, exactly?”

“That you were a swimmer.”
“And then what did he say?”

He shrugged. “Nothing really. He just looked relieved.”

***

The above autoethnographic anecdotes exemplify many of my social interactions with others, especially those who are not swimmers or other types of competitive athletes. These scenes depict what I have learned about being an athlete and being female in a culture that mostly values men’s athletic experiences. Ethnography focuses on culture, and autoethnography shows how culture shapes the experience of the writer or learner (Ellis, 2004). Writers in the field of adult education have shared their autoethnographic accounts of learning; for example, Wright’s (2008) autoethnography examined how social class shaped her life as researcher and learner; Tisdell (2017) does an autoethnographic analysis of her experience in walking the Camino de Santiago as a way to theorize the notion of transformative pilgrimage learning. While some writers in the field discuss autoethnography to specifically examine how culture shapes aspects of their story, there are many who discuss the larger world of narrative learning (Michelson, 2013; Rossiter & Clark, 2007, 2010). In a dissertation drawing on autoethnography and narrative in adult education, Crothers (2018) has recently shared his autoethnography in a larger narrative study of the culture and embodied learning of bicycle racers. My own dissertation follows a similar tradition, and examines aspects of my own autoethnography as a swimmer, as an athlete, and as a woman; but the study also examines the narratives of other women athletes. In the remaining part of this introduction I share relevant aspects of my own autoethnography before moving into further contextualizing the issue I investigate in this study.

I have been a competitive swimmer for over 30 years, since I was three years old. I have been at full height at 5’10” since I was 12, have had an athletic build with noticeably broad
shoulders, and have always had short hair because it’s easier to manage when I am in and out of
the pool multiple times per day—and because I like it short. My body, my competitiveness, and
my athletic prowess have often elicited the nicknames “Anne the Man” and “The Beast” from
my peers. I never hear maliciousness behind the nicknames; in fact, the names are often wielded
with respect, yet I feel uneasy about them. On one hand, I value my athleticism, aggressiveness,
muscles, and other typically masculine traits that enabled me to be one of the best competitive
age group and master’s swimmers in the nation. But on the other hand, I am not a man nor a wild
animal and don’t want to be described as one.

Because I’ve never felt like I fit the mold of a “typical” girl, I sought women’s studies
courses in college where I learned about feminism; from this standpoint, adult educators would
say I was a very self-directed learner and was trying to examine what I had learned from
experience (Merriam, Caffarella & Baumgartner, 2007). Through a feminist perspective, that I
learned as an undergraduate student and then later in graduate school in studying the feminist
adult education literature (e.g., Gouthro, 2019; Hayes & Flannery, 2002; Kaufmann, 2002;
Tisdell, 1998), I began to understand that our culture likes to categorize everything into neat little
boxes: man/woman, masculine/feminine, mind/body, public/private, strong/weak, etc. I learned
how these dichotomous categories separate men and women and how we associate the
characteristics that our culture values (masculine, strong) with men and how we associate the
characteristics we devalue (feminine, weak) with women. I wondered if being called “Anne the
Man” was a compliment because it positioned me in a lauded, masculine category or if it was
derogatory because I was a girl who didn’t fit into a neat little box.

I gravitate towards stories about other girls and women who don’t fit into neat little
boxes. For example, my favorite movie is A League of Their Own, a fictionalized account of the
first women’s baseball league in America in the 1940s; I love reading literature with athletic female protagonists, like *Swimming* by Nicola Keegan, which is a fictionalized story of an Olympic-level American swimmer; I seek interviews and articles about athletes in newspapers and magazines, like the feature article in *The New Yorker* about Ronda Rousey, the bantam weight mixed-martial arts fighter; on social media, I follow some of my favorite athletes like four-time world Ironman champion Chrissie Wellington, who tweets snippets of her training schedule. Their stories excite me because I can compare and contrast my athletic stories with theirs, learn about myself as an athlete and as a woman, and know that it is OK to be who I am and who I want to be.

**Contextualizing the Problem**

It’s unfortunate, though, that there are so few stories in popular culture and in the media about sportswomen, and those that do exist often portray women using sexist language and images (Heywood & Dworkin, 2003; Lindner, 2011; Whiteside, Hardin, DeCarvalho, Carillo, & Smith, 2013). This means that when I and other athletes turn to stories of sportswomen for inspiration and guidance, we are left with stories riddled with sexism, if we can find them at all. In the past 30 years of sports reporting in *The New York Times*, for example, only 5.2% of sports articles focused on women’s sports and sportswomen, and those articles were shorter than the articles about sportsmen and men’s sports (Schmidt, 2016). In addition to lack of coverage, traditional sports journalism is a veritable field of sexist language and images. Consider that *Sports Illustrated*, a preeminent sports magazine, only featured women on 4.9% of its covers from 2000-2011, and, within that 4.9%, women often shared the cover with men; were not even directly related to sports participation like in the *Swimsuit Issue* (Weber & Carini, 2012); and/or
were hypersexualized, like Linsey Vonn, Olympic alpine skiing champion, who was photographed lying on a sauna bench, tugging on her bikini bottoms while looking seductively at the camera (Weaving, 2016)—a pose which obliterates her accomplishments as an athlete and reduces her to a sex object.

Not only do audiences absorb that sexism, but sportswomen also internalize the implications of the language and images: “Microaggressions in media coverage for women’s sports help to create a dismissive, hostile, and sexualized environment for female athletes at both the professional and recreational levels, which can negatively affect these athletes’ performance, self-esteem, body image, and their physical and mental health” (Kaskan & Ho, 2016, p. 283). So when women construct identities from the sexist, unequal portrayals of sportswomen in the media (Knapp, 2014; MacKay & Dallaire, 2013; Mean & Kassing, 2008; Sznycer, 2010; Tovares, 2010), it not only reinforces hegemonic gender roles and portrayals but has significant negative health effects.

There are several common discursive practices in popular sports media that oppress athletes. I discuss them here in terms of women in sports, but these rhetorical norms can apply to all women. First, women are often marked by sex-specific words and practices that position them as diminutive, secondary, or amateur. For example, calling adult women athletes infantilizing names like girls, ladies, sweeties, princesses, or dolls (Fuller, 2006) whereas male athletes are called . . . men. Second, some discursive practices set up women as outsiders—as “other”—and/or turned to objects and erased as subjects (Fuller, 2006), like referring to female sports teams as women’s teams and male sports teams without the gender signifier: WNBA = Women’s National Basketball Association vs. NBA = National Basketball Association. In this case, women are marked as “other” and men as the norm. In addition, oppressive, sexist discourse
places more emphasis on women’s physical appearances than on their accomplishments. *Sports Illustrated* once published the following description of figure-skating champion Katarina Witt: “So fresh-faced, so blue-eyed, so 12-car pileup gorgeous, 5 feet 5 inches and 114 pounds worth of peace-keeping missile” (as cited in *Women’s Sports*, n.d.). It may be a flattering description, but it disregards her identity as a top athlete and focuses on her feminine physical characteristics instead.

Chapter Two provides a more thorough discussion of women, sports, and discourse through a feminist lens, but the important point to take from the discursive practices mentioned above is that language has consistently been used as a means of oppression, of keeping women down, of keeping women secondary to men, as “other.” Lakoff (1975), a linguist who specializes in women’s speech and the speech used to describe women, has written extensively about the numerous cases in which our culture’s language clearly—though usually unconsciously—discriminates against women. She argued that “linguistic imbalances are worthy of study because they bring into sharper focus real-world imbalances and inequities. They are clues that some external situation needs changing, rather than items that one should seek to change directly” (p. 43). What she means is that we can use language to diagnose social inequities and discover the underlying causes of the sexist discourse. Changing those structural inequalities will then force us to change our language.

Not only could we use language to diagnose and discover inequities, but we could also use it as a means to resist those inequities. Lakoff argued that structural inequalities need to be addressed, but other feminists believe people can counter oppression by creating new ways of speaking and by providing opportunities for all people to have their voices heard (Nye, 1998; Tirrell, 1998). Feminists have been discovering and creating words and discourses for decades,
like Cixous’ (1976) *Laugh of the Medusa*, in which she encourages women to “Write your self. Your body must be heard” (p. 880). Further, within the field of adult education, as Gouthro (2019) recently summarized, feminist scholars have discussed the importance of analyzing the theories and discourse around learning, and used a critical feminist lens to discuss ways to challenge power imbalances and sexist discourse. Kaufmann (2010) does such a critical feminist analysis of how such practices play out in classrooms. It’s not just the new words, discourses, and stories on their own that resist oppression against women; it’s that they have the ability to generate actions that overturn patriarchal, sexist practices in our culture. But when discussing sexist language on televised sports, Messner, Duncan, and Jenson (1993) warn us that “language does not simply change as a reflection of changing social realities. Language also helps to construct social reality. Thus, the choice to use nonsexist language is a choice to affirm linguistically the right of women athletes to fair and equal treatment” (p. 134). Therefore, providing opportunities for a diversity of athletes to share their stories in their own words with their own voices brings society closer to eliminating not only oppressive discourse, but potentially countering oppressive acts.

Take, for example, the individual soccer players who told their sports stories in spring 2016 after the U.S. Women’s National Soccer Team won the World Cup in July of the previous year. Through their personal stories, they illustrated how U.S. Soccer has grossly mistreated them financially. Not only are their salaries and bonuses significantly lower than the players on the men’s team despite having more international success, they also receive less money for food, hotels, and other traveling expenses. Telling their individual stories created a collective story, which they have been able to use to take U.S. Soccer to court and fight for “equal pay for equal play.”
In a post-Title IX world, more girls and women than ever participate in and consume sports, but if we continue to hear and thus use sexist language to describe women’s athletic feats and muscled bodies, women’s progress in the sporting culture will become stagnant or even reverse. This relates to what John Dewey wrote about experiential education in *Experience and Education*: “all genuine education come about through experience” but that “does not mean that all experiences are genuinely or equally educative” (2007, p. 25). He noted that some experiences are “mis-educative” (p. 25) and could deter growth of further experience. In this case, sportswomen and sports consumers experiencing sexist discourse through the media could be having “mis-educative” experiences; hearing that women are “other” or lesser than men in the sports realm—or the fact that they’re largely missing from sports culture and sports stories—could prevent women from pursuing sports and prevent sports fans from taking sportswomen seriously. So by women sharing their sports experiences free of sexist discourse, sportswomen can demonstrate that their experiences exist and are valid and thus create a new understanding and meaning of women in sports for themselves and others.

The discourse on sportswomen reflects how American and other western cultures view sportswomen and how sportswomen view themselves, so it is time to pay attention to discourse and ensure athletes, journalists, and sports fans are not unintentionally spreading sexist views of themselves or other athletes. Some sports communication researchers have speculated that if sportswomen tell their stories in their own words, then they can challenge the inequitable language used to describe them (Antunovic & Hardin, 2013; Mean & Kassing, 2008; Wolter, 2012), thus also challenging and deconstructing their personal identities as athletes.

It’s likely, though, that even when given the opportunity to share their sports stories in their own words—through interviews, books, or on social media like blogs or Twitter—
Sportswomen will continue to use dominant, sexist discourse because they do not realize they are using it and/or they do not know of other ways to describe their athleticism (Antunovic & Hardin, 2013; 2012; Hardin, Zhong & Corrigan, 2012; Hardin & Whiteside, 2009). There are few studies about sportswomen who consciously rejected the dominant discourse, and there are also few studies that examined sportswomen’s own interpretation and reflections on their athletic identities, but there are no studies that examine the learning and identity development that takes place when sportswomen shared their sports stories while deliberately subverting the dominant discourse. This is where my study steps in.

**Purpose and Research Questions**

The purpose of this study was to gather and analyze the discourse of the stories, images, and artifacts that sportswomen used to narrate their athletic careers, bodies, and lives. With narrative adult learning and poststructural feminist theoretical lenses, I explored their stories with autoethnography, narrative, and feminist critical discourse analysis and then encouraged participants to retell and reflect on their stories in a way that affected learning/identity formation and will possibly facilitate social change. Through this collaborative writing process, I hoped to elicit a series of sports stories that are free of sexist language and images, and portray the athletes as they want to be portrayed. Such narratives, I believe, will and inspire future generations of athletes.

My study addresses the following research questions:

1. In what ways do participants assimilate and/or subvert dominant discourses when describing their athletic careers, bodies, and lives?
2. What do participants learn about their athletic identities when they are educated about sexist discourse and then critically examine the discourse they use to discuss their athletic careers, bodies, and lives?

Theoretical Framework Overview

As I will discuss further in Chapter Two, I used poststructural feminist theory (Kaufmann, 2010; Weedon, 1987) and narrative adult learning theory (Michelson, 2012; Rossiter & Clark, 2007; 2010) to frame this study because they work well in conjunction to theorize about storytelling and learning: 1) Poststructural feminist theory allowed me to analyze the discourse and symbols within the participants’ stories, images, and artifacts and 2) Narrative learning theory allowed me to analyze what the participants learn from telling and reflecting on their stories.

As its name suggests, poststructural feminist theory marries the ideas of poststructuralism with feminist theory, so it discusses discourse, language, meaning making, power, and knowledge in terms of how it can end women’s oppression. As poststructural feminist theorist Weedon (1987) wrote, “We need a theory which can explain how and why people oppress each other, a theory of subjectivity, of conscious and unconscious thoughts and emotions, which can account for the relationship between the individual and the social” (p. 3). Poststructural feminist theory aims to bridge this gap between the individual and social experience by explaining where female experience comes from, why it is contradictory or incoherent, and why and how it can change, particularly through the relationships among language, discourse, and subjectivity. Tisdell (1998) has discussed how poststructural feminist theory relates to feminist pedagogy and adult education. She highlights the notion of constantly shifting identity as learners constantly re-
shape their identity in light of further experience and analysis of experience. This theory works well for my study because my aim is to document the experiences of sportswomen by examining how conscious attention to the language and discourse can change their self-image and affect their identity development.

According to narrative adult learning theory, when adults are able to narrate their experiences and/or their identities, they can begin to interpret their stories to make sense of them. Narrative provides a foundation for understanding the “dynamic and complex interdependence of cultural, familial, and individual meaning systems in our own lives and in the experience of adult learners” (Rossiter & Clark, 2007, p. 27). By hearing stories and telling their own, adults can begin to see how they are positioned in those stories. In this way they can see how they fit into these pre-existing myths, dominant narratives, and/or oppressive circumstances and, ultimately, recognize how to free themselves from them (Rossiter & Clark, 2007, 2010). This pairs well with poststructural feminist theory because both are related to how changing one’s language and discourse can change one’s self-esteem, identity, and/or perspective. In this study, I used poststructural feminism to frame the discourse analysis (Van Dijk, 2015) and potential for change in the discourse, and then I used narrative learning theory to examine what and how athletes learned by being encouraged to recognize and/or change that discourse.

In addition to creating the words we speak, language also shapes our thoughts and actions: “Our language conditions our thoughts and articulation and at the same time imprisons us. Encountering a different mode of expression in the language opens up channels for broadening horizons” (Goodson & Gill, 2011, p. 80). Self-narration, then, provides us with the opportunity to use our own words/language/stories to describe ourselves. By hearing personal narratives and telling our own, we can begin to see how we are positioned in them and, ideally,
how to free ourselves from them. A combination of poststructural feminist theory and narrative learning theory allowed me to examine how people make significant individual and social changes through self-narration.

Both of these theories connect to the adult education theory of experiential learning, especially adult narrative learning theory, which is a type of experiential learning (Michelson, 2012). A full explanation of experiential learning theory is outside of the scope of this study, but it is important to note experiential learning’s basic components and background here as well as its connection to narrative adult learning theory (Rossiter & Clark, 2007, 2010). There are many different approaches to experiential learning, but the common thread among approaches is that “learning from experience involves adults’ connecting what they have learned from current experiences to those in the past as well as to possible future situations” (Merriam, Caffarella & Baumgartner, 2007, p. 185). In this study, to promote meaning making like identity formation and to potentially facilitate social change, I asked sportswomen to connect their past, current, and future sporting experiences as they related to their athletic careers, lives, and bodies.

Constructivism is the experiential learning approach that best informs this study because constructivism focuses on reflection, which relates to learning because people have experiences and then they reflect on them to create new knowledge, which is exactly what I asked of this study’s participants. Reflection becomes a meaning-making process as a result of experience (Merriam, Caffarella & Baumgartner, 2007). This approach is relevant to this study because I asked participants to share the experiences they have already had and then reflect on them to create new knowledge and/or meaning of their sports careers and communities.
Research Design Overview

I used a combination of qualitative methods to create this dissertation: narrative autoethnography to gather and present data, and feminist critical discourse analysis to analyze it. The general purpose of qualitative research is to understand how people make meaning (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). In particular, this is a narrative-autoethnography, where I include my own autoethnography examining how culture shaped my experience (Ellis, 2004) and also included the narratives of other sportswomen.

I was interested in studying post-collegiate competitive female athletes who have made competitive sports a part of their lifestyle, so I identified four local women who matched these criteria and were willing to participate. Then I conducted, recorded, and transcribed interactive interviews, which are collaborative efforts between the researcher and participants that discuss a particular topic—in this case competitive athletic careers, lives, and bodies—through multiple interview sessions. The emphasis here is on what can be learned through these conversations within the interview setting and through the stories each researcher/participant pair tells (Ellis, Adams & Bochner, 2011). This interview method is a self-conscious, collaborative process and it works best when both researcher and participants have experience with the discussion topic (Ellis, 2004), which is why it works well for this study: I, like my participants, am a competitive athlete. After interviewing participants, I created a story about each athlete’s career and body using only her own words. Ethnographers and those who conduct narrative research often write in creative ways that target audiences within and outside academia, so ethnographic narrative writing works well here because I want other female athletes to read or hear these stories, reflect upon their own athletic identities and bodies, and then consider the discourse they use to describe themselves.
After completing a draft of each athlete’s story, I used feminist critical discourse analysis to examine the gendered discourse, if any, that the participant used. Discourse analysis pays attention to the effects of our words to express or describe something with the purpose of gaining a better understanding of how discourse is connected to the de/construction of particular versions of events (Willig, 2013). Feminist critical discourse analysis is similar but more specific: it studies the way that social-power abuse and inequality related to gender are used, copied, legitimated, and resisted through discourse (Van Dijk, 2015). Because I wanted to examine how gender stereotypes in sports are reinforced and resisted through discourse, this is an appropriate method of analysis. I will further discuss these methods in Chapter Three.

**Significance of Study**

This research provides contributions to the fields of sports and gender studies, adult education and lifelong learning, and is personally significant to me. In this section I discuss these contributions and why this study is important not just for sportswomen, but for all women, sports consumers, and everyone else who lives in a world that values a sports culture.

**Significance for Sports and Gender Studies**

Sports have had, and continue to have, a significant impact on American and other western cultures. The discourse people of this culture use to discuss sports and athletes reflects how the society values them, and the current sports discourse devalues sportswomen (Jones, 2013; Kaskan & Ho, 2016; Sherry, Osborne, & Nicholson, 2016). Although sport is still a small area of research, it continues to grow and gain respect as more researchers recognize sport’s prominent place in all cultures, and its importance in determining and shaping those cultures:
“sport reflects culture, and culture reflects sport” (Sands, 2002, p. 8). Sport has a hand in many major sociocultural systems like language, clothing styles, and concepts of heroes, and it symbolically represents societal struggles like property, fairness, honor, and economic gain (Creedon, 1994). As sports ethnographer Sands (2002) stated, “sport has become both a barometer of social change and a leading agent of social change [...]. It is also an extremely large window in which to peer into the ticklings and cultural variation of humankind” (pp. 7-8).

Whether you’re an athlete, a sports fan, or someone who has little interest in sports, you are affected by sports because they have a significant impact on American and other cultures.

Consider sports’ impact on gender. As Creedon (1994) put it: “Sport is a microcosm of gender values in American culture” (p. 4), meaning that through multiple aspects of sport, we can see how our American culture views gender. Take, for example, the National Football League (NFL): a staple of American culture. Creedon (1994) argues that:

- at a minimum, because professional football remains a male-only preserve, we learn that being male in our culture confers a degree of privilege. By denying women access to the game as players, we are taught that women are less qualified, powerful or physical than men. By limiting women to largely stereotypical support roles (e.g. cheerleader, spectator, perhaps hostess for a Super Bowl party), we also learn that women should be subservient. (p. 7)

This is just one of many examples of how women are pushed to the sidelines in sports culture. Although Creedon wrote the above statement 25 years ago, I argue that the situation is similar today; It is true that since then, the NFL has courted its female fans to increase revenue; in 2014 the NFL succeeded in increasing its female viewership by 26% and increasing fantasy football participation by 10% in a single year (Chemi, 2014). The NFL also had its first female referee,
Shannon Eastin, in 2012. Even though women have increased their engagement with the NFL, they still are not the main participants—the players—and the NFL remains a male-dominated domain (Antunovic, 2014).

The implementation of Title IX, the performances of the 1996 female Olympic athletes, and the 1999 Women’s World Cup Soccer competitions created turning points for women in sports (Heywood & Dworkin, 2003), helping to put women’s sports in mainstream media and pop culture venues, but the quantity and quality of that coverage is still lacking, and some of it creates a misleading “separate but equal” mentality. Much of society doesn’t realize or doesn’t care that efforts to create more programming for women’s sports creates a further gender divide. For example, ESPN created the website espnW to provide more sports coverage for women sports fans. It’s a step towards receiving more coverage for women’s sports, but having that coverage in an entirely separate domain sends the message that women’s sports are still separate from—and lesser than—men’s (Wolter, 2012).

The findings from the 2018 Nielsen Sports Report, *The Rise of Women’s Sports: Identifying and Maximizing the Opportunity*, show some progress in women’s sports programming and consumption; for example, this study found that 84% of general sports fans are interested in women’s sports, and 51% of those fans are men, which disproves the idea that only women are interested in women’s sports. In addition, the findings have shown that there is an increased interest in women’s sports when they are viewed in conjunction with men’s sports, like track and field events. These findings may encourage media outlets to increase and strengthen women’s sports media; however, at this time, both men and women have low expectations of women’s sports with only a third of sports fans believe them to be skilled, inspiring, and/or progressive (The Nielsen Company, 2018).
By examining the representation of athletes through discourse, specifically how sportswomen described themselves, this study explored how much the dominant, sexist discourse of women in sports has affected the way sportswomen speak, and therefore think, about themselves as women and as athletes. From here, women can determine what to do to change the language they use about themselves and, ideally, affect the language others use to speak about them. If sportswomen begin to resist the popular, common, sexist discourse around sports, and call out others who do not, more positive representations of sportswomen in the media and pop culture could possibly follow. All of this ultimately leads to the goal of creating fair perceptions of and conditions for sportswomen.

Significance for Lifelong Learning and Adult Education

Although this study focused on the learning that takes place when sportswomen tell and then retell and/or reflect on their stories about their sports careers, lives, and bodies, the general concepts explored within the study—learning through narrative experience and considering the discourse used to present oneself and de/construct one’s identity—are applicable to a wider adult audience than just sportswomen. For example, this study focused on gender and sexism, but other issues such as racism, heterosexism, and class bias should also be similarly examined through language. This study on sexism in sports could be a starting place for examining and changing other unequal representations not just of competitive athletes, but of all women.

This study builds upon the foundations of experiential learning—one of the classic learning theories of adult education—particularly through a constructivist lens. According to Merriam, Caffarella, and Baumgartner (2007), “Those who see experiential learning through a constructivist lens want to foster critical reflection on experience and challenge learners’
assumptions while validating personally constructed knowledge” and “educators serve as facilitators of reflection and encourage learners to discuss and reflect on concrete experiences in a trusting, open environment” (p. 169). It is with this lens that I approached this study, the results of which provide evidence that the constructivist approach of reflection does facilitate personal meaning making and identity formation.

Personal Significance

This study is significant to me personally because it combines my two greatest loves: swimming and storytelling. I began swimming competitively when I was three years old, and I’ve been writing stories for almost as long; before I knew how to write, I would sit on my mom’s and dad’s laps in front of a computer and dictate stories that they typed for me. Swimming and writing are activities I have always done for pleasure or self-fulfillment, but I have also realized that these are rich areas of personal learning and potential social change.

I have been journaling since I was 8 years old, so while conducting this study, I read some of my old journal entries for ideas and inspiration. The journals are filled with stories about swimming competitions, softball tournaments, basketball games, and endurance running. In the space between these stories I also included snippets of life about trying to keep up with my older brother, dressing up for Halloween with my best friends, cute boys on whom I had crushes, and other thoughts on my world and the people in it. But it is clear that competitive sports, particularly swimming, have shaped who I am and how I perceive the world. It has been through this process of telling, retelling, and reflecting on my stories that I have constructed an identity as a competitive swimmer.
Significance Conclusion

So, I encourage other sportswomen to share their sports stories because it is important that there are more stories about sportswomen, told in their own words and free from sexist overtones, available for other athletes, sports fans, and scholars, as well as non-athletes. With the rising popularity of social media, many athletes are already sharing pieces of their athletic careers in their own words, but unless they are aware of the sexism inherent in dominant sports discourse, they are apt to mimic it and therefore reinforce it (Hardin, Zhong, & Corrigan, 2012). In this study I examined the stories sportswomen told about their competitive sports careers, bodies, and lives to see how they portrayed themselves through discourse. Then I assisted them in reflecting on and in some cases rewriting the stories to deliberately subvert the dominant discourse and discuss what they have learned about their athletic identities through this narrative process.

Assumptions, Limitations, and Strengths

According to Merriam and Tisdell (2016), a main characteristic of qualitative research is that “the researcher is the primary instrument for data collection and analysis” and “the human instrument has shortcomings and biases that can have an impact on the study” (p. 16). Rather than eliminating biases or overlooking shortcomings, a qualitative researcher should identify and monitor them and make it clear to the audience how the biases or shortcomings relate to the study. In this section, I clarify the assumptions and limitations of this study but also emphasize its strengths.
Assumptions

Each assumption below relates to this study’s research questions.

1. Sportswomen who have not been educated about sexist discourse, media biases, or similar concepts are likely to use the dominant, sexist discourse when describing their athletic careers and bodies.

2. When they are helped to recognize the dominant discourse, most sportswomen will understand its implications and want to change the discourse.

3. Sportswomen will want to re-story their narratives about their athletic careers and bodies in new ways in an effort to subvert the dominant discourse and are able to make meaning (learn) from this change of discourse.

Limitations

Although this study includes a strong research design and is grounded in relevant literature and theories, it is not without its limitations.

1. Lack of geographical diversity of participants: Because of the limitation of time and money, I used a purposeful convenience sample of only sportswomen local to me in central Pennsylvania.

2. Research methodology: Autoethnography is a difficult and rigorous methodology, but it has many opponents. Some critics believe there are ethical considerations and others even debate whether it is science or art. I elaborated on these concerns in chapter three.

3. Researcher biases and positionality: I am an athlete, a writer, a feminist adult educator, and a woman, so I viewed and analyzed the stories generated during this
study through that lens. I discussed my perspective as a researcher in more depth in chapter three.

**Strengths**

Despite the study’s limitations, it also has numerous strengths that make it viable, culturally relevant research.

1. Participation of girls and women in sports has grown and continues to grow, yet the media still present them as “other” or lesser than men in sports. This may be because men’s sports have a longer, richer history in our culture than women’s, but by telling their sports stories, sportswomen will create a stronger foundation on which to build their own rich history.

2. Plenty of studies have examined the way others—like sports journalists, bloggers, and fans—discuss sportswomen’s careers, performance, and bodies, but few have examined the discourse that professional sportswomen use to describe themselves, and fewer still examine amateur athletes’ sports discourse. This study takes these concepts a step further: not only does it examine sportswomen’s discourse, it also investigates what amateur sportswomen learn when encouraged to reflect on their stories and tell them in a non-sexist way. It examines the effects of learning on identity formation and ponders the possibility of facilitating social change.

3. This study is a rigorous academic endeavor that created a series of short stories available and easily digestible for the consumption and learning of non-academics about sportswomen. So not only does the study contribute to the academic world of adult education and sports feminism, it also contributes to the literary world
that is severely lacking stories about sportswomen. With the participants’ permission, I plan to publish the stories on my website, share them through social media, and attempt to publish them in accredited creative writing journals.

**Dissertation Organization**

To help the reader better navigate this piece of writing, I describe here this dissertation’s organization. Part One contains this introduction chapter in addition to chapter two: the literature review and chapter three: the study’s methodology. Part Two contains chapters four through seven and describes the findings of the study. There is one chapter for each of the four participants, and each chapter has two parts. The first part of each chapter contains the participant’s story as she told it in her own words during her first interview. The second part of each participant’s chapter contains the analysis and discussion of her story, which includes the participant’s reflection of her story as she discussed it in her second interview, and what I learned from each participant. Part Three houses the study’s implications and conclusions.

**Defining Terms**

The terms below appear frequently throughout this dissertation. This section identifies how I have used these terms within the scope of this study.

*Deconstruction* within this study is a form of analysis poststructural feminists use to examine differences within a text, which could be a written document, an image, a phrase, a person, a place, etc., to better understand that text. This process of analysis includes the 1) reversal and 2) displacement of binary oppositions (such as male/female, strong/weak) and shows texts as “not natural but constructed oppositions, constructed for particular purposes in
particular contexts” (Scott, 1988, p. 38). I write de/construction with a slash to show that deconstructing a text provides space to re-construct it without use of binary oppositions, which are standard in a dominant discourse.

*Dominant discourse* refers to the standard ways of speaking about and/or portraying any phenomena. In this study, the dominant discourse refers to the often sexist discourse that media and pop culture use to describe women in sports. Discourse is neither just a language nor just a text but a “historically, socially, and institutionally specific structure of statements, terms, categories, and beliefs” (Scott, 1988, p. 35). A discourse can reflect the values of a culture.

*Narrative and Stories* are terms I use interchangeably throughout this proposal, though some academics argue that they are different. Boje (2006), for example, says that narrative is a story confined to a “chronology with a linear plot, a cohesive telling with beginning, middle, and end” (p. 1) and that narrative fails to consider the complexity of fragmented, non-linear, or evolving stories. But in my study, both narrative and story refer to a person’s account of an event or events, whether it is told linearly, in fragments, or in any other manner. This study assumes that people make meaning of their lives from the stories they hear and tell (Rossiter & Clark, 2007; 2010).

*Poststructural feminism* is, according to English (2010), “a body of theory that pays attention to the issues of knowledge, power, difference, and discourse and how these intersect and entwine in the lives of women” (n.p.). Poststructural feminist theory aims to bridge the gap between the individual and social experiences of women by explaining where female experience comes from, why it is contradictory or incoherent, and why and how it can change. Some recent feminist authors refer to this type of feminism as *Third Wave Feminism*. 
Sportswomen refers to adults who identify as women and have made a competitive sport—not just health and fitness—a part of their lifestyle. These could be either amateur or professional athletes. When possible I avoid the term female athlete because using female as a qualifier for athlete creates a “separate but equal” mentality. On occasion, I will use female as an adjective to provide clarity about the specific athletes to whom I refer.

Title IX is a piece of legislation the federal government passed in 1972 that states: “No person in the United States shall, on the basis of sex, be excluded from participation in, be denied the benefits of, or be subjected to discrimination under any education program or activity receiving Federal financial assistance” (U.S. Department of Education). This law refers to all educational programs, not just athletics; however, this law was a huge turning point in athletics because it provided equal opportunity for girls and women to participate in sports at any educational institutions that receive federal funding, from elementary schools to universities.
CHAPTER 2
LITERATURE REVIEW

The purpose of this study was to gather and analyze the discourse of the stories, images, and artifacts that sportswomen used to narrate their athletic careers, bodies, and lives. With narrative adult learning and poststructural feminist theoretical lenses, I explored their stories with narrative autoethnography and feminist critical discourse analysis and then encouraged them to retell and reflect on their stories in a way that affected learning/identity formation and will possibly facilitates social change. Through this collaborative writing process, I hoped to elicit a series of sports stories that are free of sexist language and images, and portray the athletes as they want to be portrayed. Such narratives, I believe, will and inspire future generations of athletes.

My study addresses the following research questions:

1. In what ways do participants assimilate and/or subvert dominant discourses when describing their athletic careers, bodies, and lives?

2. What do participants learn about their athletic identities when they are educated about sexist discourse and then critically examine the discourse they use to discuss their athletic careers, bodies, and lives?

The purpose of this chapter is to discuss the empirical literature that exists about sportswomen’s stories and how they have de/constructed their identities as sportswomen through narrative. There are few studies about sportswomen who consciously reject the sexist sporting discourse; there are also few studies that examine sportswomen’s own interpretations and reflections on their athletic identities; but there are no studies that examine the learning or
identity de/construction that takes place when sportswomen share their stories while deliberately subverting the sexist sports discourse. This is where my study steps in. While most dissertation literature review chapters are written in third person, at times I write in first person to talk about my journey with the literature and to make my own positionality visible in the story. The literature review chapter is mostly about the literature in the third person, but it also has a context and a story. In this chapter I both provide discussion on the literature itself, but in the telling, I also provide context for the story.

I wrote this chapter soon after the 2016 Olympic Games, so it includes an overview of studies on the discourse and images of athletes in traditional sports media that were published prior to or immediately after this event. I discuss the recent themes of the existing empirical literature on the de/construction of athletes’ identities. After that, I offer an overview of the study’s theoretical frameworks—poststructural feminism and narrative learning theory—to frame and provide context for the study. Finally, I end with the implications and conclusions of the literature on adult learning and identity.

**Overview of Sportswomen in Traditional Sports Media**

It was impossible to ignore NBC’s sexist coverage of the 2016 Summer Olympic Games. Commentators kept calling swimmer Katie Ledecky, a multi-event world-record holder and the gold medalist in the 200, 400, and 800-meter freestyle, the “female Michael Phelps” and said that she “swims like a man” (Beauchamp, 2016, n.p.). By comparing Ledecky to male swimmers, even champion Michael Phelps, implies sportsmen are the norm to which others should aspire and that sportswomen are secondary to sportsmen. Before swimmer Katinka Hosszu of Hungary had even dried off after breaking the world record in the 400 individual medley, the NBC
reporter turned the camera on her husband and coach and credited him for her swimming success. Almost all of the media coverage of Dana Vollmer mentioned that she had just given birth and how incredible it would be for her to win a medal after having a baby (Beauchamp, 2016, n.p.), which implies that women are incapable of doing what they had done before they gave birth. And these are only a handful of examples of the commentary on a single sport.

On a positive note, NBC swimming commentator Rowdy Gaines was quick to say of Ledecky, “She doesn’t swim like a man. She swims like Katie Ledecky” (Beauchamp, 2016, n.p.) to deflect the sexist comments of other commentators. Other journalists and social media pundits called out NBC’s sexist commentary through videos and internet memes that ran rampant through social media outlets during the Games; for example, an article titled “Michael Phelps, the Male Katie Ledecky, Just Made Olympic History” parodies the comparison of Ledecky to male swimmers: “Ledecky doesn’t ‘swim like a man’ (whatever the hell that means) — rather, Phelps swims like a woman” (DiDomizio, 2016).

Several researchers recently stated that social media users have the potential to subvert the dominant discourse in sports media but have not yet gotten there (Antunovic & Linden, 2015; Bruce, 2016; Wolter, 2012). Reactions to the Olympic coverage exemplifies this: it calls out the sexism but does not explain the extent of the harmful effects of sexist discourses on sportswomen such as low self-esteem, negative body image, and poor physical and mental health (Kaskan & Ho, 2016). So, on the positive side, more people are publicly responding to the sexist discourse, helping others to see its absurdity; however, they are not critically analyzing its institutionalized and normalized sexism or other harmful side effects. Sexist discourse, therefore, is still running rampant throughout U.S. sports media. The following sections provide my
methodology for gathering literature on the discourses and images of sportswomen in traditional sports media and an overview of the most recent scholarly research on the topic.

**Methodology for Literature Review**

To find articles on the discourse and images of sportswomen in the media, I used combinations of the following keywords: female, women, athlete, sports, media, discourse, sexist, language, audience, images, and photos. I first used these keywords in the Lion Search on Penn State Harrisburg Library’s website, then in Google Scholar, and lastly in the following databases: Communication & Mass Media Complete, Academic Search Complete, ProQuest, and Taylor & Francis. I gathered additional articles from the reference pages of the articles found in the previously mentioned searches. Finally, I performed a hand search of three of the most commonly cited journals, 1) Sex Roles, 2) Communication and Sport, and 3) Journal of Sports Media from 2014 to 2017.

Because I focus primarily on research published between 2013 and 2017 to emphasize that this is still a current and relevant topic, I did not review articles published prior to 2013. To further narrow the scope for the review of discourse and images, I eliminated articles that studied only international sports media so I could hone in on the coverage in the United States. Because I intend to interview participants about competitive sports experience, I also eliminated studies about recreational sports like hiking and jogging. And lastly, I eliminated literature that focused on women and girls under age 18 because I am interested in studying the experiences of adult women. Through this process, I found multiple articles on audience perceptions of sportswomen in the media, which help to bridge the gap between the literature on discourse and images of sportswomen and the literature on the de/construction of sportswomen’s identities through
personal narratives, which I cover in a later section of this chapter. To strengthen the review on audience perceptions of sportswomen in the media, I expanded the search to include articles published since 2010 and included audiences of adolescents. These searches resulted in 23 scholarly articles. See Table 1 for a breakdown of the literature.

Table 1
Research on the Discourse and Images of Sportswomen in Traditional Sports Media

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Author(s)</th>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Qualitative or Quantitative</th>
<th>Research Method</th>
<th>Purpose</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Discourse and Images</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bruce</td>
<td>2016</td>
<td>Qualitative</td>
<td>Literature Review</td>
<td>Synthesize U.S. and global research into 15 historical and emerging rules of media representation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hodler &amp; Lucas-Carr</td>
<td>2016</td>
<td>Qualitative</td>
<td>Content Analysis</td>
<td>Examine the narrative told around Olympic champion swimmer Dara Torres’s 2008 “fitspirational” comeback</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sherry, Osborne, &amp; Nicholson</td>
<td>2016</td>
<td>Qualitative</td>
<td>Literature Review</td>
<td>Synthesize scholarly research on the role of print media images in the construction of attitudes towards and perceptions of women’s sport</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Schmidt</td>
<td>2016</td>
<td>Quantitative</td>
<td>Content Analysis</td>
<td>Investigate trends in 30 years of sports reporting in <em>The New York Times</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lavelle</td>
<td>2014</td>
<td>Qualitative</td>
<td>Rhetorical Analysis</td>
<td>Analyze sports magazines’ coverage of WNBA player Brittney Griner</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Liang</td>
<td>2014</td>
<td>Qualitative</td>
<td>Content Analysis</td>
<td>Analyze sports advertising posters</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wolter</td>
<td>2014</td>
<td>Qualitative</td>
<td>Content Analysis</td>
<td>Analyze articles and images “above the fold” on the espnW website</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kim &amp; Sagas</td>
<td>2014</td>
<td>Quantitative</td>
<td>Content Analysis</td>
<td>Compare female athletes and supermodels in <em>Sports Illustrated’s Swimsuit Issues</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Authors</td>
<td>Year</td>
<td>Methodology</td>
<td>Method</td>
<td>Description</td>
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<td>-----------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cooky, Messner, &amp; Hextrum</td>
<td>2013</td>
<td>Mixed Methods</td>
<td>Content Analysis</td>
<td>Determine if televised news media coverage continues to focus on men’s sports over time</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aull &amp; Brown</td>
<td>2013</td>
<td>Quantitative</td>
<td>Textual Analysis</td>
<td>Compare press coverage of fights that occurred on court in NBA and WNBA games</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bissel &amp; Smith</td>
<td>2013</td>
<td>Quantitative</td>
<td>Content Analysis</td>
<td>Observe the visual and verbal aspects of the primetime broadcasts of the women’s beach volleyball games during the 2008 Olympic Games</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jones</td>
<td>2013</td>
<td>Quantitative</td>
<td>Content Analysis</td>
<td>Analyze website coverage of the 2008 Olympic Games</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wolter</td>
<td>2013</td>
<td>Quantitative</td>
<td>Content Analysis</td>
<td>Analyze the photographs in the feature articles on the espnW website</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Audience Perceptions</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Smith</td>
<td>2016</td>
<td>Quantitative</td>
<td>Survey</td>
<td>Test the relationships between self-objectification and body esteem from sports media exposure</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pegoraro</td>
<td>2015</td>
<td>Qualitative</td>
<td>Content Analysis</td>
<td>Analyze whether the Nine for IX documentary “Branded” contained the elements needed to move viewers to action related to gender equity in sports</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MacKay &amp; Dellaire</td>
<td>2014</td>
<td>Qualitative</td>
<td>Content Analysis and Interviews</td>
<td>Understand how visitors of the Skirtboarder’s blog interpret (re)presentations of female skateboarders</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kane, LaVoi, &amp; Fink</td>
<td>2013</td>
<td>Mixed Methods</td>
<td>Survey and Interviews</td>
<td>Explore how elite female athletes respond to the ways they are represented in sport media</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Daniels &amp; Wartena</td>
<td>2011</td>
<td>Mixed Methods</td>
<td>Open-Ended Survey</td>
<td>Investigate which aspects of sportswomen in the photographs adolescent boys focused on and to learn which</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
I examined 13 articles published since 2013 that contain empirical research about traditional media’s representation of sportswomen through discourse and images. Of these 13 articles, six are quantitative, six are qualitative, and one used mixed methods. Table 1 provides a quick reference for each article. One article, Bruce’s (2016) literature review, synthesizes the U.S. and global research of sportswomen in the media into categories of representation, which included key sports media studies from the 1970s to 2016. Because she already wrote a through and comprehensive review of the literature, the purpose of this section, then, is to add to and critique Bruce’s (2016) review, particularly with the articles found within the past five years, to provide context for the current state of sportswomen in traditional sports media. This overview sets the stage for the following section in which I discuss how audiences perceive sportswomen because of these media representations.
After Bruce (2016) synthesized the relevant research on sportswomen in the media and created categories of representation, she used a third-wave feminist theoretical lens—which is a synonym for poststructuralism and means that she studied both the similarities and differences of coverage—and a cultural studies theoretical lens to challenge researchers' traditional interpretations of these categories. She revealed an important, though not surprising, discovery that the majority of sportswoman discussed in the literature are white, elite, heterosexual, able-bodied, middle-class athletes from the U.S. Within this scope, she divided the literature into three main categories of media representation: 1) Difference, 2) Similarity, and 3) Agency. She further broke down each category to create 15 rules of sports media representation, as shown in Table 2 and discussed below in detail.

Table 2
Bruce's (2016) Rules of Traditional and New Media Coverage

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Themes</th>
<th>Rules</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Difference: Five Older Rules</td>
<td>1. Lower Broadcast Production Values</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2. Gender Marking</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3. Infantilization</td>
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<td></td>
<td>4. Non-Sport-Related Aspects</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>5. Comparisons to Men's Sports</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Difference: Four Persistent Rules</td>
<td>6. Sportswomen Don't Matter</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>7. Compulsory Heterosexuality and</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Appropriate Femininity</td>
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<td></td>
<td>8. Sexualization</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>9. Ambivalence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Similarity: Four Current Rules</td>
<td>10. Athletes in Action</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>11. Serious Athletes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>12. Model Citizens</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>13. Us and Them</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>15. Pretty and Powerful</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
**Difference: Five Older Rules.** Bruce (2016) divided the first category, Difference, into two sub-categories: Five Older Rules and Four Persistent Rules. The Five Older Rules (numbers 1 through 5 in Table 2) are most often found in the foundational literature on women in sports (Messner, Duncan, & Jensen, 1993; Oglesby, 1978), but are considered older rules because some recent literature (Bissell & Smith, 2013; Jones, 2013) provides evidence that these rules are waning, even if their influence remains. Over twenty years ago, Messner et al. (1993) reported that televised coverage of women’s basketball included fewer cameras, graphics, replays, close-ups, and other visual effects that left viewers with the impression that the game was boring. The same study also found many gender markers that positioned women as inferior to men—like referring to women’s basketball as “women’s basketball” and men’s basketball as “basketball”; infantilizing terms to describe sportswomen such as girls or ladies; and other unequal language such as describing men’s success as talent and women’s as luck.

More recent studies, however, found fewer instances of gender markers or infantilizing language in sports media. The results of Jones’ (2013) study on the coverage of the 2008 Olympic Games suggested that “such terms which devalue sportswomen’s status and their performances are slowly disappearing from the lexicon of most sports journalists” (Jones, 2013 p. 257). Likewise, Bissell and Smith (2013) found an improvement of the commentary, court shots, and camera angels of beach volleyball matches during the 2008 Olympic Games. Much of the broadcast commentary was game-related and focused on the players’ physical and mental toughness on the court. They also found that the number of sexualized camera angles on breasts and buttocks had dropped by 20% from the coverage of the 2004 Olympic Games. In addition, Wolter’s (2013) study of photographs and articles on the espnW website revealed an overall improvement of representation of sportswomen.
Although there has been improvement, the Five Older Rules have not disappeared. Pontererro (2014) stated that women are “often represented in sports reporting as ‘cute little girls’” (p. 104), implying women’s immaturity and therefore lack of adult competence, including athletic skill. Pontererro’s (2014) study, however, was on international newspaper coverage of one tennis player—Maria Sharapova—and its results may not reflect the most recent U.S. sports media discourse. But Bruce’s (2016) fifth rule—Comparisons to Men’s Sport—should be moved to the Persistent Rules category because it still runs rampant in current sports media coverage.

Aull and Brown (2013) explored media stories about NBA and WNBA fights and found many comparisons of female to male athletes; from this, they concluded that this language “risks constructing female athletes only according to how they compare (or do not) with male athletes as the standard for what athletes are” (p. 39). Similarly, in a rhetorical analysis of *Sports Illustrated’s* and *ESPN: The Magazine’s* coverage of the 2011-2012 NCAA women’s basketball season, Lavelle (2014) discovered that media constantly compared player Brittney Griner to male athletes rather than to other women. This approach, reasoned Lavelle (2014), prevents Griner from being judged like other players. These comparisons are also dangerous because they pose sportsmen as the norm to which sportswomen should aspire.

In addition, recent research found that the media still represents sportswomen through Non-Sport-Related Aspects (rule 4) rather than their athletic qualities and successes. Take Dara Torres, for example. She is a four-time Olympic swimmer with nine Olympic medals, most recently known for her three silver medals at the 2008 Olympic Games. At the time, she also happened to be 41 years old and a mother. According to Hodler and Lucas-Carr (2016), the media coverage of Torres during an eight-week period spanning the 2008 Olympic Games reduced her identity as an elite athlete, making it seem as if “her swimming success is secondary,
and the medals are just a by-product of the bigger achievement—achieving a good-looking post-pregnancy and post-40 body" (p. 444). This discourse poses middle-age and motherhood as the antitheses of elite athleticism, as barriers to be overcome. Although the media coverage was complimentary of Torres’ body without sexualizing it, it still put more emphasis on her age and motherhood status, hence detracting from her status as an athlete. It also reproduced Compulsory Heterosexuality and Appropriate Femininity (rule 7), one of Bruce’s (2016) Four Persistent Rules.

**Difference: Four Persistent Rules.** The Four Persistent Rules (numbers 6 through 9 in Table 2), according to Bruce (2016), originate in the foundational literature on women in sports but also persist in the current literature. In Jones’ (2013) study of media coverage during the 2008 Olympic Games, she examined the quality and quantity of website coverage of national broadcasting companies in four countries, including the U.S. She found that only 30-35% of the coverage focused on women and it was only that high because the exposure of a few select, attractive women boosted the percentage. Also, nearly twice as many stories about men took the prime above-the-fold spots, clearly marking a greater emphasis on male athletes, showing evidence that sportswomen did not matter. Similarly, Cooky, Messner, and Hextrum’s (2013) longitudinal study of televised news media revealed that the quality and quantity of women’s televised sports decreased significantly among top Los Angeles TV news stations and ESPN’s *SportsCenter*. For example, during NCAA basketball tournaments, women’s teams received six minutes of coverage on *SportsCenter* within a three-hour timeframe, and most of those six minutes were on the margin of coverage like on the scrolling ticker at the bottom of the screen. Schmidt’s (2016) even more recent content analysis of sports coverage of the past 30 years of
The New York Times found that only 5.2% of articles focused on women’s sports and tended to be shorter than the articles that focused on men’s sports. Schmidt (2016) stated he observed no improvement of these statistics over the entire 30-year span of his study.

Sexualization of sportswomen in the media is another current concern. Sherry, Osborne, and Nicholson (2016) published a literature review of scholarly research on images of sportswomen that exposed the subtle ways in which sports media constructs sexual difference. Although this study mainly focused on international, not U.S., representation of sportswomen, it came to the same conclusions as the U.S. studies: media continue to maintain sexual difference by devaluing women’s sports participation via visual representation. Sports media discourse as a whole also continues to sexualize and devalue sportswomen. For example, Ponterotto’s (2014) study of media coverage of Maria Sharapova suggests that “eroticism of the female athlete is constant.” Even Wolter’s (2013) discourse analysis of espnW coverage, in which she credited the company for its vast improvement of women’s sports coverage, showed many direct references to sportswomen’s physical appearance rather than athletic performance. In Bruce’s (2016) literature review, she recognized the positive changes in media discourse but emphasized that these positive changes are mostly only happening for white, heterosexual athletes with a narrow range of body types: “sportswomen represented within this discourse (who are invited to pose for men’s and sports magazines, particularly in the United States, or included in hottest female athlete lists) most often represent the most elite athletes in the world who are young, White, explicitly or implicitly heterosexual, and with lean, toned body types that reflect idealized femininity” (p. 372). Many sportswomen are still sexualized and devalued, despite the positive changes for a select few athletes.
**Similarity.** Bruce (2016) divided her second category of media representation, Similarity, into Four Current Rules (numbers 10 through 13 from Table 2) that represent how sportswomen and men are represented in similar ways. Interestingly, most of the studies she cited as supporting these four rules come from international publications, not from the U.S. Bruce (2016) speculates this is because the U.S. has emphasized research on discourses linked to femininity and gender difference whereas nations with fewer sportswomen achieving globally have emphasized nationalism. Model Citizens (rule 12) refers to gendered and/or racialized media representations that show sportswomen bringing glory to the nation. This rule, however, leads to the Us and Them rule in which the media presents sportswomen from their home nation as serious athletes and model citizens but then sexualizes or subjects to dominant discourse of sportswomen from other nations (Bruce, 2016). Cooky, Dycus, and Dworkin’s (2013) comparative analysis of the U.S. and South African media coverage of Caster Semenya—South African track and field star who won the 800-meter race in a world championship event and then underwent gender testing because of her deep voice and muscular build—exemplifies these rules. The study found that the coverage in the U.S. media framed the debate around terms of Semenya’s “true” sex and medical limitations of sex testing whereas the South African media focused on nationalism to frame her as a “‘true’ woman defending the nation against a perceived racist assault” (p. 31). In this case, the U.S. and South African media support Bruce’s (2016) rules 12 and 13.

When considered from the perspective of U.S. media, the other two rules in this category—Athletes in Action and Serious Athletes—are better suited in the Persistent Rules category because they still exist in U.S. sports media. Bruce (2016) stated that media photographs of sportsmen and women are similar, but U.S. literature on the topic disagrees. To
return to Jones’ (2013) study on newspaper coverage of the 2008 Olympic Games, she found that photos of athletes were unequal in terms of both quantity and quality: there were fewer photos of sportswomen, and those photos were more likely to portray athletes in passive positions whereas sportsmen appeared more often and in action shots. Jones’ (2013) finding is not unusual; media often depict female athletes in passive, sexy, or sexual poses that emphasize their appearance and downplay their athleticism. Kim and Sagas (2014), for example, compared photos of sportswomen with female supermodels in issues of the Sports Illustrated Swimsuit Issue. They found that the magazine represented athletes in more active and energetic poses than the supermodels, but the athletes were still in sexually suggestive poses. The researchers argued that Sports Illustrated “has sought to represent athleticism with sexuality by transforming female athletes into sexual objects for male audiences” (p. 127). Likewise, Liang’s (2014) study on sports product advertising found evidence that media use sexualized images of sportswomen to sell men’s sports products. Even in the advertisements for women’s sports gear, the athletes were in passive poses rather than performing a sport.

On the other hand, Wolter (2012, 2013, 2014) conducted studies of the espnW website, “a voice for women who love sports,” and discovered a vast improvement of quantity and quality of coverage of sportswomen compared to other sports media outlets. Wolter (2013) argued that espnW’s photographic representation of female athletes is unprecedented both in frequency and seriousness of coverage, meaning they are shown as more active. In addition, most of the articles mentioned sportswomen’s prowess, strength, and positive skill levels and accomplishments. Unfortunately, Wolter (2014) also found that despite the recognizable improvement of coverage, ESPN’s motivation for creating espnW and improving that coverage was not for the benefit of women in sports, but only to generate profit. ESPN and its parent company Disney Corporation
have a history of discrimination against women, so creating anything related to women, like espnW, exploits them. In addition, she stated that the espnW site sets women up to not be taken seriously as athletes or sports fans because having a separate site devoted to women in sports posits female athletes and female fans as different from and lesser to male athletes and male fans. Cooky, Messner, and Hextrum’s (2013) longitudinal study of televised news coverage of women’s sports also found that the media did not take sportswomen very seriously; not only did they discover a lack of coverage, but much of the coverage focused on fights, assaults, and scandals within women’s sports rather than on their achievements.

Clearly, Bruce’s Four Current Rules do not ring true for sports media coverage in the U.S. In Bruce’s defense, however, she conceded that the similarities of representation she found between sportsmen and women does not mean that the discourse around sportswomen is changing; instead, media inserts sportswomen into stories that "read much like men's sports stories with a focus on tough, physically skilled, successful, focused, determined women who are legitimately striving for athletic success" (p. 367). This still reinforces the traditional sports media discourse.

Agency. Rules 1 through 13 as discussed above represent traditional media coverage, but Bruce's (2016) final category—Agency—contains Two New Rules that represent new media coverage. These new rules surfaced through the advent of new media—like blogs, Twitter, and Facebook— which allow women to tell "their own multiple truths, and creat[e] Internet-based sites and media that tell stories traditional media have ignored" (p. 368). Both of these new rules—Our Voices and Pretty and Powerful—focus on deconstructing dichotomous categories, including difference/similarity, pretty/powerful, sexy/athlete, and other either/or combinations.
These Two New Rules, therefore, embrace a both/and perspective that "creates space for ruptural discourse that sees no incompatibility between athleticism and femininity" (p. 368). New media, she argued, allows athleticism and femininity to co-exist rather than be posited as opposites. The Pretty and Powerful rule exemplifies the marriage of traditionally contradictory terms, and the Our Voices rule shows that sportswomen and their fans have control over the way media represents them because new media gives them the agency to represent themselves. Some modern sportswomen use new media to share their story in their own words and use the Pretty and Powerful rule to do so (MacKay & Dallaire, 2013). I examine the concepts of Two New Rules more closely a later section of this chapter titled De/construction of Sportswomen’s Identities through Narrative.

To conclude, Bruce (2016) argued that the old rules of sports media representation are changing but are making room for new rules that prove problematic in new ways. For example, the Pretty and Powerful rule "reinforces and normalizes whiteness, heterosexuality and an exceptionally narrow range of body types as representing 'ideal' femininity" (p. 372). She therefore urges researchers to focus on the intersections of race, gender, and sexual orientation in future studies. In addition, Bruce (2016) notes that the majority of studies focus on only elite sportswomen, which shows that there is room for research on casual or amateur athletes, such as the participants in my study.

**Audience Perceptions of Sportswomen in the Media**

I examined 10 studies published since 2010 about audience perceptions of sportswomen in the media. Of these 10 studies, five are quantitative, three are qualitative, and two used mixed methods. I included these articles in this review because they are necessary for showing the
effects of the above-mentioned discourse and images on sports media consumers, including sportswomen. This literature also helps to connect the effect of sports media discourse to the ways in which sportswomen de/construct their identities through personal narratives, which I discuss later. The purpose of this section is to explore the potential effects of sports media discourse and images on various types of audience members.

As established in the previous section, sexualization of sportswomen in the media is one of the most prevalent issues sportswomen face. Not only has recent literature found plenty of evidence that media sexualizes sportswomen (Bruce, 2016; Ponterotto, 2014; Sherry, Osborne, & Nicholson, 2016; Wolter, 2013), additional bodies of research provide evidence that sports audiences of all varieties negatively perceive sportswomen when presented with sexualized images or discourse of those women. Harrison and Secarea’s (2010), for example, asked college students to read fake articles about women’s basketball—some articles sexualized the players and some did not—and then to fill out a questionnaire to measure the participants’ perceived gender role orientation. They found that the more sexualized the portrayal of the athletes, the higher the participants rated their disapproval; they were also more disparaging of the athletes’ athletic abilities. Similarly in Daniels and Wartena’s (2011) study, they showed photos of performance athletes, sexualized athletes, and sexualized models to adolescent boys and asked them to rank the photos. The results indicated that boys objectified the sexualized athletes even more than the sexualized models, and the boys tended to provide neutral or negative comments about the sexualized athletes’ athletic skills. The negative perceptions of sexualized athletes inspired Smith (2016) to conduct a study to test the relationship among self-objectification, body esteem, and sports media exposure for collegiate sportswomen by presenting participants with images of performance athletes and sexualized athletes and asking them to fill out
questionnaires. The results suggested that athlete participants were less likely to self-objectify and have greater body satisfaction when they viewed images of performance athletes. This provides yet another reason why the media should provide more action shots of sportswomen.

That audiences perceive sexualized athletes as less competent than performance athletes was also one of the findings in Smallwood, Brown, and Billings (2014) study in which they compared audience perceptions of sportswomen posing in *Sports Illustrated’s Swimsuit Issue*, where they pose in skimpy bathing suits, versus in *ESPN: The Magazine’s Body Issue*, where they pose nude. Participants viewed the sportswomen in the *Swimsuit Issue* as more feminine and sexual, whereas they viewed the sportswomen posing nude as more athletic and muscular. The authors interpreted this as a clear divide between athleticism and femininity, which again shows this dichotomy between pretty or powerful that Bruce (2016) discussed in her literature review of media representations of sportswomen. Kane, LaVoi, and Fink’s (2013) interviews with elite sportswomen, which examined how the athletes responded to the way the media represented them, also indicated sportswomen’s anxiety about athleticism versus femininity. The authors reported that many athlete participants did not want to be perceived as “‘just a sweaty jock’ who spent all their time in the gym, but as someone who, when off the court, could also be traditionally feminine” (p. 288). Perhaps it is because these sportswomen realized that men are more interested in sportswomen and women’s sports when the athletes are more feminine in appearance (Jones & Greer, 2011) that the sportswomen of Kane, LaVoi, and Fink’s (2013) study wanted to be viewed as traditionally feminine; however, they also indicated that their greatest desire was to for audiences to recognize their athletic competence. Clearly both athlete and non-athlete audiences have a hard time reconciling a pretty and powerful mentality because
they see pretty (feminine) and powerful (athletic) as opposing traits, not as ones that can coexist in the same person at the same time.

In addition to the pretty/powerful dichotomy, one of the biggest critiques among researchers of audience perceptions of sportswomen in the media is that although athletes and non-athletes alike are recognizing the negative effects of sexualized discourse and images of women in the media, few are taking action against it. As stated earlier in the chapter, some audience members are using social media to call out the sexism but usually fall short of explaining the extent of sexism’s harmful effects, like poor body image and low self-esteem (Kaskan & Ho, 2016). Some traditional types of media are calling out the sexism but fail to inspire audiences to take action. One of the documentaries in ESPN’s Nine for IX series, *Branded*, explored whether sex appeal would always outshine performance of sportswomen. Pegoraro (2015) analyzed this documentary to determine if it contained the elements to motivate its audience to take action around issues of gender inequality in sports, but she found that it fell short because, again, it provided evidence of sexism and inequality, but failed to give the audience specific tasks for combatting it.

Alternatively, when MacKay and Dellaire (2014) analyzed the contents of the Skirtboarder—female skateboarding—blog and interviewed some of its users, they found that “these young women are reflexive (have a critical awareness) toward the (re)presentational and practical struggles that female skateboarders face and have committed to being part of the movement to challenge the current system through engagement with the virtual Skirtboarder community and/or through their skateboarding practice” (p. 561). So not only were they aware of the inequities for women in their sport, they were using their self-expression on the blog to counteract it by creating positive media representations of female skateboarders. Although social
media has the ability to do more to resist the sexist discourses and images of sportswomen in traditional media, social media users are not always using that ability. In a survey of over 200 independent sports bloggers, Hardin, Zhong, and Corrigan (2012) found that blogs typically replicate traditional media discourse and values. They call for more bloggers willing to cover women's sports and advocate for sportswomen, like the users of the Skirtboarder’s blog.

This dissertation will be an answer to that call: I am a sportswoman writing about and advocating for sportswomen. Not only am I calling out the sexist discourse and images in traditional sports media, but I intend to help other sportswomen recognize their discourse and alter it, if necessary, to tell stories about their athletic careers, bodies, and lives in their own words yet free of the dominant, sexist discourse. The next section contains a review and analysis of the research on sportswomen’s narratives, which I have included so I could explore how sportswomen are currently discussing their athletic careers, bodies, and lives.

**De/construction of Sportswomen’s Identities through Narrative**

There are many ways in which traditional sports media use sexist discourse when representing sportswomen: comparisons to men’s sports, compulsory heterosexuality, and sexualization. Heinecken (2016) sought to answer the question, “while [sportswomen’s] devaluation by news media is well-documented, what happens when sportswomen are able to represent their own experiences?” (p. 325). In this section, I seek the answer to the same question, but instead of analyzing 30 of the most popular book-length autobiographies written or co-written by sportswomen as of 2012 as Heinecken (2016) did, I analyzed the most recent empirical research published on the topic since 2012.
The purpose of this section is to examine sportswomen’s narratives about their athletic careers, bodies, and lives, and how researchers have analyzed those narratives to determine how sportswomen have de/constructed their athletic identities. First I’ll describe my method for gathering this literature and then present the major themes of findings before ending with the literature’s significance.

Methodology for Literature Review

To find articles on the de/construction of female athletes’ identities through narrative, I used combinations of the following keywords: female, women, athlete, sports, narrative, story, identity, construct, deconstruct. I also used specific sports as keywords such as swimming, rugby, roller derby, basketball, soccer, and golf. I used these keywords in the Lion Search on Penn State Harrisburg Library’s website, then in Google Scholar, and finally in the following databases: Communication & Mass Media Complete, Academic Search Complete, ProQuest, and Taylor & Francis. I gathered additional articles from the references pages of the articles found in the previously mentioned searches. I then discarded articles about women in non-competitive athletic activities like hiking because my focus is on competitive sports identities. Because I wanted to examine the experiences of adult athletes, I discarded articles that were only about females under age 18. To target the most current research, I used only articles published since 2012.

These searches resulted in 11 empirical research articles that analyzed sportswomen’s narratives through written or spoken word to show how they de/construct their athletic identities. Although all of the articles included analysis of women’s stories, some articles included men’s stories as well (Carless & Douglas, 2012, 2013; Hudson & Day, 2012), and two included stories
of women sports fans (Antunovic & Hardin, 2013; Heinecken, 2015). Three articles’ participants
discussed sporting experiences in childhood and young adulthood (Carless & Douglas, 2012,
2013; Heinecken, 2015), but all participants in all articles were aged 18 or older at the time of the
research study. Five articles focused on professional athletes (Carless & Douglas, 2012, 2013;
Heinecken, 2016; Knapp, 2014; Sznycer, 2010), and six on amateur athletes (Antunovic &
Hardin, 2013; Heinecken, 2015; Hudson & Day, 2012; MacKay & Dallaire, 2013; McNaughton,
2012; Skinner, 2015). All articles focused on women in either the United States, Canada, or the
United Kingdom. Refer to Table 3 for more details about each article.

Table 3
Research on the De/construction of Sportswomen’s Identities through Narrative

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Author(s)</th>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Qualitative or Quantitative</th>
<th>Research Method</th>
<th>Purpose</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Adjepong</td>
<td>2017</td>
<td>Qualitative</td>
<td>Interviews</td>
<td>To discuss the ways in which women rugby players’ privileged positions as white and sometimes heterosexual women shape their sense of belonging in the sport</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Heinecken</td>
<td>2016</td>
<td>Qualitative</td>
<td>Content Analysis</td>
<td>To analyze the construction of female athletic identity and sports practice in thirty women’s jockographies topping Amazon.com’s list of popular sports autobiographies during the fall of 2012</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Heinecken</td>
<td>2015</td>
<td>Qualitative</td>
<td>Thematic Analysis</td>
<td>Examine how the Twitter account @SoccerGrlProbs constructs female athletic identity via its image of the “soccer girl” and how girls and young women relate to this identity in their own self-construction as athletes</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Themes of Empirical Research

This body of research reveals the four major ways sportswomen use discourses to de/construct their athletic identities: by 1) reproducing dominant discourse, 2) engaging in...
ambivalent discourses, 3) revealing the potential for resistance discourses, and 4) creating alternative athletic narratives.

**Reproducing the dominant discourse.** It is no secret that traditional sports media uses sexist discourse to represent sportswomen. Because sexism is so predominant in sports culture, it is considered the dominant discourse. When sportswomen reproduce the dominant discourse, it means they use the same sexism to represent themselves; comparing themselves to sportsmen, participating in compulsory heterosexuality and appropriate femininity, and performing self-sexualization are examples of this.

Heinecken’s (2016) study of sportswomen’s autobiographies identified numerous ways sportswomen represented themselves with the dominant discourse, including their identification with and desire to be masculine. Volleyball player Gabrielle Reece, for example, framed masculinity as “the root of sporting excellence” and femininity as “a source of weakness and sabotage” (p. 331). Knapp’s (2014) interviews with athletes on a Midwestern women’s professional football team revealed similar values. The athletes were preoccupied with playing the “right” way, with physical and mental toughness, and a competitive spirit. They emphasized this toughness by referring to their sport as “smash mouth football” or “hitting them in the mouth,” both representing the expectation of direct physical contact (p. 64). Emphasizing the traditionally masculine aspect of the sport—physicality—showed that the male version was treated as the standard version to which the players aspired, thus devaluing femininity. For some sportswomen, this can lead to patterns of anorexia and overtraining as they try to “prove beyond a shadow of a doubt that they are not what those ideas [of femininity] say they are: weak, mild, mean, meant to serve others instead of achieving for themselves” (Heywood as cited in
Heinecken, 2016, p. 332). Those are just some of the damaging effects of over-valuing masculinity in sport.

On the other hand, plenty of sportswomen prefer to emphasize their feminine traits to distance themselves from masculinity and to enforce their heterosexuality. Heinecken (2016) found that some athletes suggested that a solution to their physical and/or emotional pain was to practice sports in a more feminine way, like training in moderation—having a balance between physical and mental well-being—which “undermine[s] the body-punishing ethic of masculine sports culture even while they enforce self-management and moderation as the ideal for women’s sports” (p. 336). Heinecken (2016) then argued that the moderation mentality links to the performance of heterosexual femininity because many sportswomen embraced their maternal identities to find that balance. Some sportswomen wrote that they were “saved by motherhood” and implied that “maternity is the start of maturity” (p. 336).

Skinner’s (2015) study likewise discussed sportswomen’s identity in terms of the balance between competitive sport and motherhood. Her interviewees were middle-aged, non-elite runners, so they considered sport to be the act that balanced out their motherhood identities, which was the opposite of the elite athletes in Heinecken’s (2016) study. Also unlike the elite athletes in Heinecken’s (2016) study, motherhood guilt affected their running identities: they felt guilty being away from their children and families for too long in order to run. Because of this, Skinner (2015) concluded, women were more likely to train for and compete in shorter road races than longer road races, thus women sacrificed their athletic identities to retain their heterosexual roles as mothers and wives. With both the elite and non-elite athletes, heterosexual femininity—particularly motherhood—is at the forefront of their identities and seen as opposition to athleticism, thus reproducing dichotomous attitudes of women in sports.
Engaging in ambivalent discourses. Bruce (2016) defined ambivalent representation as a juxtaposition of sportswomen’s “physical skill, strength or competence against traditional femininity, weakness, incapacity and inferior quality of women’s sport” (p. 366). An example of this in the media is a sports-focused headline paired with a sexualized image of the athlete. Bruce (2016) cited ambivalence as one of the most common forms of representation of sportswomen in traditional media, so it is no wonder that sportswomen often represent themselves this way, too.

During Adjepong’s (2017) interviews with 15 players on a women’s rugby team, she found that the women would simultaneously challenge and reproduce dominant discourse. On the one hand, her participants embraced the traditionally masculine rugby culture by “chugging beer from sweaty boots, running around naked, and singing raunchy songs”; on the other, they said things like “we’re, like, a cute rugby team” (p. 216) to deflect that masculinity and potential “accusations” of being dykes. This ambivalence allows men to accept women into the masculine culture of rugby while also allowing the women to retain their femininity.

Sportswomen also often display ambivalent discourse on social media. Heinecken (2015) analyzed the posts of a Twitter account called @SoccerGrlProbs to determine how its authors and followers constructed their athletic identities. Based on her examples of the posts, these women used ambivalent discourse to represent themselves. For example, authors would complain about their inability to be feminine (wearing a dress and doing their hair) which served to show that despite their masculinity (having muscles and wearing sweatpants) their gender orientation is still “correct” because they at least aspire to meet norms of femininity, even if they present themselves as falling short of that goal. In addition, the posts made comparisons between male and female players, but instead of positing men’s soccer as the model to which they aspire,
they poked fun at it by posting “a photo of a female athlete whose face is torn and bloody. The caption reads: ‘No Problem girls. I can go on.’ The image of a male player on the ground grabbing his knee in pain appears underneath with a caption reading ‘AHHH!! I’m dying!’ Soccer Chick 101 retweets the same photo, commenting ‘this is why watching girls playing soccer is more entertaining’” (p. 1042). By posting images like these, the authors and followers try to resist the dominant discourse that women are weaker than men. Although it resists the dominant discourse, it also reinforces it by showing women and men as separate and distinct entities in sports participation, therefore creating an ambivalent discourse.

Heineken (2015) compared the ambivalent discourse of the @SoccerGrlProbs posts to MacKay and Dallaire’s (2012) study of the Skirtboarder’s—women skateboarders—blog because both social media outlets simultaneously reproduce and mock the dominant discourse. Skirtboarders posted photos of themselves wearing bikinis and posing in sexually suggestive ways that are typically feminine; but some of these photos also show the athletes with a garden hose, which may represent a mockery of soft-pornography rather than a reproduction of it. Additionally, the Skirtboarder’s community rarely emphasizes female stereotypes or compare themselves with men’s performances, which subverts the dominant discourse; yet they rarely push their subversiveness to a conscious, deliberate level. For instance, they do not identify publicly as feminists and appear to have no political agenda: they self-represent on their blogs as “‘just skateboarders’ rather than as female skateboarders on a mission to promote and express gender politics’” (p. 180). Similarly, the authors and followers of @SoccerGrlProbs also do not push a political agenda, nor do they discuss issues of racial or gender equality, lack of media coverage, or other inequities in sports. This leads some researchers to criticize social media for its failure to “truly challenge hegemonic sports media construction” (Heinecken, 2015, p 1049).
Revealing the potential for resistance discourses. Social media like the Skirtboarders’ blog and the @SoccerGrlProbs have great potential to subvert the dominant sports discourse, but they, like other traditional media, are falling short. Antunovic and Hardin (2012) studied women’s sports blogs’ potential for activism but found that most bloggers still reinforced dominant, sexist, discourse. The bloggers in their study reiterated the notion that men’s sports are the standard to which women’s might aspire, which is consistent with the previously mentioned studies on women’s football and soccer. Antunovic and Hardin (2012) found some evidence of bloggers writing about prominent issues in sports, particularly gender equality, but more noticeably they found that “the bloggers missed a magnitude of opportunities to address social and cultural issues” (p. 316). Sports fans rather than athletes wrote these blogs, but based on the other studies referenced here, I wonder if athletes would have missed just as many opportunities.

A more recent study by the same authors (Antunovic & Hardin, 2013) found that female sports bloggers defy “both stereotypical representations of women in mainstream sports media and hegemonic masculine discourses replicated in the blogosphere” (p. 1374), which shows hope for social media as a way to resist the dominant sporting discourse. But again, the authors of these blogs were sports fans and not necessarily athletes. Also, the article made a clear distinction between men’s and women’s sporting discussions and experiences. This enhances the idea that men’s and women’s sporting experiences are distinct and separate, thus reinforcing the dominant discourse. Although social media as a whole may be failing in this regard, some individual women have made deliberate attempts to use resistance discourses.

McNaughton (2012) published an autoethnographic article that explored how her identity as a Muy Thai fighter violates conventional womanliness. From this description alone, it is clear
that McNaughton’s narrative is an ambivalent one. Throughout the article, she showed how she has difficulty reconciling the part of her that is “neither gentle nor weak, [...] I am aggressive, assertive, highly competitive, and not particularly nice when I’m in the ring” (p. 7) with the part of her who “refuses to surrender my femininity,” writes dissertations on Martha Stewart’s exploration of domestic style and design, gets couture haircuts, wears high heels, and likes edgy fashion (p. 9). Although she says that she refuses to “yield to the binary structure underwriting many identity positions” (pp. 9-10), the way she discussed her identity showed that she was segregating her feminine and masculine sides rather than creating a more fluid identity.

McNaughton (2012) may have told her story with ambivalent discourse, but she did take her article a step further by not only discussing the sexism and inequalities she has faced as a fighter, but also by encouraging others to pay attention to language, especially in the sporting culture. She explained that exposing the socially constructed nature of language—which I have been calling the dominant discourse—reduces its power and provides a space to create new meanings. This idea correlates well with the ideas of poststructural feminism and narrative learning theory discussed later in this chapter. McNaughton (2012) doesn’t, however, provide examples of how others looking to break from the binary, dominant language should do it. This was the same criticism that Pegoraro (2015) had about traditional media: even when it acknowledges sexism in sport, it does not provide specific tasks or a desired behavioral response from the audience. This is why, in my study, I will educate my participants about the dominant discourse and then help them to subvert it in a retelling of their story.

Creating athletic narratives. Some of the articles in this body of research do not fall neatly into the categories dominant, ambivalent, or resistant discourses, but they do show how
athletes de/construct their athletic identities through storytelling. Antunovic and Hardin (2013) analyzed 449 sports blogs listed on the BlogHer website to examine how the bloggers—some athletes and some sports fans—represented themselves. They found an increase in first-person narratives and an increase in sports participation among the bloggers. They also determined that the bloggers seemed to have one of two main purposes: 1) to document their own process of becoming physically active and going through a training routine or a workout or 2) to provide information about sports that would contribute to the well-being of the reader. They concluded from their findings that women’s discussions of sport may be different from men’s and that scholars should be attentive to that difference. This is the same theory behind the creation of the espnW website, “a voice for women who love sports,” which has received both positive and negative reviews for its portrayal of sportswomen (Wolter, 2012, 2013, 2014). On the one hand, acknowledging sportswomen’s experiences is powerful; on the other hand, comparing their discourse with men’s posits them as different and possibly on unequal terms.

Two other studies (Carless & Douglas, 2012; Hudson & Day, 2012) examined the way athletes describe their experiences through narrative, but these studies differ from Antunovic and Hardin’s (2013) study in several ways. First, they generated the narratives through interviews rather than finding the stories on social media; second, the participants were all elite athletes rather than amateur athletes or fans; and third, their participants were a mixture of men and women. Carless and Douglas (2012) examined ways in which the elite athletes created narratives alternative to the dominant one in which winning or being the best is the most important aspect of competitive sports. They found that some athletes did have alternative reasons for competing, such as performing at their own highest level; enjoying the embodied experience of sport; and engaging in a community of athletes. Although they did not segregate their results by gender and
their results do not discuss gendered discourses, this study shows that it is possible for athletes to describe their athletic careers, lives, and bodies using an alternative to the dominant discourse.

Hudson and Day (2012) explored the effects of athletes’ writing about competitive stressors. They referenced Douglas and Carless’s (2009) study in which they explored instances of narrative wreckage: changes or disruptions to an athlete’s sporting narrative. Changes include starting athletic participation (Collinson & Hockey, 2007), ending athletic participation (Douglas & Carless, 2009), and disruptions like injuries (Collinson & Hockey, 2007), illness (Jones et al., 2005), or excessive stress (Hudson & Day, 2012) that alter the athlete’s career. When narrative wreckage occurred, athletes adopted alternative narratives (Douglas & Carless, 2009). Hudson and Day (2012) analyzed the narratives of athletes from a variety of sports to examine their narrative wreckage. They found evidence that athletes experiencing narrative wreckage would alter their narratives by either realigning them with the dominant narrative—like wanting to return to previous levels of success after a debilitating injury—or creating a new narrative to fit their situation—like incorporating an illness into their competition story. This study, like Carless and Douglas’s (2012, 2013), shows that athletes are capable of re-storying their athletic careers to create alternative narratives, but also found that re-storying could lead athletes to reverting to a dominant discourse.

**Significance of Findings**

To summarize, the major themes in this body of research included how female athletes de/constructed their sporting identity by 1) reproducing dominant discourse, 2) engaging in ambivalent discourses, 3) revealing the potential for resistance discourses, and 4) creating alternative athletic narratives. After analyzing this literature, I wonder if there are any ways that
sportswomen can describe themselves that will not be negatively critiqued, and the answer is probably not; therefore, sportswomen’s interpretations of their own athletic stories becomes important. The most noticeable gap in this research was the lack of studies on sportswomen’s interpretations of or reflections on their own stories. This is where my study steps in: I will explore the learning and identity development that takes place when female athletes share their sports stories, reflect upon the discourse they use to tell it, and retell their stories free of sexism.

**Poststructural Feminist Theory**

To assist me in exploring how competitive sportswomen de/construct their identities through storytelling, I will use a poststructuralist feminist lens. This lens will help to guide and interpret my findings because it discusses the intersection of language, discourse, and an individual’s subjectivity (or identity), all of which my study seeks to address. In this section, I first describe poststructuralism, followed by a summary of feminist theories, and then combine these ideas to discuss poststructural feminist theory. I further breakdown poststructural feminist theory by describing the theory’s intersection of 1) language, 2) discourse, and 3) subjectivity. I end by making a connection between the theory and my study.

**Poststructuralism**

Poststructuralism’s main ideas include “the operation of language, the production of meaning, and the ways in which knowledge and power combine to create accepted or taken-for-granted forms of knowledge and social practices” (Fawcett, 2008, p. 666). Related to language, meaning making, knowledge, and power, this movement also deals with deconstruction:
breaking down the way people have been socialized based on categories such as gender, race, and class.

Through an examination of language, poststructuralism seeks to address and collapse binary concepts – like male/female, white/black, rich/poor, masculine/feminine – by deconstructing the way people create and use language. By breaking down these lingual dichotomies, poststructuralists suggest that “most of the world really exists in various shades of grey” (Tisdell, 2002, p. 170). Poststructural thought emphasizes the importance of everyday language used to name everyday experiences, and encourages others to examine their language use and deconstruct it to reveal its inherent meanings and assumptions (Hayes, 2002). In addition, the deconstruction of language can “show us how our ways of naming our experiences are not neutral but are instead based on assumptions that can reinforce privilege and oppression” (Flannery & Hayes, 2002, p. 14). The deconstruction of language, then, can break barriers and reverse trends of privilege and oppression.

Language, according to poststructuralism, is one way in which people create meaning. From this perspective, meaning is constantly evolving, never static, although there can be fixed meanings in specified contexts. For example, when considering views of the self, poststructuralists reject the idea of an essential or core self that never changes and, instead, place importance on “decentered subjects, where subjectivity is regarded as changing, complex, and contradictory” (Fawcett, 2008, p. 667). The concept of self is always in flux because society and other external factors that affect it are constantly in flux. So from this perspective, people are at once oppressed and privileged depending on their experiences and the contexts in which they find themselves (Flannery & Hayes, 2002).
Understanding that there is no fixed meaning, or truth, in the world leads to another main precept of poststructuralism: the way knowledge and power combine to create accepted forms of knowledge and social customs. With poststructural thought, it would be difficult to accept one version of the truth over others to create established social practices because there is no singular truth; instead, there are multiple truths for different people based on their positions and experiences in life. Poststructuralism is more interested in these concepts of knowledge and power in everyday life, as opposed to the knowledge and power of institutions or “elite” groups in society (English, 2010, p. 711).

**Feminist Theory**

Like poststructuralism, contemporary feminism is a late-twentieth century movement. Feminism is, above all else, “invested in the politics of change in order to end the domination and oppression of women” (English, 2010, p. 711). And yet with that primary goal, there are different types of feminists and feminist theories, each with a different approach to abolishing women’s oppression. In this section, I compare and contrast three feminist approaches – individual models, structural models, and poststructural models – to explain why poststructural feminism is more complete.

**Individual models.** The individual models of feminist theory — such as liberal feminism and psychoanalytical feminism — focus on women’s individual rights and privileges to end oppression. Liberal feminism emphasizes equal opportunity for women, particularly in the realms of education and career. In other words, liberal feminists want women to gain the same access and privilege that men have without having to change the institutions or societies in which
they work and live. The psychoanalytical model of feminism is similar because it argues that men’s and women’s perceptions of gender should change at a psychological level in order to end oppression and patriarchy (Tisdell, 1995).

Critics point out that individual models of feminism do not focus on social change or power relations within society or an institution (Humm, 1995); however, it’s possible that feminists in this category believe that if each individual changes his or her mindset, it will then lead to societal changes and equity. Another critique of these models is that it tends to consider women as one collective group to the exclusion of different experiences among women and their different categories in life, like race, class, and sexuality. Because of this, the individual models tend to focus on white, middle-class, heterosexual women (Tisdell, 2002); women who do not fit that demographic are often ignored within these models.

**Structural model.** Unlike the individual models of feminist theory, the structural models — radical, Marxist, and other socialist feminisms — focus on changes at the societal level, not on changes for individuals. For example, liberal feminists “simply want women to have access to the system more or less the way it is” whereas radical feminists “work to change the system of patriarchy” (Tisdell, 1995, p. 60) and Marxist feminists want to change both the patriarchal and capitalist systems of society to eliminate women’s oppression.

These structural models, however, do not take into consideration that some individuals are active subjects and do have power and control over their lives, sometimes enough to resist forms of structural, societal oppression. Also, structural models only consider “systems of oppression or privilege from the standpoint of whatever structure is their unit of analysis. Structural theories tend not to account for the fact that some groups are more privileged than
others within the particular structural unit(s) of analysis” (Tisdell, 1995, p. 61). So, structural theories of feminism are useful because they consider the necessity of societal change to fight women’s oppression, but they do not consider the differences among individuals within the societies or institutes that enable women’s oppression.

**Poststructural model.** Poststructural feminist theory, then, seeks to rectify the shortcomings of the individual and structural models of feminism by combining each of their strengths. Under the umbrella of this theory, women are “not one unified, coherent group with a singular identity; they are constantly creating new identities and subjectivities, freeing themselves from labels, cultural expectations, and norms” (English, 2010, p. 711), which improves upon the critiques of the individual models of feminism. In addition, “In recognizing that women are active participants in their own creation as subjects, poststructuralist feminism makes it possible for women to revise how they have been constructed and to grasp that they inhabit multiple and possibly contradictory positions at the same time” (English, 2010, p. 711), which improves upon the limitations of the structural feminist models.

**Poststructural Feminist Theory**

As previously mentioned, poststructural feminist theory seeks to address and give legitimacy to both the similarities and differences of women and their experiences (Flannery & Hayes, 2002), thus making up for the deficiencies commonly noted in other feminist theories. As its name suggests, it marries the ideas of poststructuralism with feminist theory, so it discusses language, meaning making, and power and knowledge in terms of how it can end women’s oppression. As Weedon says, “We need a theory which can explain how and why people oppress
each other, a theory of subjectivity, of conscious and unconscious thoughts and emotions, which can account for the relationship between the individual and the social” (1987, p. 3).

Poststructural feminist theory aims to bridge this gap by offering an explanation of where our experience comes from, why it is contradictory or incoherent, and why and how it can change, particularly through the relationships among 1) language, 2) discourse, and 3) subjectivity. Below I describe poststructuralist feminism in terms of these qualities.

**Language.** Poststructural feminists believe that language is important because it helps people to understand the establishment of relationships with other people. By using language to name the experiences of those social relationships, poststructural feminists believe that people can then understand how those relationships work, including how institutions are structured and how collective identities are formed. In this context, language is not a term that refers to words, vocabulary, or other grammatical rules. It is a meaning constituting system, meaning “any system—strictly verbal or other—through which meaning is constructed and cultural practices organized and by which, accordingly, people represent and understand their world, including who they are and how they relate to others” (Scott, 1988, p. 34).

Language and other texts like books and documents, as well as elements like cultural spaces, need analyzed to avoid oversimplification of the world’s meanings and to open up new interpretations. Poststructural feminists believe that multiple aspects of language and texts should be accounted for when analyzing them, particularly historical and contextual meanings. Poststructuralists, however, “insist that words and texts have no fixed or intrinsic meanings, that there is no transparent or self-evident relationship between them and either ideas or things, no
basic or ultimate correspondence between language and the world” (Scott, 1988, p. 35). In other words, language and what it represents is constantly changing.

Through language, we learn how to behave “normally” in society because it teaches us what is socially accepted as normal. But when we realize that language, and the meanings it produces, are constantly in flux, language can become a very powerful site for political action. But language can only become an important site for political action when we realize that it contains competing ways of giving meaning to the world, those meanings are always in flux, and the dominant meanings can be contested (St. Pierre, 2000; Weedon, 1987). According to poststructural feminist theory, it is through using alternative or resistant discourses and meanings that we can better understand of women’s oppression and how to end it.

**Discourse.** Discourses are more than ways of thinking and producing meaning. They are neither a language nor a text but a “historically, socially, and institutionally specific structure of statements, terms, categories, and beliefs” (Scott, 1988, p. 35). An examination of discourse helps us to address questions such as “How do meanings change? How have some meanings emerged as normative and others have been eclipsed or disappeared? What do these processes reveal about how power is constituted and operates?” (Scott, 1988, p. 35). In addition, discourses “constitute the nature of the body, unconscious mind and emotional life of the subjects which they seek to govern. Neither the body nor thoughts and feelings have meaning outside of their discursive articulation, but the ways in which discourses constitute the minds and bodies of individuals is always part of a wider network of power relations, often with institutional bases” (Weedon, 1987, p. 105).
Different discursive fields within different organizations and institutions – like schools or hospitals – often have different “truths” or different ways of seeing the world and people’s social relationships. Poststructural feminists encourage the expression of multiple truths and propose that people have their own truths based on their life experiences and positionality (Tisdell, 2002). The goal of poststructural feminism is not to achieve a singular truth but, instead, to be able to analyze truths from multiple perspectives to allow for a better understanding of the “complex, dynamic, and often contradictory nature of human experience” (Hayes, 2002, p. 236).

So having multiple truths is a positive aspect of meaning making, according to poststructural feminists, but the problem comes when competing discourses have different truths and those truths are conceived in such a way that forces people to follow a singular truth of a particular organization or institution rather than question it. Foucault’s work on discourse has aimed to shed light on competing truths to show “the shared assumptions of what seemed to be sharply different arguments, thus exposing the limits of radical criticism and the extent of the power of dominant ideologies or epistemologies” (Scott, 1988, p. 36). This means that although some people and institutions have different truths, their different truths, or viewpoints, often have similarities. A purpose of poststructural feminism, then, is to show that few, if any, aspects of the world are in black and white; most have a grey area.

**Difference.** Through the above discussion of language and discourse, you can see that an important aspect of poststructural feminism involves the concepts of difference and similarity; according to Ferdinand de Saussure’s structuralist linguistics, meaning is made through these implicit and explicit contrasting concepts (Scott, 1988). Poststructural thinkers, including poststructural feminists, call these contrasting concepts—known as binary oppositions—into
question (Tisdell, 2002). Binary oppositions include opposing terms such as male/female, white/black, rich/poor, and reason/emotion; in the western philosophical tradition, the first word of the pair is considered stronger and better than the second, even though the leading word loses its power and meaning without the context of the second word.

In patriarchal discourse, binary oppositions of sexual difference, like masculine/feminine, can create meanings that are not related to gender; this then ties meanings of gender to various kinds of cultural representations by which men and women are organized and understood (Scott, 1988). In other words, binary oppositions place men and women in completely separate categories and then are assigned further binary oppositions like masculine/feminine, strong/weak, and logical/emotional, which serve to keep men and women in separate spheres and do not allow for any overlap, such as a feminine man or a logical woman. Not only do these binary oppositions keep men and women separated, they keep women oppressed because all of the primary terms of the binary opposition, which are seen as stronger and better, are associated with men and masculinity, and all of the secondary terms, which are seen as weaker and less important, are associated with women and femininity (Spencer, 2006).

The purpose of poststructural feminism is not to reverse the binary opposition to make women and their associated terms the primary or more powerful side of the opposition, but to show that there is a range of grey area between both terms of any binary opposition (Spencer, 2006). Poststructural feminists argue that “meaning cannot take binary oppositions at face value but rather must ‘deconstruct’ them for the processes they embody” (Scott, 1988, p. 37).

**Deconstruction.** The act of deconstruction analyzes differences of a “text” to better understand it; this method, according to poststructuralists, involves two steps: the reversal and
displacement of binary oppositions. When using this process of analysis, it shows the texts to be “not natural but constructed oppositions, constructed for particular purposes in particular contexts” (Scott, 1988, p. 38). The deconstruction of binary opposition is important because it allows for a critical analysis of the way people ordinarily express their ideas, which shows patterns of meaning that may act against the original intentions of those ideas.

**Subjectivity.** The concept of deconstruction can be applied to a person’s subjectivity – or identity – which is “the conscious and unconscious thoughts and emotions of the individual, her sense of herself and her ways of understanding her relation to the world” (Weedon, 1987, p. 32). The self is not something with which we are born (Spencer, 2006): it is produced socially through language. As previously stated, poststructural feminists believe that because language is always in flux, a person’s identity is always in flux, too (St. Pierre, 2000). Therefore, no one has a fixed identity, and the way a person changes her identity and the meaning placed on her life is through changing the language and discourses used to discuss it.

According to Weedon (1987), “As we acquire language, we learn to give voice – meaning – to our experience and to understand it according to particular ways of thinking, particular discourses, which pre-date our entry into language” (p. 32). This means that we have predetermined sets of discourses we can use to describe our experiences and selves, whether those discourses match our experiences and selves or not. This can cause people to create experiences or change their selves to match the pre-existing language structures. This becomes problematic “if you accept that your individuality and your femininity are fixed qualities which constitute your very nature” because “then you are likely to assume in advance what you can achieve” (Weedon, 1987, p. 80). Poststructural feminist theory fights the idea that language
mirrors the world (St. Pierre, 2000) and instead believes that the world mirrors the language. So, again, if we can change the language we use, we can change our selves and, but extension, our social institutions.

**Poststructural Feminist Theory Implications**

In this study, I aimed to help competitive sportswomen to reflect upon the discourse they used to tell their stories and encouraged them to narrate themselves in a language free of the dominant discourse. Feminist scholars have already discussed the importance of analyzing the theories and discourse around learning and Gouthro (2019) in particular used a critical feminist lens to discuss ways to challenge power imbalances and sexist discourse. Likewise, Kaufmann (2010) conducts a critical feminist analysis of how such practices play out in classrooms. A poststructural feminist lens is appropriate for this goal because it allowed me to examine the language athletes used to discuss their athletic experiences and analyze it to discover areas in which their language could be changed to create a resistant discourse. It also helped me to examine how language and the dominant or alternative discourses have shaped their identities as female athletes.

A poststructural feminist analysis is needed with this study because just allowing a woman’s story to surface doesn’t mean she will use a resistant discourse. Many women’s stories, according to Weedon (1987), “reproduce forms of discourse which place women firmly within patriarchal relations and encourage them to identify themselves with masochistic forms of femininity and find pleasure in doing so” (p. 165). So some sportswomen may happily use a dominant discourse and unknowingly identify with patriarchal oppression, but it is the goal of this study to identify when and how this study’s participants use this discourse and find
alternative ways to express themselves. Afterwards, I hope that sportswomen can continue to use a resistant discourse, assist other athletes in doing so, and ultimately change the way sportswomen are discussed and treated in our society.

**Narrative Learning Theory**

I have always been a lover of stories—an avid reader and writer—but for most of my life it felt like a frivolous pleasure, something done purely for enjoyment, relaxation, and entertainment. Recently, though, I’ve begun to understand that stories are powerful. With them, people make meaning of their lives, expand their perspectives and open their hearts to people who are different from them, push beyond the boundary of dominant stories about themselves, others, cultures, places, and situations, and much more. Adult educators have also been realizing the power that stories have on learning and education: “Good stories take us to new places in our heads and hearts, and narrative learning uses that power to create highly effective, compelling, and meaningful teaching” (Rossiter & Clark, 2010, p. 91). These adult educators have researched ways they can harness the power of stories to meet the goals of adult learners.

Some of these adult educators have dabbled in documenting a narrative learning theory (Rossiter & Clark, 2007) also referred to as narrative pedagogy (Goodson & Gill, 2011). This relatively recent learning theory derived from other research on narrative learning that discusses narrative as a vehicle for learning and meaning making, outlines the adult learners’ and educators’ roles in narrative learning, and provides a model for how adults make meaning through narrative, all of which I describe below.
Narrative as a Vehicle for Learning and Meaning Making

Although narrative learning theory is a relatively recent learning theory, the concept of learning through narrative and storytelling is not new. First-person accounts of experiences—also called stories or narratives—became a more popular method for understand the meaning of human experience in the early 1990s (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). For instance, Boje (1991) wrote extensively about oral storytelling, particularly how employees within organizations made sense of their collective experiences and facilitated change through collectively telling stories about their place of employment. In addition, researchers have been using narrative as a method for data collection and analysis for decades.

Stories have a solid place in education and adult learning because they allow us to make meaning of our lives (Merriam, Caffarella, & Baumgartner, 2007). They are a way of narrating our experiences, which are pre-linguistic and not related to language. Yet we use language to access, reflect on, make sense of, and express our experiences through language, or, in other words, by narrating our experiences (Michelson, 2013; Goodson & Gill, 2011; Rossiter & Clark, 2010).

“Stories are everywhere,” wrote Rossiter and Clark (2007). “We tell them, we live them, our views of reality, of life itself, are shaped by them in ways beyond our awareness. We make sense of our experience, day by day and across the life span, by putting it into story form” (p. 3). Not only does this quote discuss the power and importance of narration, but it also hints at its fluid nature. Narrative is a process, not a product. Goodson and Gill (2011) describe it as “a journey that leads to learning, agency, and better understanding of oneself, others, and one’s purpose in the world” (p. 102). According to narrative learning theory for adults, this narrative process paves the road to identity development and meaning making.
Narrative learning theory directly equates narrative with identity. For example, Yuval-Davis (2006) wrote that “identities are narratives, stories people tell themselves and others about who they are (and who they are not)” (as cited in Rossiter & Clark, 2010, p. 4). Life stories answer questions of identity: Who am I and how do I fit into this world? Goodson and Gill (2011) question if it’s possible to even have an identity without a way to narrate it. They also ask if narrative can bring out a ‘true’ or ‘essential’ self. Rossiter and Clark (2010) take a stance on this question and emphasize that identity—the self—is never fixed: it is “always producing itself through the combined processes of being and becoming, belonging and longing to belong” (p. 4). Through narrative, adults can understand themselves not as fixed entities just moving through time or developmental sequences but as “complex and multidimensional story that unfolds over the course of a lifetime” (Rossiter & Clark, 2007, p. 31).

According to narrative learning theory, once adults are able to narrate their experiences and/or their identities, they can begin to interpret the stories to make sense of them. (See section A Model for Making Meaning through Narrative for more details on how adults do this.) Narrative provides a foundation for understanding the “dynamic and complex interdependence of cultural, familial, and individual meaning systems in our own lives and in the experience of adult learners” (Rossiter & Clark, 2007, p. 27). By hearing stories and telling our own, we can begin to see how we are positioned in them. In this way, we can see how we fit into these pre-existing myths, dominant narratives, and/or oppressive circumstances and, ultimately, recognize how to free ourselves from them (Rossiter & Clark, 2007, 2010).

Language is the primary way that oppression is created and reinforced. So if language is a means of oppression, it can also be a means of reversing that oppression. Goodson and Gill (2011) question whether people recognize themselves as products of a dominant culture or
dominant narrative, and Rossiter and Clark (2007) insist that they do: “At the cultural level, we understand that the accepted narratives of the dominant culture define oppression and privilege – the center and margins – of a society.” Goodson and Gill (2011) noted that language shapes our thoughts and actions as well as the words we speak. They also stated that “our language conditions our thoughts and articulation and at the same time imprisons us. Encountering a different mode of expression in the language opens up channels for broadening horizons” (p. 80).

Self-narration provides people with the opportunity to use their own words/language/stories to describe themselves, which helps them to break free from oppressive conditions.

To illustrate this, I’ll return to my example in chapter one in which I stated that in childhood my peers would sometimes call me “Anne the Man.” In the dominant cultural narrative, men are strong and athletic and women are not, so if a woman has strength and athletic capabilities, as I did, she is categorized as manly. But by talking about my athleticism and gathering stories from other female athletes, we can show in our own words that athleticism and strength are not just associated with men, and thus break that dominant cultural narrative.

**Adult Learners’ and Educators’ Roles in Narrative Learning Theory**

Rossiter and Clark (2007), who identify as adult educators, argue that narrative education is “aligned with our field’s foundational belief in the essential connection between experience and learning, and it offers a way to effect that connection by using the natural way in which all of us make sense of our experience, that is by storying it” (p. 10). Adult educators, they argue, will be more effective if they understand how narrative works. In the previous section, I briefly explained how narratives can help people form identities and make meaning in their lives, and I
will now discuss in more detail how these concepts fit into adult education by outlining the roles of adult learners and educators in narrative learning theory.

Goodson and Gill (2011) define narrative pedagogy/learning as “the facilitation of an educative journey through which learning takes place in profound encounters, and by engaging in meaning-making and deep dialogue and exchange” (p. 123) and Rossiter and Clark (2007) wrote that it “aims to connect the educational experience and content with the learner’s construction of the self-story” (p. 62). The foundation of narrative learning includes a) teachers’ authentic engagement, including sharing personal narratives; b) deep caring relationships; c) respect; and d) love. To elaborate on these points, Goodson and Gill (2011) wrote, “in facilitating narrative learning, the teacher and the learner both share their understanding, knowledge, worldviews, values, and personal experiences. Through such giving and sharing, the teacher and the learners themselves mutually enrich each other’s humanity” (p. 124).

Clearly, there must be a lot of trust and respect among learners and educator to create these conditions, and it is the educator’s role to create them. One way in which educators do this is by knowing their learners and respecting their learners’ prior experiences as the foundation for new learning. To be effective at this, educational content and activities need to connect with the learner’s prior experiences and have some degree of immediate meaning for the learner. Educators also need to share their own stories with students early on in the process to create credibility and authenticity in the learning environment (Rossiter & Clark, 2007). The success of narrative pedagogy also depends on the educator’s ability to “identify with the learners as persons and fellow human beings, and to be open to the learners’ self-knowledge, current needs, narrative capacities and characters, lived experience of the past and present, and their capacities for consolidating, modifying and transforming their narratives toward their well-being”
It seems, then, that educators following a narrative pedagogy are likely also practicing a learner-centered educational philosophy. It is also the educators’ role to give learners responsibility in the educational process by encouraging them to incorporate their own lives into that process. Educators are more like resources for learners rather than transmitters of knowledge, so it is the educator’s responsibility to create an interpretive space in which the learners can interact with content and stories (Rossiter & Clark, 2007). Educators, therefore, need to let go of control and allow students to actively participate in their own learning process; thus, this model assumes a degree of self-directed learning on the part of the students.

In addition to acting as agents of their own learning and development, students in a narrative model of education are expected to participate in the narrative process, which includes listening to, sharing, and interpreting stories as well as linking them to their own experiences. If educators provide opportunities for self-storying, then learners should begin to understand they are not only the protagonists of their personal stories, but the authors, too. It’s in this realization that learners can learn and make meaning from stories. When learners and educators participate in this narrative process, it makes the curricular content “more real, more immediate, and more personal. And it also creates a new and deeper level of engagement by the learner with the content, and that engagement is more complex than the cognitive engagement because now there’s more involved” (Rossiter & Clark, 2007).

A Model for Making Meaning through Narrative

I just discussed the role of meaning making in narrative learning theory, so now I will expand upon this by describing how adults use narrative to make meaning in their lives. Goodson
and Gill (2011) discuss the Spiral Process of Narrative Learning (see Figure 1), which incorporates the main parts of the narrative learning process for adults. The process typically begins with the narration step, in which educators and learners consider their life stories. Goodson and Gill (2011) emphasize that the educator’s role here is to prepare learners to ask themselves reflective questions such as who am I? What are the major events in my life? They also note that it’s vitally important that educators share their narratives at this stage to show they are equal participants in the process, not experts.

Next comes collaboration in which learners also share (or reconstruct) their stories and participate as active listeners to their peers’ stories. At this stage, the educator should model active listening, including hearing what is unsaid, and use these observations to ask good questions and invite open dialogue. Through these questions, peers’ questions, and other aspects of open dialogue, learners can begin to make meaning from their stories. Rossiter and Clark (2007) noted that as storytellers, learners often focus on experiences that elicited emotional...
reactions, which motivate them to make sense of those reactions through their stories. The listeners/readers connect with the speaker(writer’s) emotions, enabling them to suggest further interpretations and/or ask additional questions. The role of story listener/reader is an important one. As story-listeners, learners can respond with empathy to another’s story, which helps them to expand their understanding of themselves, deepen their acceptance of others, and widen their worldviews. Just by listening to or reading stories, “Our personal experience mingles with what we hear and then see. As listeners, we are co-producers with the teller of the story performance. It is an embedded and fragmented process in which we fill in the blanks and gaps between the lines with our own experiences” (Boje, 1991, p. 107). This process of filling in the blanks and gaps creates a collaborative experience and facilitates learning for the story receivers.

Following collaboration comes location, when learners begin to locate their stories in historical, cultural, and social contexts. This stage is important because learners can begin to understand why they tell their stories the way they do at a particular moment in time. “At any given time,” wrote Rossiter and Clark (2007), “we are somewhere in the middle of the story, and we don’t know for sure what comes next” (p. 39). Because of this, the same story can be interpreted differently at a different point in time, which is why the continual spiral process of narrative learning is so important.

Some stories will then move onto the next stage, theorization, in which learners reveal more abstract understandings of their stories, for example, finding the connection between the stories they have shared and their reflection on them. Goodson and Gill (2011) wrote that this stage is the starting point for developing a strategy for living a good life. This could also be the stage in which learners begin to truly take responsibility for their stories and understand how their personal narratives can help them to break free from dominant, oppressive ones. As
Rossiter and Clark (2007) wrote, “One implication of this interpretive orientation is that it is very empowering. While we do not have control over many of the events or circumstances of our lives, we do have some choice as to how we interpret them. [...] This realization of choice in meaning making is one of the most valuable aspects of the narrative orientation in adult education because it opens up possibilities. Adult learners can choose to see things differently, to reinterpret the past” (p. 34).

The fifth stage, which Goodson and Gill (2011) emphasize is not the end point but a transition point, is where potential transformative learning occurs. In this case, they mean transformative in the sense that learners can begin to live an examined, or good, life. Learners could go through the five-step process multiple times with the same or different stories. As Goodson and Gill (2011) stated, “the spiral of narrative pedagogy is in endless flux” (p. 130), which means that no story or interpretation of a story is always the same.

It is through this or similar processes that adults are able to construct or reconstruct meaning of their world, which allows them to “exercise the autonomy and responsibility required of a citizen in a democratic society” (Rossiter & Clark, 2007, p. 61), or, in other words, to make meaning of their lives – and make meaningful lives – through narrative. It is through this process of narrative learning that participants this study de/constructed their athletic identities through their self-narration. Chapter three outlines this research process in more detail.

**Implications and Conclusion**

In this chapter, I outlined the empirical literature that discusses how traditional and social sports media uses sexist discourse that leads audiences, including sportswomen, to absorb and regurgitate that discourse and its implicit sentiments. I also summarized the literature that shows
how sportswomen use that dominant discourse when de/constructing their athletic identities. 

Through this review, I identified a gap in the literature: no studies exist about athletic identity de/construction when female athletes deliberately subvert the dominant discourse. In addition, I summarized the main concepts of poststructural feminist theory and narrative learning theory in relation to this study.

In this chapter I also emphasized the importance of sportswomen being able to tell their own stories in their own words and having the opportunity to consider the discourse they use to tell those stories. This study will provide sportswomen with the opportunity to better reflect on their athletic experiences and identities, how they have formed their athletic identities, and how they can re/tell their stories to help themselves and future generations of athletes to eliminate the sexist discourse of women in sports.
CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this study was to gather and analyze the discourse of the stories, images, and artifacts that sportswomen used to narrate their athletic careers, bodies, and lives. With narrative adult learning and poststructural feminist theoretical lenses, I explored their stories with narrative autoethnography and feminist critical discourse analysis and then encouraged them to retell their stories in a way that affected learning/identity formation and will possibly facilitate social change. Through this collaborative writing process, I hoped to elicit a series of sports stories that are free of sexist language and images, and portray the athletes as they want to be portrayed. Such narratives, I believe, will and inspire future generations of athletes.

My study addresses the following research questions:

1. In what ways do participants assimilate and/or subvert dominant discourses when describing their athletic careers, bodies, and lives?

2. What do participants learn about their athletic identities when they are educated about sexist discourse and then critically examine the discourse they use to discuss their athletic careers, bodies, and lives?

This is a qualitative research study, and qualitative research in general examines how people make meaning (Merriam, 2002), though there are different types of qualitative research. I used narrative autoethnography to gather and present the data, and feminist critical discourse analysis to analyze the data. I then used the tenets of narrative learning to help participants reflect on and/or retell their stories without sexist discourse. The purpose of this chapter is to describe this methodology and support why I have chosen it.
Researchers typically use autoethnography to study their own experience, but they also often conduct narrative interviews and observations to examine other people’s experiences in order to understand aspects of culture (Ellis, Adams & Bochner, 2011); for example, studying the discourse that sportswomen use to describe their athletic careers, bodies, and lives to understand how the dominant sexist discourse has affected their perceptions of their athletic experiences. Autoethnographers often write in creative ways that target audiences within and outside academia, so this will work well here because I want other sportswomen, beyond the participants of this study, to hear these stories, reflect upon their own athletic identities and bodies, and then consider the discourse they use to describe themselves. This study, however, is about how the study’s participants discuss and reflect on their own stories from a narrative perspective; I then used discourse analysis to analyze those stories.

Discourse analysis pays attention to the effects our words have on expressing or describing something with the purpose of gaining a better understanding of how that discourse connects to the de/construction of particular versions of events (Willig, 2013). Feminist critical discourse analysis is similar but more specific: it studies the way that social-power abuses and inequality related to gender are used, copied, legitimated, and resisted through language (Van Dijk, 2015). Because I want to examine how discourse reinforces and resists gender stereotypes in sports, this is an appropriate method of analysis.

In this chapter I first present an overview of autoethnography by discussing its place in the social sciences and in relation to narrative inquiry, followed by an overview of feminist critical discourse analysis. Next, I describe my background as a researcher and its effects on the study. Afterwards, I describe how I selected participants and collected, analyzed, wrote up, and verified the data. The chapter ends with a summary and conclusion.
Autoethnography Overview

Autoethnography is the marriage of autobiography, which is the account of a person’s life as told by that person, and ethnography, the study of people’s customs and cultures (Ellis, Adams & Bochner, 2011). Therefore, autoethnography is the study of a person’s customs and culture as told from that person’s perspective. These stories are often told using literary devices such as characters, scenes, and sensory details. This section provides an overview of autoethnography by discussing its place in qualitative research and the social sciences.

Qualitative Autoethnography in the Social Sciences

As noted above, qualitative research aims to understand “how people interpret their experiences, how they construct their worlds, and what meaning they attribute to their experiences” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 6). Qualitative researchers often approach research from an interpretive, critical, and/or postmodern angle, all of which assume reality is socially constructed so there is no single reality or truth. On the other hand, quantitative researchers—those who study statistics and percentages—believe that a single truth does exist, that it can be found through observations and measurements, and that it should be presented with numerical data. In qualitative research, however, the primary researcher is often the main source of data collection and analysis and the data is presented using thick, rich descriptions rather than numbers (Merriam, 2002).

Autoethnography is a type of qualitative research, and researchers who use it are interested in understanding interpretations of people, including themselves, and events at a particular point in time in a particular context rather than finding or proving the absolute truth or
reality (Ellis, 2004). Autoethnographic scholars want to concentrate on creating meaningful, accessible, and evocative research grounded in personal experience that introduces readers to issues of cultural identity; to little-known or silenced perspectives; and to forms of writing that deepen their audience’s ability to empathize with people who are different from them (Ellis, Adams & Bochner, 2011).

One of the least restrictive methodologies used in the social sciences, autoethnography “expands and opens up a wider lens on the world, eschewing rigid definitions of what constitutes meaningful and useful research” (Ellis, Adams & Bochner, 2011, p.1). Autoethnographic research has had powerful effects on me as a reader because it values stories as “meaningful phenomena that taught morals and ethics, introduced unique ways of thinking and feeling, and helped people make sense of themselves and others” (Ellis, Adams & Bochner, 2011, p. 2). Because its goal is to “describe and systematically analyze personal experience in order to understand cultural experience” (Ellis, Adams & Bochner, 2011, p.1), autoethnography pairs well with poststructural feminist theory and narrative learning theory because they all emphasize the power of personal stories.

Autoethnography combines ethnography and autobiography, and because it does not fall completely into either category, some scholars have criticized it, claiming that it is not a valid research methodology. Autoethnographers, however, believe it is futile to debate whether it is a valid research process or product because rather than being preoccupied with validity, autoethnography seeks to produce accessible yet analytical texts that can change people and the world for the better (Ellis, Adams & Bochner, 2011). This study assumes autoethnography’s validity as both a research process and product.
Next, I describe the foundations of autoethnography by describing ethnography. Then I
describe narrative autoethnography, which is the particular type of autoethnography I use in this
study.

Expectations of Autoethnography

In order to describe autoethnography, it is important to first discuss its foundation in
ethnography: a common type of qualititative research that comes from anthropology but is not
limited to that field. Although there is some variation among ethnographers about how to
approach this genre, the common precept is that it focuses on culture and society when culture
refers to “the beliefs, values, and attitudes that structure the behavior patterns of a specific group
of people” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 29). In ethnography, researchers are interested in
describing people: what they do, what they know, and what they make and use. In addition, they
may be interested in the signs, symbols, or language of a culture. An ethnographic study involves
extensive fieldwork, usually as a participant observer, to gain an insider’s perspective and a
deeper understanding of a culture’s behavior and thought (Merriam, 2002). Autoethnography
uses the same concepts noted above but is different because it focuses also on the self in relation
to culture.

While this study focused on both my own autoethnography—and its exploration in
relation to culture—and the narratives of the participants, the study could be conceptualized as
an autoethnographic narrative study. I have chosen to frame this as a narrative autoethnographic
study because I asked participants to tell me their stories and I analyzed the stories from both a
cultural perspective and a discourse analysis perspective, which I will discuss in more detail later
in this chapter.
Narrative autoethnographies are storied forms of autoethnographic research: “While the ethnographic stories feature the actions of others through description and interpretation, the ethnographer’s experiences appear as personal narratives interwoven within the ethnographic narrative” (Allen, 2017). Because I focus on both my stories and the participants’ stories, and weave my stories and reflections with my participants’ stories and reflections, narrative autoethnography is an acceptable method for this study.

The process and results of this study allowed me to gain a greater understanding of competitive sportswomen’s behaviors and thoughts about themselves, as well as my own behaviors and thoughts, by capturing and analyzing the discourse we use when describing our athletic careers, lives, and bodies.

**Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis**

Because language is a form of social interaction, it is inseparable from its social context. The purpose of discourse analysis, then, is to study language as a social phenomenon, which it does by using real people in real social settings with spoken or written text (Brewer, 2011). Language is studied in this way because, according to discourse analysis, it reveals something about the social situation in which the language is used (Brewer, 2011); for example, studying athletes’ language when describing their careers and bodies will reveal social positioning and implications of women in sports. Discourse analysts use texts—written or spoken language—in order to find patterns of meaning, contradictions, and inconsistencies. It works on the assumption that language processes are not static and orderly but fragmented and inconsistent; therefore, it assumes that language patterns can be altered (Brewer, 2011).
Critical discourse analysis is a type of discourse analysis that examines how language reveals, reproduces, legitimates, and resists social inequalities with the purpose of, ultimately, challenging that social inequality (Van Dijk, 2015). Feminist critical discourse analysis is a branch of this that specifically focuses on gender inequalities in society. The purpose of feminist critical discourse analysis is to “show up the complex, subtle, and sometimes not so subtle, ways in which frequently taken-for-granted gendered assumptions and hegemonic power relations are discursively produced, sustained, negotiated, and challenged in different contexts and communities” (Lazar, 2007). This type of gender research reflects the importance of culturally defined meanings of language processes and gender, acknowledges that individuals create gendered identities through language, and assumes that the social contexts in which individuals make linguistic choices affect those choices by either adhering to or departing from the norm (Kendall & Tannen, 2015). These are all similar assumptions of my research on sportswomen, which is why this is an appropriate method to analyze my data.

**Researcher Background**

It is imperative for qualitative researchers to place their background and biases in the foreground of their study, so this section presents more on how my background as a competitive swimmer, my experience as a feminist educator, and my love of reading and writing stories have all contributed to how I will approach the data collection, analysis, and write-up of this research study.

Being a competitive swimmer increased my self-esteem, self-knowledge, my voice, and my status in society, which are all principal goals of a feminist pedagogy (Tisdell, 2002). I don’t think that my swim coaches deliberately instructed using a model of feminist pedagogy;
however, they always created a caring, safe environment in which I felt valued and included, thus helping to increase my self-esteem and self-knowledge. I was and am a quiet person, but it was through swimming—not school or other social institutions—that I found my voice because swimming is the area of my life in which I feel most comfortable and have the strongest sense of belonging.

Even though I do not think I was coached or taught under the deliberate use of a feminist pedagogy when I was a child, I do believe I naturally follow one as an educator for two main reasons: 1) my positive experiences as an athlete, which included positive interactions with coaches, and 2) my undergraduate scholarly research in feminist studies. The combination of those two experiences lead me to feminist pedagogy, which is “a method of teaching and learning employing a political framework that involves consciousness-raising, activism, and a caring and safe environment” (Merriam, Caffarella, & Baumgartner, 2007). As an educator, I try to create a caring and safe environment for adult learners. For this study, I created these conditions so my participants would share their sports stories. One way I did this is by getting to know the athletes as individuals and sharing pieces of my own story and experiences with them, too.

It is important to me as an educator that I get to know my students as individuals. I provide plenty of opportunities for them to share information about themselves and their previous experience with the subject matter we discuss. Sharing autobiographical information is one way to deal with differences and similarities among learners and especially between me and the learners. In the scope of this study, the learners are both the study’s participants and anyone who reads the participants’ stories. Tisdell (2002) states that feminist pedagogy is about personal and public stories and their use in education because stories “give context, provide examples,
touch our hearts, and put a human face on the rational world of ideas” (p. 157). Therefore, as a feminist educator, I share relevant stories about myself and my background and encourage others to do the same. This study is part autoethnography because it is important to me as a feminist educator to share my story as well as give others the opportunity to share theirs.

Sharing stories among learners and between myself and learners is an effective way to illustrate connections between people and experiences and to raise consciousness about relevant topics, but being a feminist educator goes beyond just providing opportunities to share stories. Feminist educators should also assist learners in interpreting the stories they tell and hear, and then encourage them to act and create social change (Grace & Gouthro, 2000; Michelson, 2013; Tisdell, 2002). In this study, for example, I found sportswomen willing to share stories about their athletic careers. After they shared their stories, I shared with them my analysis of their stories and encouraged them to reflect on their experiences to create deeper meaning and to consider instances of sexism and/or sexist discourse that they could revise. My hope is that they will continue to eliminate sexist discourse when speaking about themselves and their bodies and, better still, encourage others to cease using sexist discourse, too.

**Participant Selection**

The intention of this qualitative study was to gain insight from specific types of people, so it required a purposeful sample, which is “based on the assumption that the investigator wants to discover, understand, and gain insight and therefore must select a sample from which the most can be learned” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 96). The results of studies using purposeful samples cannot be generalized to other populations, but that is not their purpose or intention.
I was interested in studying post-collegiate competitive sportswomen who make competitive sports a part of their lifestyle; therefore, I used a criterion-specific sample selection. My participants have all of the following characteristics: 1) identify as female, 2) have made training for and competing in individual sports part of their lifestyle, 3) are at least 18 years old, 4) are not currently collegiate athletes, and 5) live within 100 miles from Harrisburg, PA. Because of the limitations of time and money, I was only able to meet with and interview women within this commute. Although I sought women who are not currently collegiate athletes, this sample includes some women who are former collegiate athletes and women who attended college but didn’t participate in competitive collegiate sports at that time. I narrowed the scope to include only athletes who compete in individual sports—sports in which athletes usually compete and score as individuals, even if those individual points add up to an overall team score—to create more homogeneity among participants and discover more similar themes. Future studies can expand upon these criteria to include a greater diversity of sportswomen.

To gather a purposeful sample, I asked friends, family, and colleagues to recommend local women who matched the criteria described above. I also contacted the presidents or social media pages of local women’s sports organizations and individual athletes to ask if they would be interested in participating in my study. Of the four participants, I connected with three of them through referrals from friends and family, and one by contacting her directly through social media; she and I discovered, though, that we have several mutual acquaintances. All four participants live in South Central Pennsylvania and are involved in their sports beyond just being sports participants; they are also ambassadors, coaches, race directors, and board members within their sports communities. It is important to note their additional involvement in their sports because that shows that they have a greater chance of influencing other athletes. The
sports these women represent are triathlon, running, tennis, and golf. At the time of the initial interviews, these women ranged in age from 38 to 69.

**Data Collection, Analysis, and Write Up**

In autoethnographic studies, data collection and analysis happen simultaneously, meaning they are not distinct and separate phases. They are closely intertwined processes because the data analysis usually determines the types of data to be collected (Merriam, 2002; Gobo, 2008). In this particular study, the write up was also entwined with the data collection and analysis, so it was not a completely separate process either. Figure 2 below illustrates the general flow of my data collection, analysis, and write-up process. Through each step, I also kept a journal of my interactions with the athletes that included observational data and my reactions to my conversations with each athlete. The rest of this section describes this research flow in more detail.

![Data Collection, Analysis, and Write Up Diagram](image)

*Figure 2: Data Collection, Analysis, and Write Up. This figure illustrates the general flow of this study’s research process.*
Data Collection

Participant observation, or immersion in a culture, is the primary data collection method of ethnography (Merriam, 2002), but in autoethnography and narrative, the primary means of data collection is the story of the researcher in relationship to culture, and/or the narratives of the participants as written or spoken in their own words. Those doing ethnography use all five senses concurrently to gather observational data, which is written in diaries and/or fieldnotes, often in thick, rich descriptions that comprise their ideas, apprehensions, upsets, confusion, and reactions to the experience, as well as thoughts about the research methodology itself. Ethnographers use participant interviews—formal or informal, usually unstructured or semi-structured—in addition to analysis of documents, records, and artifacts and the researchers’ observations and impressions (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Because this was narrative autoethnography and not a traditional ethnography, the primary means of data collection was my own autoethnography and narrative interviews with participants.

Autoethnography data collection is similar, but because of its connection to autobiography—the process of writing one’s own life story—data collection focuses on aspects of the researcher/writer’s past experiences. Autoethnographers and those conducting narrative research use artifacts, photos, recordings, personal journal entries, and other items meant to assist with memory recall. They will also often focus their data collection on epiphanies: “remembered moments perceived to have significantly impacted the trajectory of a person’s life” (Ellis, Adams & Bochner, 2011, p. 3), particularly epiphanies that stem from their cultural identity. In the following paragraphs, I discuss how I collected data for my own autoethnography and then for participants’ stories.
Collecting autoethnographic data. In this study, I used a combination of the above data collection methods but focused primarily on unstructured and semi-structured interviews. Throughout the entire research process, I kept a journal that documented observational data in relation to my own story and my reactions to each step of the research process. I also examined old journals, photo albums, awards, swim meet programs, and other artifacts to help me to write my story about my competitive athletic career and body. I chose to research my story first so I would have a solid base of information to draw upon when I conduct interviews. As I conducted interviews, however, I discovered more to add to my story, so I continuously edited and reflected on my story throughout the research process.

Collecting Participants’ Stories. After researching my own story, I conducted and recorded interactive interviews with my participants. Interactive interviews are collaborative efforts between researchers and participants. They discuss a particular topic—like competitive athletic careers and bodies—often through multiple interview sessions. The emphasis here is on what can be learned through these conversations within the interview setting and through the stories each researcher/participant tells (Ellis, Adams & Bochner, 2011). This interview method is a more self-conscious, collaborative process than reflexive interviews, and it works best when both researcher and participants have experience with the discussion topic (Ellis, 2004), which is why it worked well for this study: I, like my participants, am a competitive sportswoman.

Prior to the interviews, I asked each participant to think about the most important moment in her sports career. I also asked her to look through any journals, sports awards, photos, videos, and any other artifacts related to her competitive athletic career to aid her memory and asked her to bring any artifacts she felt comfortable sharing with me to the interview. During the interview, I asked each participant to describe the artifact(s) to me so each woman’s story in the
following chapters includes sensory details in the woman’s own words. The interviews are informal, so although I had a list of questions—“How did you get involved in competitive sports,” “Why do you continue to play,” “How would you describe your body,” and “What is your most significant competitive sports experience?”—we did not strictly stick to this script.

**Data Analysis**

To analyze the data collected through autoethnographic means, I used a feminist critical discourse analysis because it allowed me to examine how the interviewees experienced their sports careers and bodies through language, how that language positions them in society, and what the consequences of that positioning may be. This is an approach that pairs well with my poststructural feminist theoretical framework (Gavey, 1989) because they both involve the interpretation of language in particular social contexts—like competitive sports—in relation to structures of power like gender.

Discourse analysis can be a rather vague approach (Gavey, 1989), but Willig (2013) has outlined a process by which discourse analysts typically proceed with this work. First, discourse analysts need to select a text for analysis. Any text is suitable, so in this study the stories created from the transcribed interviews with the participants served as texts. Next, discourse analysts work through the texts line-by-line with a set of research questions in mind. Typically, these research questions will focus on the effects of discourse, not on the thoughts or feelings of individual speakers. As they proceed line-by-line, they write analytical notes in the margins related to their research questions and other emerging themes. They pay attention to the word choices of both the interviewee and the interviewer because the interviewer gives the
interviewees’ responses the appropriate context. This is the process I used to analyze the data I collected through interviews.

To prepare for the analysis, I recorded and transcribed each participant’s initial interview and then created a story about her athletic career and body using only her own words. I arranged each participant’s words into paragraphs, and rearranged some information from the original order in which she said it during the interview, but I did not alter her language or content except for eliminating occasional interjections like “um.” After completing a draft of her story, I used feminist critical discourse analysis to examine the gendered discourse, if any, that the participant used. This helped me to answer the first research question: *In what ways do female athletes use and/or subvert dominant discourse when describing their athletic bodies and careers?* I examined the stories for any of Bruce’s (2016) 15 rules of media representations of women in sports and the methods of de/constructing athletic identities and in terms of sportswomen’s alternative narratives (Carless & Douglas, 2012), both of which I described and critiqued in chapter two.

In the second interview, I asked the participant to read the story I created from her initial interview to make sure it represented her fairly and accurately. I planned to work collaboratively with each athlete to make edits until the story reflected the way she wanted to be represented, but each athlete said the first version of the story fairly and accurately represented her. After that, I asked the participant to explain her word choices, especially any instances of sexist discourse, discussed their significance, and explained why it is important to subvert that sexist discourse. This conversation with each athlete assisted me in answering the second research question: *What do female athletes learn about their athletic identities when they examine the discourse they use to discuss themselves?*
Data Write Up

The form of an autoethnographic write-up depends on factors such as the intended audience, the amount of emphasis the researcher places on the study of others, the researcher’s interactions with self and others, analysis, interview contexts, and power relationships (Ellis, Adams & Bochner, 2011). Although there are different ways to write-up narrative autoethnographic studies, commonalities among all forms include thick, rich descriptions (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016), which are common to other types of qualitative studies, too. These descriptions come from the researchers’ observations, which is why it is a good practice for them to write thick, rich descriptions in their diaries and fieldnotes (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). This study also relies heavily on the data gathered from interactive interviews, but I collected this information and wrote it in a way that included rich descriptions; for example, I asked participants to use sensory details to describe the photos, awards, and other artifacts they used to share their stories.

Wolf (1992), in her discussion of ethnography, argued from a feminist perspective that form, however, is not as important as the political agenda to discover all that can be discovered about the diversity of lived experiences, but she noted that others, like postmodernists, tend to favor a creative, messy form over the content of a study. Ultimately, she concluded that the form and content should depend on the audience: “If our writings are not easily accessible to those who share our goals, we have failed” (p. 119). One purpose of the narrative autoethnographic write-up is to reach wider and more diverse mass audiences than traditional academic research, which can make personal and social change possible for more people (Ellis, Adams & Bochner, 2011). I wrote this dissertation for an academic audience to which I contribute knowledge in the
fields of adult education and sports feminism. Because of this, I include a thorough explanation of the study’s theoretical framework and methodology. However, I want the participants’ stories to be accessible to a non-academic audience, too, so I contribute a series of sports stories that are free of sexist language and images, and also portray the athletes as they want to be portrayed and will, hopefully, inspire future generations of athletes. Because of this non-academic audience, I plan to keep the analysis of each athlete’s story separate from the story itself to prevent interruptions from the sportswomen’s stories.

**Verification of Autoethnographic Findings**

Many researchers and academics ask how readers can trust the data collected and analyzed in autoethnographic findings, especially when “there is no final truth” (Wolf, 1992, p. 92) acquired through this methodology. Gobo (2008) has an answer: “If we abandon the positivistic idea that an objective reality exists independently of the observer, the problem of the correctness and veracity of the ethnographer’s statements shifts to a broader dimension, where it is not so much the truth (which is often impossible to ascertain) that matters, as the researcher’s ability to persuade his or her audience of the credibility of his or her conclusions” (n.p.). In other words, Gobo (2008) agrees with Wolf’s (1992) statement above that writing should be accessible to the audience; as long as academics and other readers of autoethnographic findings can let go of the idea of an absolute truth, they can find meaning and usefulness in autoethnographic data.

Gobo (2008) states six main criteria autoethnographic researchers should follow to ensure the dependability of their findings, and my study abides by these criteria.

1) **Completeness**: descriptions must be accompanied by details of the context.

Ellis, Adams & Bochner (2011) state that the write up of the research “evokes in readers
a feeling that the experience described is lifelike, believable, and possible, a feeling that what has been represented could be true” (p. 11). This helps connect readers to writers.

2) **Saturation of the categories**: related to completeness, this means that the researcher has covered all relevant categories and didn’t intentionally leave out any relevant information.

3) **Authenticity**: the fieldwork must be certified as genuine and not falsified.

4) **Consistency**: refers to the extent that like observations and other collected data from different occasions are classified or analyzed in the same way.

5) **Credibility**: the consistency between descriptions and interpretations. Ellis, Adams & Bochner (2011) refer to this as reliability and say it evokes the questions “Could the narrator have the experiences described, given the available evidence? Does the narrator believe this is actually what happened?” (p. 11). In order for an autoethnographic study to be credible, it should also meet the following criteria: the results are consistent with the theory adopted; the concepts have been systematically correlated; the causal relations have been developed correctly (Gobo, 2008).

To account for credibility of a text, researchers often use member checks, also called respondent validation. To complete a member check, the researcher takes the analysis or write-up to the participants and asks whether the interpretation “rings true” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 246). In this study, I conducted member checks throughout the research process to ensure I fairly and accurately represented the participants.

6) **Plausibility**: consistency between the autoethnographer’s conclusions and his or her scientific community’s knowledge; however, this criterion has some flexibility.
Otherwise, conclusions would always replicate existing data rather than adding to the field’s knowledge base.

In addition to these six criteria, Ellis, Adams, and Bochner (2011) also discuss the importance of the generalizability of collected data. This doesn’t refer to generalizability in the traditional sense—that the data apply to large random samples of respondents—but instead refers to the readers’ reactions to the write-up of the findings. Readers determine if a story speaks to them about their experience or about the lives of others they know: “Readers provide validation by comparing their lives to ours, by thinking about how our lives are similar and different and the reasons why, and by feeling that the stories have informed them about unfamiliar people or lives” (Ellis, Adams & Bochner, 2011, p. 11). If all of the above criteria are present in an autoethnographic study, as they are in this study, the data from that study are more dependable, valid, and reliable.

**Summary and Conclusion**

This chapter has described the methodology I used for this study. I used narrative autoethnography to collect, present, and verify data. To analyze the data, I first used feminist critical discourse analysis to identify areas of sexist discourse and then used the principles of narrative learning to help participants retell their stories without sexist discourse. These methods pair well with the theoretical lenses of feminist poststructuralist and narrative learning theories because they all involve the examination of language with the intent to de/construct it. I also outlined how my background as a competitive athlete, feminist educator, and writer will affect the way I will conduct and present this research. The final research product is for an audience of academics in adult education and sports feminism. The sportswomen’s stand-alone stories are
kept separate from the analysis so the stories are relevant for a non-academic audience interested in sports stories.
PART TWO
SPORTS NARRATIVES

INTRODUCTION TO SPORTS NARRATIVES

Part Two of this dissertation contains chapters four through seven and describes the findings of the study. There is one chapter for each of the four participants, and each chapter has two parts. The first part of each chapter contains the participant’s story as she told it in her own words during her first interview. I transcribed the interview, put it into paragraphs, and rearranged some information from the original order in which she said it during the interview, but I did not alter her language or content except for eliminating occasional interjections like “um.” I put each participant’s story in italics to differentiate it from my own voice. The purpose of this study was to gather and analyze the discourse of the stories, images, and artifacts that sportswomen used to narrate their athletic careers, bodies, and lives in order to better understand how sportswomen assimilate and/or subvert the dominant sports discourses and examine the learning and identity formation that takes place when sportswomen are educated about sexist discourse and then critically examine their own. Therefore, it is crucial to this study to learn about each participant’s sporting career as she tells it in her own words. The second part of each participant’s chapter contains the analysis and discussion of her story, which includes the participant’s reflection of her story as she discussed it in her second interview, and what I learned from each participant.
CHAPTER 4
LYNN’S STORY

Lynn is a 38-year-old white woman who fell in love with triathlons after a childhood and collegiate competitive swimming career. Below is a list of terms you will encounter during Lynn’s story that may be unfamiliar for outsiders to the competitive swimming and triathlon cultures. Following the definition of terms is Lynn’s story told in her own words. This part is italicized to differentiate it from my voice. The second part of the chapter contains my analysis combined with Lynn’s reflection of her story as she discussed it in her second interview. The chapter ends with what I learned from Lynn’s story.

Definition of Terms in Lynn’s Story

*Freestyle (Free)*: one of the four competitive swim strokes also known as the front crawl

*Triathlon*: an athletic competition consisting of swimming, cycling, and running in that order without stopping. Triathletes can compete in various distances, most commonly sprint, Olympic, half-Ironman, and Ironman.

*Ironman*: a long-distance triathlon usually consisting of a 2.4-mile swim, 112-mile bicycle ride, and 26.2-mile (marathon) run in that order

*Tapering*: the practice of reducing exercise in the days just before an important competition to allow the body to rest and optimize performance during the competition
I’ve Been around Pools All My Life

In the neighborhood I grew up in, there were two boys next door, two boys across the street, so I grew up with a lot of boys and we were playing outside all the time. Then I wanted to play softball one summer, when I was 8—7 or 8—but I missed the age cut off. But a family friend was starting to swim that summer, so I joined the swim team. I just swam and played soccer. That’s my earliest remembrance of getting involved in sports. I did swimming mostly. Mostly freestyle. Distance freestyle. But I swam everything here and there. But I’d say free is the one I did the most and liked the most. I did swimming in the spring, fall, and winter and then I played soccer in the summer.

I hurt my back over the summer after I graduated high school. I fell in the pool. I’ve been around pools all my life and... (laughs). I ended up going to Elizabethtown College, but I couldn’t walk, couldn’t get around campus. I went for a week at Etown then came home and took the whole year off. It was hard. You’re just set in your activity, your exercise. I don’t really sit around too much. I do enjoy sitting around, don’t get me wrong. It was hard especially because everyone I graduated high school with was at college and competing in college and I was just home and recovering. It was a mental...yeah, mentally challenging as much as physically challenging.

I went back to Etown the next year. I swam. I lucked out. I was pretty lucky. I had a little bit of shoulder stuff after I graduated, like when I started training for triathlons, but otherwise I got through school pretty injury free. They fused the lower three vertebrae. So you can’t really tell flexibility wise or anything. Sometimes standing or whatever, if I stand too long I have trouble with it. But otherwise I’ve done an Ironman and all types of stuff with it, so I’m lucky. Very lucky.
I got into some recreational soccer after college, but I guess my senior year in college I started running a little with some friends, just to get exercise or whatever. I graduated and came home and a family that I’m friends with was into biking, so I got a bike and I rode with them. Their son wanted to do a team triathlon, so I did the run and he biked and we got a swimmer. That was the first triathlon I had gone to and was like, aw, I want to do this. It was the competitive side of it, too. After swimming I was like, what am I going to do? I want to do something competitive. So it never left. Good or bad (laughs).

**What’s an Ironman?**

I did my first triathlon and that was like late fall. Then I decided that I wanted to sign up for a sprint triathlon in the spring, so I did that in Maryland for the American Cancer Society. I kinda raised money for that and went down and did that. Then I felt, that’s it! (laughs). That’s all it took.

I did my first triathlon in 2002, and I did my first Ironman in 2005. Between those years I did some sprints and Olympic distance triathlons and did a half Ironman. At the time, I don’t remember it being as, like we didn’t have Facebook, you know, we didn’t have that sort of stuff. So I think it was a friend—I was married to a man at the time—a friend of his, was doing Lake Placid Ironman, and I was like, what’s an Ironman? And so I was really intrigued by that and for some silly reason decided I wanted to do it. I think it was that year I did the half Ironman, and then signed up for the full. You had to sign up a year in advance and it sold out in a couple hours. So I was on the computer, right, I remember being at work and registration opened at noon and I registered right away.
Then I worked with an online coach to get a sense of...I didn’t know where to start training. Obviously, I know you should swim, bike, and run. But I didn’t know. I had no idea. I think I just did a Google search for triathlon, Ironman triathlon plans or something. I contacted a coach I had found and kinda just followed his plan, and that was that. It was this little group out of Virginia, somewhere, I don’t remember where. I would talk to him by phone and he would send a month-by-month training plan, like a calendar. I reported back into him. I found it very helpful. You know you train so much for it, and even today I say it takes the guess work and the planning out of it. Instead of sitting down and thinking, OK, this week when am I going to swim, when am I going to run, and what am I going to do? It was kind of like, OK, this Monday I’m running for 30 minutes. It took a little bit of that stress away so you’d just go out and train. I definitely found it beneficial. Just the progression of the training load from week-to-week. I think I would have been lost otherwise.

Now I use another coach, he’s actually in Virginia, too. He has a company called Speed Sherpa and I think there’re three coaches. And they train athletes mostly along the east coast. So now he gives me week-by-week training plans and then we email back and forth and all that. I still use a coach because I’m not sure, I just feel more confident that I’ll be ready for events. Again, in the back of my head, like [my partner] Piper says, you know you can do this on your own. It’s been like, what? Fifteen years that I’ve been doing triathlons that I should know what I’m doing. But I don’t know, I guess it’s confidence. I just like having someone tell me what to do and then go out and do it.

Friends once in a while come swim with me or I run here and there. When I was doing longer bike rides I’d go out with some friends. But mainly I train by myself. Only because, well, I don’t know. I’m not that comfortable or not that confident running. It’s not so easy for me, so I
think I shy away from running with other people, aside from Piper because, you know, I can tell her how I feel. Yeah, I don’t know if it’s a confidence thing. I just feel more comfortable doing it by myself. Although it is fun to have friends around doing stuff, too. Biking even more so, I like doing with friends. But I don’t always, not very often.

**Lake Placid Half Ironman**

Next weekend I’m doing a half Ironman in Lake Placid. That’s the big one of the year. The weather is chilly up there. The low is getting down into the 30s. But that’s good. I’d rather it cold than hot. I have to go run an hour and ten minutes after this, or this evening at some point. And after that I can feel, like, it’s pretty short stuff. You probably, you’ve experienced tapers. They’re not always...I look forward to them, it’s shorter workouts but, ugh, I hate tapering! My coach...have you heard of Training Peaks? It’s a calendar and my coach can put workouts into it. And I, through my Garmin, can upload my workouts to Training Peaks so he can see all of the data and stuff. So, for tomorrow, he has just a swim on there, but he made a note that said, yes, this is the only workout because we are resting and tapering. And I’m like, man, it’s a Saturday without much of anything to do. So, taper can drive me batty.

I’ve been struggling for the last couple years, any long-distance race I do, I cramp a lot on the run, and then I’m walking and whatever. So I’ve been messing a lot with my nutrition, training nutrition, salt and all that. My main goal is to hopefully get through the run without cramping. My way-out-there goal is if I could qualify for the World Championships? But I don’t know. That all depends on who shows up.
A Couple of Small Goals. One Big Goal.

It’s a Half Ironman World Championships. It changes—this year it’s in Chattanooga, next year it’s in South Africa. I don’t think financially I could go to South Africa, but if I could say I qualified for it. But it’s all based on each age group, like I’m in the 35-39 age group. And each age group has a certain number of qualifiers. So say my age group has three slots. The first three people will be asked do you want to take your slot? If they all three say yes, then it’s done. But say you finished first and you say you don’t want to go to the race, then it will roll down. It’ll keep rolling down until people say yes. So I could finish 8th and if three people above me don’t take it then I could. It’s not a specific time goal, like in swimming you have specific time to qualify for Districts. It’s not that cut and dry. There are numerous half Ironmen all over the world that are qualifiers. Not just one specific qualifier. Man, I don’t even know. A big number of qualifiers. So we’ll see. If all goes according to plan, maybe.

So a couple of small goals. One big goal. My goal is really just to get through without too many issues with my body. Just to have a strong race individually for myself because it’s been kind of a struggle the last few years. I’ll get to the run and sometimes even on the bike I’ll start cramping, like my legs, my thighs, my calves. And aside from a nutrition thing I’m not really sure. So I keep trying different sports drinks, different electrolytes, different gels. This year I started using more salt-based stuff. More salt than I’ve used in the past. So I’m hoping maybe that will be the answer. One PT [physical therapist] thought that maybe with my fusion in my back some nerve stuff was going on, being on the bike so long causes it. I don’t know. I’m hoping it’s just dehydration and nutrition that I can control. It’s very hit or miss. Trial and error. So every time I go out I have been using trial and error. But the last few weeks I’ve, hopefully, fingers crossed, have figured out what to do. I hope so.
I’ll eat pasta and chicken the night before. The day before I just like to chill and watch TV or lay around or whatever. And then race morning I always eat the same breakfast: eggs and toast with peanut butter. Just trying to stay calm because I can get worked up and very nervous. Not very easy to be around, I think. So, I just kind of control the nerves and anxiety. You know how that is. I think at any level, sometimes even these local races get me as bad as a bigger race.

This past Ironman I did in 2014, I struggled a lot. I basically walked the entire run because of cramps and I was nauseous and all that stuff. The cramping started on the bike, but it’s my most memorable Ironman because a friend from high school had brain cancer and was getting treatment at the time, so I raised money as part of my, like, leading up to the Ironman for her family. So the entire day I thought, this is awful but it could be a lot...I thought of what she was struggling with. Just knowing that I did what I could to help her out, as best I could. And doing this race for her, I guess you could say, was a highlight.

I’ve done four Ironmen. Over 15 years I’ve done maybe 40 races of some level. It’s crazy to think about it that way. I have no idea. My brother is coming next weekend to Lake Placid, and he came to my last Ironman, but those are the only two races that he’s come to. But my parents try, they come to a lot of things, local or distant triathlons. So, they’ve been a huge support, for as long as I can remember. Like my dad came to all of the college swim meets, and my mom came to some that she could get to. So, they’ve been a big support. Now, over these years I’ve done triathlon, I’ve met a lot of people who have, you know, a close network of friends through triathlon. Like some friends live an hour away, so that’s been cool, just the community that you become connected to. I’m in contact with some people from college but not a whole lot. I’d say most of my friends revolve around triathlon.
They All Have a Story

I’ll have to show you the room back there. This is the little training room. My brother, before I moved here, in my apartment I had just medals hanging from a pole. And my brother who’s a little OCD was like, how can you just hang those like that? He needed structure to how these medals were hung. I could count them. I’m not sure I have all of them. But the medals that I have are all hanging up back there, from over the years. I feel like it’s showing off a little. These are the things my brother gave me because he was too upset about how they were just all crumpled together. There’re two plaques. One says “Run when you can, walk if you have to, crawl if you must, but never give up.” And those are a bunch of running medals hanging from that plaque. The other one says, “Always earned, never given,” and those are my triathlon medals. And then on the other wall are two Ironman plaques that have Ironman and half Ironman medals hanging from them. They all have a story.

Here’s the Sharkfest medal. It’s just basic, has a shark on it. I swam Alcatraz. That was...you have to do that! For years I had been talking about it. I want to do this swim and finally my one friend said, OK, we’re sitting down right now and we’re signing up for it. She said, if you keep talking about it, it’s never going to happen. So I said OK. It was 2013. We went out and did like the San Francisco touristy thing and did the swim and it was great. You definitely have to do it. Not a lot of big hoopla or anything. They take the ferry out and you swim back in and go through the finishing shoot, and that’s pretty much it. There’s not much post-race. It’s like a half hour and you’re done. But it was pretty cool. It was well-run, there were enough kayakers in the water to not feel like you’re unsafe. Just that experience was cool. And then the next day we went and toured Alcatraz, and that was fun.
And I love this medal, it’s a survival medal. It’s a triathlon that you bike 30 miles first and then you run to one lake and swim across the lake and then you run to a second lake and swim across the lake and then run to a third lake and swim across that one. So you carry all of your gear with you. You ride and you drop your bike off with your support people. Then you put your running shoes on and take your swimming stuff with you and then when you swim you either put your shoes down the back of your jersey or take, like, a waterproof bag. It’s a very fun race. Those, I would have to say, are my two favorites. And the Ironman ones. They were well-earned.

I’ve had a few races that I’ve cramped in that were pretty challenging. I did the—and this is another one you should do—I did the 4.4-mile Chesapeake Bay swim. I wore a wetsuit. Did you wear a wetsuit? It was difficult in the sense that I think I overheated. I sweat a lot and I had a gel with me in my wetsuit but never stopped to do it, and I’m someone who eats quite frequently, especially when training, too. I think I eat more than, or take in more calories than, most people do. So, I think I should have taken something during that. Anyway, I mean, I think between overheating and lack of calories. I had about a half-mile to go and I started feeling really bad. My arms started shutting down, and you know when you feel like you’re going to pass out or something? I kept telling myself if you just get to land, you’re going to be OK. And then of course you have to get up and walk across the mats up the little hill, and I was like, oh my gosh, I swear I’m going to pass out. I got through the timing mat and then sat down and medical came over and I went to the med tent. And it was awful. But I recovered.
What My Body Can Do

I feel like I have an athletic build. But sometimes I feel like I’d say I’m a little pudgy some places, but I know that’s not really...I tell myself that it’s that way, but I don’t know. I went through an eating thing years ago, in college. I don’t remember having any complex about it before that. And since that I’ve kind of been like, it goes in waves of obsessiveness. Sometimes obsessiveness with the scale, you know, how I feel in clothes, or what things look like in the mirror, but to describe it, I don’t know. So I think my body’s strong, durable sometimes, not durable other times. I appreciate what my body can do for me, what I ask it to do. I think it, most times, holds up, so I appreciate that.

Lynn’s Reflection on Her Story

This section contains a combination of my analysis of Lynn’s story and Lynn’s reflection on her story after reading it a few weeks later. While Lynn tells her story, she does not reproduce a dominant, sexist discourse nor does she use a resistance discourse. Instead, she uses the alternative narratives performance at her own highest level and engaging in a community of athletes (Carless and Douglas, 2012) common among other amateur athletes. She also uses a humble discourse, which is common among the other participants of this study, who are also amateur athletes. Throughout each section, I also describe Lynn’s reflection on her story and discourse.

No Reproduction of the Dominant Discourse

Lynn described herself as an avid sports media consumer: she often has ESPN playing in the background in the mornings or evenings and listens to other sports talk shows. Yet despite
near daily exposure to traditional sports media, Lynn did not reproduce the dominant, sexist sports media discourse—which includes comparisons to sportsmen, sexualization, and expressing a desire to be more masculine or feminine—while discussing her sports career. Based on the lack of sexist discourse in her narrative, she does not seem to have internalized that traditional discourse that she consumes, perhaps because ESPN and other sports talk shows so rarely feature women.

At the beginning of her narrative, she said she got interested in playing sports because she used to play with a lot of boys in her neighborhood who were interested in sports: “In my neighborhood I grew up in, there were two boys next door, two boys across the street, so I grew up with a lot of boys and we were playing outside all the time.” I thought she might then compare herself to the boys, but she did not then or elsewhere in her narrative compare herself to boys or men. Reflecting on the lack of comparisons to sportsmen, Lynn said, “I don’t remember ever being the girl that was, like, I want to be as fast as them [the boys]. I just remember I saw them playing football in the backyard or playing basketball in the driveway. We were competitive with each other, but not competitive in that boy versus girl way or anything.”

In addition, Lynn never commented or even hinted that she ever wished to be more or less feminine or masculine, which are other signs of the dominant discourse. Likewise, Lynn showed no signs of sexualizing herself. Instead, she seemed shy or apprehensive to describe her athletic body, saying it was a “tough question.” When I suggested to her that maybe the “rules” of traditional sports media as reported by Bruce (2016) do not apply to amateur athletes because they are not as likely to be reported on in traditional media like professional athletes are, she said that many amateur athletes do portray themselves in a sexual manner:
On Instagram, there’s a lot of—well I can only match it to triathletes and runners—but of people taking selfies or, you know, those go-pros. There’s a whole lot of just...I guess sexualizing. There are a whole lot of females who are on the side of the pool in their swim suits that they post of themselves. They’re not in the media, but now they have all of this social stuff going on. I can’t see myself doing any of that stuff, taking selfies of me as I’m jumping into the swimming pool, or something. [The photos are] not always sexual. I think the big thing is now, I think it’s go-pros. [...] They’re getting off their bike and have this sexual pose or position, and I think, I don’t know about that, but it seems like it’s the thing to do. Or you’re getting out of the pool and you’re pushing up on the wall and you take this picture of you getting out of the pool.

This reflection on other amateur athletes’ use of sexualization and social media shows Lynn’s ambivalence towards it. On one hand, it seems to make her uncomfortable and she does not want to post sexual pictures or other content of herself. On the other hand, she does say “it seems like the thing to do,” from which I infer she is not opposed to it, even if she would not do it herself.

Lynn does not have a big social media presence, but she is a 2018 ambassador for Honey Stinger, a brand of sports gels. As part of her ambassador role, the company expects her to have a social media presence, so she will try to make social media posts about her triathlon training and races more often. She, however, cannot see herself taking selfies with sexual poses, or any kind of selfie, even non-sexual sports related photos. She feels more comfortable taking photos with friends before or after races, but otherwise “I’m just not comfortable with it. But I enjoy seeing other people’s photos.”
No Resistance Discourse

Although Lynn does not engage in posting sexual photos on social media, she does not display a resistance discourse either, in which she actively speaks against a dominant discourse. She said, “I mean, I listen to it [sports media], but I don’t chew on it and think, man. I don’t think deeply about it. It never really upsets me.” On the other hand, her attitude against selfies, particularly selfies in sexual poses or attire, and her deliberate lack of participation in self-sexualization as a form of passive resistance. Several researchers (Antunovic & Hardin, 2013; Bruce, 2016) have already noted the potential for resistant discourses among athletes on social media, and Lynn, even if passively or unintentionally, is participating in this resistance.

Alternative Discourses

Lynn does not reproduce the dominant discourse, nor does she actively resist it, so her narrative is one that Carless and Douglas (2012) would refer to as an alternative discourse. In this case, the alternative discourses in which she engages are performance at her own highest level and engaging in a community of athletes. Most of her narrative describes challenging herself to be a better athlete: getting a coach, trying new nutritional methods, and setting a training schedule are all examples of this. She also often discussed other people who were part of her athletic journey, from the neighborhood boys, to family friends with whom she biked, to her supportive family, occasional training partners, and the other triathletes she has met during her athletic journey.

Narrative Wreckage. Narrative wreckage occurs when an athlete stops, starts, or pauses training for an athletic event or career often due to injury or illness; when this happens, athletes
will often use a dominant performance narrative (Douglas & Carless, 2009; Hudson & Day, 2012). Even when her story dipped into narrative wreckage—when Lynn injured her back and lost a year of competitive sports—she did not fall into a dominant performance narrative; in fact, she did not put much emphasis on the injury as part of her sports story. It seemed like she only mentioned it to explain a gap in her swimming career. Reflecting on her original narrative, Lynn said, “I had a year off, then I went back to Etown [College] and swimming. And I don’t know if it was because I didn’t know what to expect or if I was so thankful to be able to do it. I never thought oh my god I have to be back to where I was.” Yet, when prompted, Lynn said that as a college swimmer, she did continue to get faster.

**Humble Attitude.** Throughout her story and while reflecting on her story, Lynn maintained a humble attitude towards her sporting accomplishments, almost to a point of self-deprecation. Her initial response after reading her story was embarrassment: she said she felt “Embarrassed. Shy. Like, if you had said all of that stuff, I’d have thought it was really interesting.” She did not elaborate beyond that, though she did say she thought it fairly and accurately represented her. This is a theme I will explore in more depth in chapter 8.

**Conclusions and My Learning and Identity Development**

Because Lynn and I both grew up as competitive swimmers—and both continue to compete in swim races as adults—I could relate to a lot of her story, particularly the part about wanting to stay active and competitive after college. Starting my sophomore year of high school and continuing through college, I battled shoulder injuries—tendonitis in both shoulders—which made swimming less fun and ultimately lead to me not competing for my school’s teams my
senior years in high school or college. I swam intermittently with a club team when I went to graduate school in England at age 22, but after that I did not swim and was largely inactive for the next five years. During that time, I swam laps occasionally, ran on the treadmill, lifted weights, went to an occasional yoga class, but did not have any health or fitness goals. I would not say I was unhealthy, but I had very low energy and little strength. When I was 26, my childhood swim team coach invited me to be an alumni guest speaker at the swim team banquet. During my speech, I cried because I was overwhelmed with emotion remembering how important swimming was to me and how it shaped me into the person I had become. That night, I stated that “although I am not currently swimming, I will always be a swimmer.” It was soon after that night that I realized I identified as an athlete—a swimmer—yet I was not living the lifestyle of an athlete and my body was no longer an athletic one. A few months after the swim team banquet, I found a master’s swim team—which is a team for adults ages 18 and older—and began swimming again, which lead to competing again. I continue to compete today, eight years later, and swimming continues to be one of the most meaningful and rewarding experiences in my life.

Like Lynn, I often train by myself. Although I have swum with an adult swim team and I sometimes meet friends to swim laps, I feel comfortable training on my own because I can go at my own pace and not put pressure on myself to perform in a certain way to meet others’ expectations. I also relate to Lynn’s desire to have a coach because it gives her confidence and helps her to focus on her performance. Writing workouts and practice schedules can be time consuming. One of my master’s teammates is the team’s coach and writes practice sets, and the master’s swimming website also shares its database of practice sets. Although I am capable of
writing my own workouts and training schedule, I always wonder if there is something more or different that I should be doing to enhance my performance.

Lynn has a slim and athletic build, yet when she described her body as “pudgy in some places,” it did not surprise me. I did not agree that she was pudgy, but it did not surprise me that she said it because I could relate to feeling that way about my body. I did not delve into the body-issue topic too deeply with Lynn, so perhaps calling herself “pudgy” reflected a lack of self-confidence, but because I have thought similarly of my body without it feeling like a lack of confidence, I did not interpret it that way. For me, I identify as an athlete and I admire other elite athletes—Olympic and other professional swimmers who compete for a living. I see that their bodies are toned with very little body fat because that is the body type they need to be elite athletes and continue to earn money in their careers. So, when comparing myself to elite athletes in my sport then, yes, I can more easily identify areas of my body that carry more fat. It does not mean I think I am fat or that I am unhappy with my body. As Lynn said as a follow-up to her comment about being “pudgy in some places,” I also appreciate my body for what it does and what I ask it to do when I train and compete.

Shortly after my first interview with Lynn, I consulted a sports nutritionist because I hoped I would learn how to adjust my diet for optimum swimming performance. I had returned to a more athletic body type than when I was in my mid-20s and not training or competing, but I also believed I had more to improve—in both body composition and energy levels. I made the decision to consult a nutritionist because I had set new swimming goals and wanted help achieving those goals; also, my conversation with Lynn made me reflect on my body and what it does for me. Could it do more if I changed how I took care of it?
Lynn is the participant in this study that I can most relate to because our ages and sports are most similar; we have even competed in some of the same races, like the 4.4-mile Greater Chesapeake Bay Swim. I understood her desire to occasionally train alone but have the guidance of a coach, of her dislike of tapering, and the effect of nerves before a competition. Her comments about her body allowed me to reflect on my own body and how much I appreciate what it does. It also inspired me to make healthy changes to better fuel my body for sports competition.
CHAPTER 5
MACY’S STORY

Macy is a 69-year-old white woman who became a long-distance runner as an adult.

Below is a list of terms you will encounter during Macy’s story that may be unfamiliar for those who are outsiders to the road and trail running communities. Following the definition of terms is Macy’s story told in her own words, which is in italics. The second part of the chapter contains my analysis coupled with Macy’s reflection of her story as she discussed it in her second interview and ends with what I learned from Macy’s story.

Definitions of Terms in Macy’s Story

*Title IX*: a piece of legislation the federal government passed in 1972 that states: “No person in the United States shall, on the basis of sex, be excluded from participation in, be denied the benefits of, or be subjected to discrimination under any education program or activity receiving Federal financial assistance” (U.S. Department of Education). This law refers to all educational programs, not just athletics; however, this law was a huge turning point in athletics because it provided equal opportunity for girls and women to participate in sports at any educational institutions that receive federal funding, from elementary schools to universities.

*K*: Abbreviation for kilometers:

- 5K = 3.1 miles
- 10K = 10.2 miles
- 50K = 31 miles
- 70K = 43.5 miles
Marathon: a running race that is 26.2 miles

Boston Marathon: an annual marathon in Boston, MA, United States always held on Patriots’ Day, the third Monday of April. It is an important and iconic race, the oldest marathon in the country, and often considered the most important marathon in the US. Runners must meet qualifying times based on their gender and age to be eligible to compete.

This Is What Your Fitness Level Could Be

I think I discovered that I’m a competitive athlete in maybe the last four or five years. I never anticipated [running] would be my pulpit, if you will, but there it is. I’m pre-Title IX so I was not a high school athlete beyond the normal things people did. We did not have conferences and that kind of thing for girls at that time. And I really missed it by a couple of years. Having said that, I don’t know that I would have been an athlete.

I began running in my 20’s just to go out and get the exercise. The feel for running is just such a natural thing. In my 30’s I began going to a couple of organized runs and couple of 5Ks, maybe a 10K in there somewhere. And then in my 40’s I became more involved in the running community. I was on the board of the Harrisburg Area Road Running Club (HARRC), I volunteered at a lot of their events and I didn’t start doing anything really competitive or long distance—not even getting in more than 20 miles a week to stay in shape—until my probably late 40’s, mid-40’s, when I began running some half-marathons and occasionally would pick up a third place in a local race somewhere. But then in my 50’s I began running with other runners more during the week. It’s amazing—I’m really a solo person in many respects—but it’s amazing how running with other runners, whether their pace is your pace, whether you’re faster or
slower than the group, it makes you a better runner, and perhaps a better person. Runners are generally good people.

I ran my first marathon at age 56 or 57. I think the competitive thing with me is not necessarily a competition against specific people; it’s a competition with yourself to meet a standard. What would I need to qualify—especially when races are qualifying races—what would I need to do to qualify for this race? I know where I am right now, but what do I need to do to bring up my training and then bring my training up to the standard I’d need for that race? That’s basically how I improved, to meet those standards.

Harrisburg probably has more runners than a lot of areas, but even as you get into your 50’s you can pretty much guess, even in the larger races here, who’s going to finish first in any individual age group. You can think you’re a real hot shot here, but go to Maryland, go to Virginia, go to D.C. and women who are 50, 60, 70, and even 80 are good runners and you’re going to find yourself in the middle of the pack (laughs). So it’s really good to get down to those races and be in the middle of the pack in your age group once in a while and say this is what your fitness level could be.

The Collection of the Day

I try to find ways to recycle trophies. I’m not a big keeper. But I keep a few things that have a special meaning or I can look at when I need inspiration. I just love my little Blues Cruise. I have the age group record for the race. I have a couple of friends who are about six years from hitting 60 and when they come in they’ll blow me away, but in the meantime, I’ll relish the glory. It is a sailboat, assuming it’s indicative of a Blues Cruise, with a version of the American flag’s red, white, and blue. The sail boat with a rudder. That’s pretty much it. Blues
Cruise 2015, first place in the 60-69 age group. And I think I was 67 when I ran that one. I wouldn’t call it easy. My friend Ashley (pseudonym), my friend and former trainer who does Ironmen, several a year, said that she found it, she thought it was hard, so that was an indication. But they call it a beginner, if someone hasn’t done a 50K before, if they train, this is a good opener for them. And it was my 2nd 50K. See, the older I get, the longer the distances go.

And I brought this other [award] because it was the first time after many, many years that I actually broke two hours in a half marathon. That was down in Maryland, a really good race day, nice and cool, and everything was right. The Annapolis Striders, an old running club in the Maryland area, sponsored that. They call it a trail half, but it’s more of a biking trail. There were some portions that are cedar, but it’s primarily asphalt.

And then this is Cherry Blossom. It’s a huge race, 35,000, a lot of people. This one was fun for me because they have a system where, and they do it through age groups, if you’ve run a prior half marathon or 10-miler at a certain pace they will put you in as a seeded runner. I thought that’s pretty cool. I looked at it and I qualified so I thought how can I not do this? It was fun because you have people like me lined up behind the elites (laughs). It was a, you’ve got a lot of really strong runners in the women’s upper age groups so I was really pleased that I placed third. That was really nice. That’s in Washington, D.C. It’s usually a week after or a week before the Capital 10-Miler. And one of the few 10-milers and they’ve been around for 35 years. Big race.

This is the only thing I brought from Boston. It’s a bottle opener. You get it in the race bag. This year will be my 8th. That’s another one I would like to do. I would like to do a decent job at Boston this year. It’s a difficult course for almost anyone. But I would, it would be nice if I
could finish around 4:30. If I could do that. And that’s what I will train to do. That will be the objective. Assuming all of these other health things are taken care of.

And do I have anything else? Oh, one little thing, yes. I brought this because, and you notice all of these go toward the incentive I had to qualify for something. It’s like my own little motivation thing. What someone else is doing doesn’t make any, it’s not, oh, I have to beat this person or, it’s, no, it’s setting a goal for a standard for myself. This was Mohawk Hudson River Marathon. And that was the first marathon I ran that gave me a qualifying time for Boston.

One that was too large to bring...they don’t do this marathon any longer. (Shows a photo and laughs.) It sits like this and it’s a glass sailboat. And that was Narragansett Marathon. They made it a half-marathon now. They only did it for five or six years. They made it a, you had to have a qualifying time five minutes faster than Boston. So that was another incentive to, OK, I have to be five minutes faster than Boston. So I did that. And when I ran it, I assumed that I would be one of the last finishers. To my husband and friends who were with me, I said don’t get excited if you don’t see me for a while. In fact I think that was the first year we did the Capital 10-Miler and we ran that course so many times in the wind coming down the river, it was a brutal winter, and I think that gave me an advantage in this marathon because it’s on Narragansett Bay and the winds were just, you’re running into the wind for half of it and I had just done so many runs down the river in that cold, cold wind that it, you know, I was acclimated to it. I didn’t even go down for the awards, or I didn’t stay for them. I said I’m going to take an hour’s nap and you guys go to lunch or whatever. So I slept for about an hour and went in and looked at their results and (laughs) I had placed first. The morning after I met somebody who had the award with him and it was like (laughs) you’ve got to be kidding me. It’s a good thing I’m not flying. It is heavy. It comes on this stand, but there’s this soft blue kind of stuff that holds
it on. And that was coming loose so I just took it off. But I’ll go down to the trophy shop and have them fix it one of these days. But yeah. It’s just this. It’s a beautiful piece on its own, so, yeah. That’s the collection of the day.

**70K for 70 Years**

This year has been...some of the things I have planned to do...I had a pulled muscle that just won’t behave itself and I’ve continued treatment on that so I kept my running low. I’m registered for the Harrisburg Marathon but I’m not sure that’s going to happen. I haven’t built my base like I should have by this point. So I may just walk it or something like that to participate or, you know, volunteer. I wouldn’t feel right going out there running and training with people and going to races and not giving back with volunteer time. And that’s probably as about as important to my running as anything, as working on being competitive, working on building skills.

The other thing I have planned to do is, I wanted to do a 70K run in my 70th year, getting to where I can do that, physically, getting that done. Plus I’m having some dental work done, so it’s like I can’t run those days. But even between my pulled muscle and my mouth those are some things that you have to take care of yourself physically first. But if all of those things work out I will get to that 70K sometime. I have my eye on one in February that I could still be ready for if that works out. It’s an organized 70K. Now a couple of members of HARRC heard I was going to do this said let us put together a course for you. We’ll make it a Sunday run and people can join you for whichever part they want to. Which I thought was just very thoughtful of them, but it hasn’t worked out. I’ve been doing a lot of travelling earlier in the year. I just came back from a 5-day hike in Switzerland, so doing it in September—plus I haven’t been able to get the miles
— that didn’t work. So I don’t know if that wonderful offer they made is going to work out or not. If not, I have one other location that might work out. It is half on the trail and then at I think at 30K it drops down to a cycling trail. They recommend that you put a drop bag at that point and remove your trail shoes and put on your street running shoes. I’m not sure. I’ve run trail races where for a little while you walk to a peak on a biking path or something and that’s very jarring for the body after you’ve been on trail. Suddenly you’re on this pavement or whatever and it feels really hard on the body after that. So I’m not sure how that last 20 miles or whatever will go (laughs). But yeah. All I have to do is get myself really healthy. I would like to do this run, I haven’t done it for a couple of years because I had other conflicts, but HARRC in the Park is in a couple of weeks and I’d like to get out there and do that to get some time on trail. It’s a fun race.

For training I would be getting myself several 20-mile runs in as if I were building up to a marathon. Plus I would be doing those same distances on trail and probably getting in maybe a 50K trail race before that, and then getting some workouts in that combine the two. Go out and have a good time on trail for 15 miles then do another 10 on road and see how the body feels.

I do once a week strength training, personal training, and I go to the Y and emulate what I did, but of course you never work as hard on your own as you do with someone else there with you. I, on a good week, will get in either two or three sessions working on upper body strength and working on balance and mobility. And I have, I’m not as good at this, but I’d like to incorporate swimming twice a week. It usually ends up being once a week. I’m not a strong swimmer but I would like to in the next year be able to do a sprint tri, the very shortest one. To build to where I can do a crawl in that period of space, and stay upright on a bike for that period of space. I don’t know if I’d want to continue doing that, but I’d like to just do it once for the
experience of it. And getting that experience in, then you are also working your entire body while you’re preparing for that.

This may be the fact that I didn’t do, in my youth, any kind of training where you have a coach training you, etc., but I have good running form but I don’t have, and you describe me as a competitive runner, but I don’t feel like a competitive runner. I feel pretty slow, actually. I don’t get power, I don’t get the power that I think there is a potential for there. I have pretty good lung capacity for someone who is 70. Your body stops using oxygen as well as it did at one point, which is one of the reasons we get sore. Well, you know all this stuff. But, and I can go forever, but it turns up in terms of having power in your legs and everything is there, but it’s like there’s a key to using it that I haven’t turned on. So yeah, I would say my body is underpowered. Not that I’m not fit. I think, well, I know my fitness level is pretty good. But I don’t feel like I generate much power. I would like to have more power, yes. Do I aspire to? If I aspired to, I probably would have been working harder. But yeah, I know it’s a weak link for me. And maybe after this conversation I will try to do that.

You Meet Some Incredible People

I’m not sure I feel proud of any of it. I think because it’s basically been for me, it’s kind of a selfish act in itself and it’s one of those things that running serves so many purposes for any person beyond your health and wellbeing. To be outside in the air. To have a place to just clear your head. But I don’t, I really, there are times when I have achieved things. A couple of things, and they don’t have to do with me.

One thing, I ran a half marathon in Mont Tremblant, Quebec. And when I looked at the results, the woman who placed first in my age group had this outstanding time and I was going,
good grief! Is this a mistake? And I looked at it, and I was like where do I know that name? And it was Jacqueline Gareau, the woman, remember, Rosie Ruiz who duped the officials at the Boston Marathon back in the late 80’s and had taken subways and that kind of thing and sat in the chair and had the crown of garland on her head. That place belonged to Jacqueline Gareau. And that was her! That was her! I was, oh my gosh, she’s out there. So I emailed her through Facebook later, and she lives probably midway between Mont Tremblant and Montreal. She has a massage practice and does some spiritual training kinds of things. This is quite a way to live your life, to make your running this wonderful skill, talent that you’ve been given, to continue to do that. And she does training, running training for groups of people. I keep up with her on Facebook and send a message every once in a while. But I think that’s one of the things about running, is that if you travel enough and go to races outside of your local area, you can meet some incredible people.

Another woman, when I did a 10K outside of Boston the week after the Boston Marathon, on the last half mile, this woman was beside me and she said, “Finish with me! Finish with me!” And she took my hand. And I said, no I can’t. She said no, finish with me. And I’m pumping like crazy and then she was just lost in the crowd. Then I looked at the photos afterward, I looked at my photos because my goddaughter was there taking photos. And I was like, oh OK, I think it was Uta Pippig. And she was, she had been their grand master kind of celebrity runner. And I was going oh my god. That people like that can give back and reach for someone and say come on, come with me. And that’s one of those moments that, not proud of myself, but proud of running and what it does for people because I’m sure I’m not the only one who has had those kinds of experiences. That has to be happening for other people as well. And it transfers to other ways, other means in your life. And I think it transfers to how you behave towards other people.
As someone who is basically a celebrity in her world can reach out to you. So, yeah, I think that’s, not pride in myself, but pride in running and that larger running community.

**Macy’s Reflection on Her Story**

This section contains a combination of my analysis of Macy’s story and Macy’s reflection on her story after reading it a few weeks later. While telling her story, Macy did not overtly reproduce the dominant discourse nor actively use a resistance discourse. She did, however, use the common alternative narratives of performing at her own highest level and engaging in a community of athletes. She also spoke with modesty about her athletic career. Each section below discusses Macy’s discourse and her reflection on it.

**No Reproduction of the Dominant Discourse**

Macy did not use any sexist, dominant discourse in her narrative, which means she did not use infantilizing language, did not discuss a desire to be more or less masculine or feminine, and did not make comparisons to men or men’s sports at any time while telling her story. In response to her lack of dominant discourse, she said, “Yeah, I don’t think that’s part of where I come from.” She said she rarely consumes sports media, though when she does, she will watch a part of a men’s football or men’s basketball game; therefore, her exposure to the traditional sports discourse is minimal and revolves around men’s sports. Despite consuming little sports media, Macy often participates in social media and has active Facebook and Twitter accounts on which she posts about her running and hiking adventures or reposts stories about other amateur athletes. She also writes a blog on which she posts reflections of her athletic goals and endeavors. Although I did not conduct a formal analysis of her writing, her posts seem to be as free of dominant discourse as her narrative.
The word that most caught my attention in Macy’s story was “underpowered,” which Macy used to describe her athletic body. At first, I considered it a part of an ambivalent discourse: a juxtaposition of sportswomen’s physical skill, strength or competence against traditional femininity, weakness, and inferior quality of women’s sport; however, after further reflection I got the impression that she used the term underpowered to, perhaps, reflect on being an older athlete or recovering from injuries, but not as a commentary on being weaker or slower due to gender. So, I re-explored this term with her and she clarified that it had to do with her training preparation and, to her, was separate from gender, age, and injuries. Macy said,

> The underpowered goes to, if your form’s good, you’re doing strength work, you’re doing speed work, and you’re doing reasonable mileage, and you’re still—I hate to use the word slow, I won’t use the word slow—but I don’t feel like I have the power that my body could or should have based on what I’m putting into it. I think it’s just a matter of expectation. There are times when I feel it and when I don’t feel it, and I’m probably running the same pace, but it’s the matter of how you’re feeling about yourself that day.

When prompted her further, she clarified what she meant by expectations: her expectations for her race performance are based on how she had trained prior to the race, and her expectations for her training are based on how she has trained previously. “It’s what I think I should be doing, although I’ve never done it,” she laughed. “I aspire to things that are totally unreasonable.”

**Alternative Narratives**

It is this type of discourse that shows Macy used an alternative to the dominant discourse. Macy used the alternative discourse described by Carless and Douglas (2012) as performing at
her own highest level and engaging in a community of athletes. She also displayed a humble attitude about her athletic accomplishments.

**Performing at Own Highest Level.** In her narrative Macy said she does not feel like and would not describe herself as a competitive athlete, yet she often looks up the times of other runners in her age group and compares her time to theirs. But she uses that more as a motivational technique to help her perform better, not because she is interested in beating a particular runner or runners: “I think it’s more comfortable for me to look at a number and say, OK, can I hit that number rather than can I finish ahead of that person.”

In the time between our two interviews, Macy said she thought about how she learned about running and decided that it was mostly through technical articles and books, which, she realized, were mostly written by men. “There are a few women who write [about running] but not that many,” she said, and cited Jaqueline Gareau, a coach who infrequently posts a few paragraphs on Facebook about what other runners have accomplished. As Macy understands it, “The women athletes, rather than putting out textbooks, they’re [leading] by example, by the way they continue to work at their craft. How do any of us continue to learn? I think from the women in this sport I have learned differently from the men who write the more technical content. From women you learn to be strong. You learn to be patient.” This shows, again, how Macy draws strength from other sportswomen not because she wants to win or beat other women, but because they and their accomplishments motivate her to be the best that she can be.

**Engaged in a Community of Athletes.** Macy also used the alternative discourse of being engaged in a community of athletes (Carless & Douglas, 2012). She emphasized multiple times
throughout her narrative the importance of the running community to her own athletic performance, goals, and enjoyment. For example, she spoke about meeting running stars Jacqueline Gareau and Uta Pippig during races and how proud she was of them and the running community in general for being so giving to other runners. She also gives back to her running community in many ways, including volunteering at events and directing races: “I wouldn’t feel right going out there running and training with people and going to races and not giving back with volunteer time. And that’s probably as about as important to my running as anything, as working on being competitive, working on building skills.” This shows that her running community is as important to her, if not more important than, her own athletic performance.

**Humble Attitude.** Macy used discourse that shows she is humble about her athletic accomplishments. For example, she has won or placed in her age group in multiple races of varying lengths yet she also describes her body as underpowered and said she does not feel proud of her athletic feats. It seems as if she is deflecting any praise or success. I will discuss this narrative theme more thoroughly in chapter 8.

**Potential for Resistance Discourse**

Although Macy has engaged in alternative discourses rather than the dominant discourse and skirted around an ambivalent discourse, she did not deliberately subvert the dominant discourse, meaning she did not seem to push a particular social agenda, or discuss sexism or bias in the sport. She did touch on experiences of older athletes when I asked about her athletic body. She said that as people age, their bodies stop using oxygen as well as they used to, which is a reason why athletes, particularly older athletes, get sorer quicker than younger athletes. She
stated this as a biological fact and not as a way to either champion or put down athletes of any age. During our follow-up conversation, Macy spoke in more detail about herself and other older athletes. “There’s so much about the body that I don’t understand,” she said, “but I think there’s something that’s happening like late 60’s that [athletic performance] starts to go down.” She cited an example of a woman runner and running coach she had met at the National Games who usually places first or second in her age group at Boston:

I looked at her last results and she ran a 4:15 or something, and I thought, wow, she either had a really bad race or she’s lost 25 minutes from a couple of years ago. So, I think there’s something in that. Are we losing how we use oxygen? I don’t know. If you look at men, I think you’d see the same thing.

On the other hand, Macy also explained how she kept getting faster as she got older. She had been a runner for over 20 years, but she ran her fastest half-marathon in her early 60’s, breaking the two-hour mark and continuing to break it. Likewise, she ran her fastest marathon at age 65. “So, why is that?” she questioned. She said she doesn’t anticipate that she’ll continue to get faster but hopes to “hold on” as long as she can.

Instances of sexism in her sport didn’t occur within her narrative, and even when I asked her directly about sexism in the running community, she said she could not think of any. But as she thought about it, she remembered subtle details about some race directors: “It was a 5K they were announcing, and they don’t do it with the men who are 60, 65. But with the women they’re like ‘we have these little ladies’ and it’s like ugh. The next race you have, I won’t be there.” This clearly shows the director using diminutive, infantilizing language, used to make women appear as children and/or weak. At another race, recalled Macy, when the race directors called the winners of each age group to receive their medals, the race director put the ribbons around the
men’s neck but handed them to the women. Another woman runner said, “If you put it around their neck, you’re going to do the same for us.” “I don’t know that he was even aware that he was doing it differently. Very nice man. It didn’t even register with me. It didn’t occur,” said Macy. After she shared this anecdote, we both wondered out loud how often we had been exposed to this subtle sexism in our sporting careers but never realized it.

Conclusions and My Learning and Identity Development

Although I identify as a competitive swimmer, I also run for fun and cross-training. I am part of the same running community as Macy, so I can relate to her comments about meeting incredible people within that community. Macy and I had not met prior to her interviews, but her athletic accomplishments preceded her and we have some mutual running friends. She was also the founder and race director of a popular race in Harrisburg. She inspires me. It’s not just the fact that she is 70 and continues to train and compete, but that she continues to achieve times faster than most people decades younger than she is and finds new events—like a 70K and a sprint triathlon—to challenge herself. Learning that she didn’t start competing until she was about the age I am now makes her story even more inspiring. Because I view her as an accomplished local amateur athlete, I was most surprised to learn that she describes herself as underpowered and that she does not feel pride for her accomplishments.

I'm not that old: I'm only 34, but a 34-year-old athlete body feels a lot different than 24- or 14-year-old body, especially in terms of competitive sports, so I can only imagine what my 70-year-old athletic body will feel like. I'm as strong as ever, maybe even stronger. Mentally, I’m definitely tougher. But I do not warm up as quickly and recovery time is worse. It's difficult for me to swim two days in a row or to run two days in a row with any intensity. I feel tired most of
the time. I take at least one day off per week and don’t do anything other than light yoga or stretching. After working with a sports nutritionist, I feel confident that my meals aren’t the limiting factor. I. Just. Get. Tired. I wonder if this is the same feeling Macy described as being underpowered: when you know you can be better/faster/stronger, but you just can’t tap into it.

At first, I thought Macy calling herself underpowered was a negative body comment, but upon reflection I have a better understanding of it as a reality for adult athletes who have goals and expectations. I am learning to place less emphasis on speed during the days I feel tired/underpowered. Instead, I focus on my technique: Am I breathing correctly? Do I have bilateral breathing? Do I take a stroke before breathing off the wall? Are my elbows high? Do I have enough body roll? How’s my head position? What are my legs doing? This turns it into a mental workout. Sure, I should think about technique even on a fast day, and I do, but on a tired day, it forces me to slow down and pay closer attention.

I was also surprised that Macy said that she does not feel any pride in her running accomplishments because she keeps a blog about her races and she spoke with enthusiasm about her races she when she showed me her awards. Perhaps we have a different definition of “pride.” I asked her which of her accomplishments made her most proud, meaning which ones does she most value; an alternative definition of pride, however, is self-importance or arrogance. Macy speaks about her accomplishments with confidence, but not with boastfulness or arrogance. She even said her accomplishments “don’t have anything to do with me.” Even if her response was due to differently defining pride, her response allowed me to reflect on why I feel proud of my athletic accomplishments, which in turn lead me to consider my privilege as an athlete.

I am lucky to be an athlete and have the body, conditions, and support to pursue my athletic goals. I think about this as I jump into the cold pool before 6 a.m. on a work day; as I run
in a hot, humid Pennsylvania afternoon; as I wake up with sore knees, a stiff neck, and a ravenous hunger; as my students and co-workers look warily into my chlorinated, blood-shot eyes ringed with goggle marks; and as I brace myself with two hands to sit down on the toilet when my legs are just too sore to do it themselves. I always think I could do more, work harder, eat better, sleep sounder. But I work with what I have, make choices to create even better conditions for athletic performance, and express gratitude that I can participate in activities I love every day.

According to Sian Ferguson at Everyday Feminism, “Privilege doesn’t mean your life is easy or that you didn’t work hard. It simply means that you don’t have to face the obstacles others have to endure. It means that life is more difficult for those who don’t have the systemic privilege you have.” I don’t know that this is what Macy referred to when she said her accomplishments have nothing to do with her, but this is what her comment made me think about. So, yes, I work hard and make sacrifices to dedicate myself to my sport, but I am also privileged that I have the body and the resources like time, money, and support to work towards my athletic goals. I am more privileged than many and maybe not as privileged as some, but recognizing my own privilege is the first step towards eliminating oppressive situations. Eliminating oppression in sports—particularly for women—is one of my goals. And I am hopeful that these stories and reflections are one tiny step towards that goal.
CHAPTER 6
KARA’S STORY

Kara is a 56-year-old white woman who began playing tennis as a teenager. Below is a list of terms you will encounter during Kara’s story that may be unfamiliar for those who are outsiders to the tennis culture. Following the definition of terms is Kara’s story told in her own words, which is in italics. The second part of the chapter contains my analysis coupled with Kara’s reflection of her story as she discussed it in her second interview and ends with what I learned from Kara’s story.

Definitions of Terms in Kara’s Story

United States Tennis Association (USTA): national governing body for tennis that promotes and develops the sport’s growth on every level in the US.

National Tennis Rating Program (NTRP): This is the USTA’s official system for determining levels of competition for all players that ranges from 2.5 for beginners to 7.0 for professional players. It is a dynamic number that updates after every officiated USTA competition.

US Open: a modern version of one of the oldest hard-court tennis tournaments in the world

Mixed Doubles: Two-on-two tennis matches in which one member of each team is female and the other male
You Played Until You Couldn’t Play Anymore

As a kid, when I was growing up, there was all kinds of stuff to do. All the kids in the neighborhood would get together and play baseball or go to the school and shoot basketball or ride bikes. From the time the sun went up to the time the sun went down, that’s just the way it was. When I went into high school, I was involved in a lot of activities. Cheerleading. Volleyball. Marching Band. Majorettes. And then I learned to play tennis. I was about 15 and I had a really good friend. He played tennis so I learned to play and so tennis became the main sport for me. Then out of high school I was involved with the team at college. I managed the men’s team there, so I got to play a lot. From 15 on I played a lot with men because there just weren’t a lot of women. I grew up in Adams County and we didn’t have a tennis team or anything. We had a couple of blacktop courts that we’d play on and I just happened to have friends who played so it would be nothing to go out and spend two or three hours playing. You played until you couldn’t play anymore. That was pretty much my sport.

I never really took lessons or anything like that. We didn’t have money to do that when I was a kid. I’ve been very lucky because I’m a quick learner, and I’ve played tennis for so long. And a lot of what I know about tennis I learned from reading books because I could never afford lessons when I was growing up. I read tons of books before I went to any kind of training camps. My first tennis racket, it was one of those hand-me-downs. In those days we were hitting with wooden rackets. In those days we didn’t have the aluminum. Then we went to aluminum, then fiber composite, and worked their way up to what we have today.

So, I’ve been playing tennis for about 40...well, I’m 56 so that’s about 41 years. When I got into my early 30s, from the time I was maybe 22 on to like 30 I had not played a lot. I got married when I was 22 so I took a break. Played sporadically but nothing consistent. At that
point I had children, so I’d get out and play with them. They had little pee-wee rackets and things. Before they had tennis for kids, I ran a pee-wee program and things like that to get the kids going. Then I went back to school when I was about 28, went back to finish college, and that’s when I really started to get back into tennis, at the level of my kids. I was really trying to get my kids into it. I ran a middle school tennis tournament every year for the kids.

Then I started volunteering and eventually coaching at the high school. I was coaching the boys and the girls. I was coach of the year in 1998. I was coaching just the girls’ team then. The coaches in the league vote on that. So that was really nice. Every year they recognize a tennis team and they recognize a coach to go with that team. So that was nice because it’s picked by the coaches in the league. I was still a fairly young coach, and I was really happy about that. Also, I was the first female coach to coach the boys at New Oxford. They had a nice write up about having a female coach coaching the guys because there weren’t a lot of female coaches coaching the boys at that time. Then each year they had a nice write up about the team and had the kids in it, and that was always nice.

I ended up going to Dennis Van Der Meer’s camp to be certified as a tennis instructor. I got certified in United States Tennis Professional Registry. It still exists today but a lot of people go with the USTA certification. Then I coached boys and girls high school tennis for 10 years, then I started to play in USTA leagues. I didn’t really know anything much about USTA and once I started taking my kids someone said why don’t you get on a team. Next thing you know I’m on a team and from there it was one team to the next. I have been playing USTA leagues from about age 32 on. That’s what I still do today. The USTA leagues run year-round. You have a 40+ league in the fall for mixed doubles; you have a tri-ladies league in the fall, which is a mixture of levels of tennis. You have in the winter an 18+ league and a 55+ league. I’ve reached the point
in life that I can play every team year-round! We’re just getting started this week. It actually kicks off for the adult season where the ladies all play against each other on the same types of teams, 55s, 18s, 40s. That wraps up in August and we start the whole process over again.

**Playing Tennis Year-Round**

At one point, I was like 36, 37, I was playing a match and it was really, it was a tough one, I played really hard. I was playing this match and I felt something pull in my back and I thought that is not good. I got home from that match and I was so stiff and so sore, and here I had ruptured a disc in my back. So, I was out for, competitively, for two years because I had to have surgery, they had to fix the rupture. It was bad. It’s been at least 15 or 16 years now, at least. Oh my gosh, it might be 20 years now. Between 20 and 25 years now, and I have not had any problems since. I’m fortunate. That was the only time I really braked after I started. But I was still coaching so I was running practices and things. After about two years I was a little nervous but I started to get back into it and have been playing ever since.

I’ve been playing tennis year-round, and this time of year I’ll play two to three times a week, easy. In the winter, up until just this winter season, I was a coordinator for the tennis club so I ran a lot of leagues, ran a lot of teams for the club, and got a lot of people playing. Throughout my whole tennis career, I’ve enjoyed playing because it’s great exercise, but I’ve also enjoyed keeping other people playing. My focus is really on the 40 and up group of players right now in my life because those people you want to keep them playing, you want them to continue to get exercise. For me, tennis is really, it’s a way of exercise for me. I’m competitive, I like to be competitive, but I also realize there comes a point I’m just going to play to play. I want to play into my 70s and 80s if I can, and there are a lot of people who do that. The research that
has been done on people who play tennis is that it improves their quality of life because it’s a sport that you can get one other person, you can go out and you can play as hard or as easy as you want, you can get some exercise out of it, it keeps you moving, it just makes you feel good to hit that ball.

Along the way, let me see, I’ve gone to Nationals, when I was a 3.0 player, we went to Nationals in Palm Springs, California. We went to World Team Tennis. I went with a team out of Hershey to Billy Jean King’s World Team Tennis. I have two pictures with Billie Jean King. One is with our 50+ team that went to World Team Tennis with our captain, Liza (pseudonym). Billie Jean King in the center. With my second 50+ team, again, we got to meet Billie Jean King. She was really nice. She’d ask everyone her name. Very nice. It’s a lot of fun. It’s just a lot of fun.

I’ve met Billie Jean King. I met Virginia Wade, years ago when I was first starting, I got to meet her. Dennis Van Der Meer. I’ve been to the US Open a couple of times, maybe three or four times I’ve been there. I’ve met Billie Jean King twice because we went to the World Team Tennis Nationals twice. Now, and I’ve had numerous teams that went on to—you have league play then you have district play and then you have sectional play and then you have national play. I regularly have teams that go on to district play. We haven’t gotten out to Sectionals yet for any of my mixed teams, but this year we did. So, this year we’re going. My 55+ is going to be at Sectionals. And if we make it through that—there are four matches—and if we make it through that, we go on to Nationals, which this year is in Orlando, Florida at the new national tennis center. So, I’m hoping we get to that. We have a really good team, so we have a good chance.

We had two teams that went to Sectionals. We had a team back in 2001 that went to Sectionals. We did really well and just missed going off to Nationals. Then we had a team again in 2014 that went to Nationals. And we did the Sectionals thing over in Princeton, and that was
probably the highlight. That was so much fun, winning at that level, knowing you were going to
go on to Nationals. We won the 2014 Sectionals Champions against Delaware, New Jersey,
Philadelphia, and Central Pennsylvania—the Middle States, which is one of five or six regions
across the country. We went and played over three days. And we won the coolest trophy. It is just
a square glass cube with a glass tennis ball. It’s just the coolest trophy ever.

**Going to Nationals**

And then winning the World Team Tennis and going on to Nationals. That was fun, too.
We partnered up with a team from Hershey. A woman in Hershey called me—it was a mixed
doubles tournament—and she called me and my partner and said hey, will you join my team?
And we said, yeah, we’ll join. My partner and I were not losing any matches. We had such a
good record, and I think that’s why she called us. It was a 50+ team and we had just turned 50
and so that was a lot of fun. We went to that World Team Tournament—you have to play in a few
tournaments and if you qualify you go on to Nationals. So, she asked us to play and we went to
that tournament, and we were already playing at another level in the same tournament. The first
day, we had to play for our own team. The second day, we played for our team then turned
around and played for her team. They were in the process of, the first day, the team they were
playing had beaten them and they had to play this team again. So, we came walking in and the
other team was like who are these people? And from that point on, they put us in and we just kept
winning and winning and winning. We won! We had to play them a third time then, and if we
beat them that third time, we were going to Nationals. And we beat them. That was fun. That
really was fun. I can still remember their faces when we walked in there.
The thing was my partner and I—in tennis you have levels: 2.5, 3, 3.5, 4, 4.5 all the way up to 7.0, which is, like, Roger Federer. We were both at the 3.5 level and we were at the top of the 3.5 level, ready to break into the 4.0 level. If you play a lot, you move into these levels and you just keep playing and getting better, getting better, getting better. They have these things called dynamic ratings. Every match you play with every person in USTA is calculated. There’s a behind-the-scenes formula going on that ranks you, and after you get to 3.51 you become a 4.0. The minute you get past 3.5, you’re a 4.0. So, my partner and I were both getting to the point where we were close to moving up. It was perfect timing. We had a great time. That was my second trip out to Palm Springs. I’ve been out there three times now. I want to go to Orlando so bad. They have them in different places around the country. They have them in Alabama, they have them in Orlando, they have them out in California, but they’ve had them out in California for so long I think they’re trying to move them more this way because it was always an advantage for California teams. So, I hope they stay on the East Coast for a while.

A Little More Cutthroat

The thing about tennis is, in this area, it’s the same people playing all the time year-round, so you know all the captains, you know a lot of the players. The players get to be social. Like, if there’s a fundraiser going on at this club or that club, they’ll notify everyone—hey, we have a fundraiser going on if anyone wants to participate in a tournament for whatever it might be. So, you get to know the players. That’s kind of fun. For me, the hard part was, when I was at the 3.5 level, most of my friends are at the 3.5 levels. The 4.0 levels, there aren’t that many of us there. There aren’t that many 4.0, 4.5, or 5.0 locally, at our club, not a ton locally. 4.5s are almost impossible to find. When I first started, it was really social for me because the fun part
was after the matches you’d always go out to eat. You’d go out to eat, you’d have a great time.

For me, it was all social. I mean, I love playing, but I loved this thing afterwards. And Melissa (pseudonym), when we were both 3.0s, it was so much fun getting together with that group afterwards. Everyone looked forward to that: where are we going to eat? Now that I’m a 4.0 there aren’t that many so you don’t have that as much. I kind of miss that. Now it’s just you play and go home. I don’t know many people who are 4.0 and the ones I do sort of have their own groups already. The higher up you go, the more play-and-go-home it is. I won’t say it’s not fun, it’s just more business. A little more serious, a little more cutthroat the higher up you go.

3.0, 3.5 is competitive but it’s social and recreational. You get to 4.0, 4.5 it’s competitive. You can go back down. I’ve been wanting to go back down, but it’s not happening (laughs). This summer I made up my mind that I either have to go up or get out because I can’t stay where I’m at. I’ve been maintaining, hoping I would go down but it’s not happening. I just keep moving higher and higher and higher, so I’m like, OK, you’re obviously not going down so let’s just kick it in gear and go up. It will be challenging to go to a 4.5. That’s a big move. That’s a hard move. Very few people get there. I’m very close. I’ve made up my mind. Now I have to do it. To move up, I have to get back into playing singles, and I really got away from that the last few years. I let the younger people do the singles. It’s more physically demanding. This year I’ve made up my mind, I told my captains if you need me, I’ll do it. And I know they’re going to need me, at least here at the beginning of the season. Maybe once things get rolling and the girls are home from college, and out of high school we might be able to pick up some young ones who can handle the singles. Not that I don’t like it. I love singles because it’s very strategic; there’s a lot of strategy when playing singles and it’s all you, but it’s just very physically demanding.
I’m in pretty good shape compared to a lot of people who are 56, to a lot of women who are 56. I’ll hold my own. I’ll probably not win that many at the 18+ age bracket, but at the 40+ I should hold my own for the most part and have pretty good matches. And if I win, that’s how I go to a 4.5. If I lose, nothing hurt. I’m hoping to have a good season this year playing some singles matches. We’ll see what happens. The other thing is when you bump up then you’re low man on the totem pole again. I’m not going to live long enough to be a 5.0. 4.5 will be my limit. For a few years I could do it. Usually when people get up into their 60s, that’s when people see themselves going back a level or two because you’re not as physically competitive at that point. But I know people playing into their 70s and 80s, so that’s my goal. That’s why I don’t want to play a lot of singles because I have good joints: I have good hips, good knees, everything, no issues right now. I want to keep it that way and I don’t want to wear myself out playing singles. Doubles is much less demanding on the body.

But there’re even fewer opportunities to play. 4.0 there are some teams, some opportunities. But 4.5, especially older 4.5, if you’re in our 50s, very limited opportunities to play. If I go to a 4.5, I’ll still be involved doing something. I’ll probably do more clinics. I’d do contract time. I like contract time now. You get a group of people together and every week you play at a set time, reserve a court. So, if I go 4.5 and there’s no team to play on, I can go to another club or I could just get contract time and partner up and just play that way. In the fall there is a 4.5 opportunity for ladies to play. They can’t get enough of them in what they call a tri-level. In a tri-level you play with a court of ladies that are 3.5, a court of ladies that are 4.0, and you play a court of ladies who are 4.5. And 4.5 ladies are almost impossible to get. What you can do is get 4.0 ladies and put them on that court and take 3.5 ladies and put them on the 4.0 court but you can’t go down. You can play up. That’s the same with the adult season. So, what a lot of
people try to do, they try to play up. They have a rule that 25% of your team have to be the rating of the team, so if it’s a 4.0 team, 25% of the members have to be a 4.0 level. The others can be 3.5s. That gives them a chance to improve their game because a lot of people their goal is to move up, up, up. But as you get in your 50s, I don’t know if that’s so much your goal anymore. You know you’re coming to the point where you don’t know how much longer you’re going to be competitive and to be competitive at a 4.5 level in your 50s, that’s very hard on the body.

**My Ultimate Goal**

My goal is to play until I’m in my 80s! That’s my ultimate goal. And I don’t care how hard I have to play, I just want to play. So that’s my long-term goal, is to keep playing. I don’t play a lot of singles anymore because physically that is just a long recovery time. I used to play a match, next day, boom, nothing, moving on. If I play a singles match now, I’m stiff for two or three days until I can get past it. That’s just an age thing. Everybody feels that. Your recovery time is your biggest thing. The best thing to do is just get out and play more tennis. So, I work out. If I’m not playing tennis, I’m walking or on my treadmill or on my bike. I do a lot of biking. That seems to help with your tennis legs. I just got a new piece of equipment, it’s a rower. I do belong to a gym but I have so much gear at home that I don’t know why I bother with the gym. I’m probably going to drop that. I like it at home. I can go at my pace. Turn Netflix on when I’m running.

I’ve always been very active, so my fitness equipment allows me to do that. I have one of those total gyms. I have a cycling bike and a regular bike, cardio bike, and I have a treadmill and a Marcy-Pro weight set and I have free weights. The cycling is really the thing that helps the most. It’s good for movement. The treadmill is good for the cardio. And the weights are good for
strength and conditioning. I like to continue to do that. Each day I try to do a little bit with that. I try to mix it up. I try to do an hour of exercise a day. That helps me to stay in shape for tennis. People think, well, it’s not a lot of running, but it is! It’s a lot of running, just not continuous running. It’s enough running that you lose your breath.

As most people my age, I’d like to lose some weight (laughs). I could lose some weight. I think physically I’m in good shape cardio-wise. It takes a lot to get my heart really going. I eat, I try to eat right. I mean, I watch what I eat, I don’t eat a lot of junk. I eat a lot of fruits, a lot of vegetables. I try to add more protein to my diet. That’s a hard thing to do, but as you get older, you feel like you need, like your body needs that more because the one thing I notice is it is hard to maintain muscle mass with each year. Your body just, I feel like you have to eat more and more protein to maintain that. I feel pretty strong, I mean I can still lift now what I could lift in my 20s. I still feel physically strong. I feel, compared to a lot of women my age...I can run circles around a lot of women my age. Physically I am really very, very fast. People are amazed by how fast I am on the court. I have this Labrador instinct where I can just see a ball and I gotta have it, you know. I get a lot of shots people don’t expect someone to get to. As long as my legs hold out.

I’ll tell you, the hardest years playing tennis was actually the 40s because you get to your 40s, your body is hearing but not responding to what you’re asking it to do. And that took a couple of years to work through that. It’s not a weight thing or anything else. It’s a hormonal thing, I think. For me, I was saying, there’s the ball—go get it, go get it, go get it, and my head was going, my arms are going, but my feet were four steps behind me. At one point I was like what is going on, which is when I switched to doubles. I got out of singles. It was so noticeable for me. So, I got out of singles and moved to doubles. After a while seems like things picked up
again and now I’m OK. When you hit 40 and that starts to happen, there’s nothing you can do about it! You’re going to find out, it’s out of the blue. What the heck is going on with my body? It’s like your head and your body are out of synch for a little while. It is very frustrating. You don’t feel it in everyday life. I only felt it when I was trying to compete. It’s the weirdest feeling. Until it happens, you can’t fully understand it. Your mind is giving your body signals that your body is just not responding to as quickly or as quickly as it could. I tell women in their 40s all the time, it’ll pass. Keep at it, keep at it.

I think as you get older, for me anyway, the competition is good, the competition is fun, I like the challenge, I like the strategy. But I think really a lot of people just like to play for the exercise. With each passing year. None of us are going to make a living doing this. It’s just a way to keep yourself moving. Gives you something to keep you moving. With each passing year, the challenge is to keep moving.

**Kara’s Reflection on Her Story**

This section contains a combination of my analysis of Kara’s story and Kara’s reflection on her story after reading it a few weeks after her first interview. While telling her story, Kara did not reproduce the dominant, sexist discourse and did not actively subvert it either, though she does use a resistance discourse in terms of age if not of gender. Instead of reproducing a dominant discourse, she uses the alternative narratives common to other amateur athletes: performing at her own highest level and engaging in a community of athletes.
No Reproduction of the Dominant Discourse

In her story, Kara does not overtly reproduce the dominant discourse, meaning she does not use gendered, sexist language to discuss her athletic career and body. Like Lynn, she describes how she learned to play tennis with the men and coached a high school boys’ team, but she does not use comparative language to do so. When reflecting on playing with the boys and men, Kara said, “When I grew up, that’s pretty much what the majority of the players were in my area, so that’s what you had to do if you wanted to play.” In this case she was not comparing herself or her performance to boys’ or men’s but explaining that there were few girls who played tennis in her hometown when she was a child.

Although Kara doesn’t use a dominant or even ambivalent discourse while telling her story, her reflection on her story shows some ambivalent discourse. For example, when I discussed my analysis of her story with her and told her I didn’t see instances of sexism in her story, she responded by saying, “That’s the thing I like about tennis: it doesn’t matter if you’re male or female. If I’m a 4.0 and a fellow is a 4.0, we’re going to go out and have a fair match. They’re equivalent regardless of gender,” which does not show any sexism, but she continued to say, “The only difference is men are stronger than women when it comes to muscle, being able to muscle the ball as far as hitting,” which does use comparative language. She also described recreational male players as more aggressive than recreational female players, though she did clarify that men are “typically,” not always, more aggressive. She explained that “most women don’t have that aggressiveness” and “women sometimes hold back and don’t capitalize the way they could.”

Although Kara did not use the term “aggressive” to describe herself, she did clearly posit herself as different from the unaggressive women and explained that she does capitalize on the
ball at every opportunity and all the “good women” do that, too. She thinks she learned to play more aggressively than other recreational women because she learned to play with the men, who mostly all played aggressively. This makes it “a bit of a struggle” for her to play with women who “will just tap it over [the net] or hit it so the opponents are going to get to it, and you end up having to play it out more whereas it could have been a winner.” Some women’s tentativeness could come from lack of experience, Kara admitted, but she was adamant that there was still a difference in levels of aggression between men and women, regardless of experience. “A lot of women, I hate to say it, are just so nice on the court,” Kara said.

In her reflection, Kara reproduced the dominant discourse by making these comparisons between men and women, but she also described herself as different from the typical women, expressing that she is aggressive and that there are plenty of other “good” and professional women who are also aggressive. Also, she never says she “plays like a man,” which is the usual comparison of men and women in a dominant sports discourse. She only says that she learned to play with the men, not like them, which has helped her to become a more aggressive, competitive player.

**Potential Resistance Discourse**

Kara’s story did not have a resistance discourse in terms of gender, but, like Macy, used a resistant discourse in terms of age, championing women who play later in life. She said one of her goals is to keep women playing as they get older. In her reflection on her story, she said, “I noticed with a lot of players when they get into their 60s they back off of competition and become more recreational then. There are leagues that are for 60s, called Super Seniors. We just don’t have a lot of super seniors in the area right now, at least at our club. At some point, there’s
going to be bubble of people who are at that level and my goal will be to keep them playing.” By this she acknowledges that it has historically not been common for women in their 60s and older to continue to compete but that she thinks that women should be able to compete at any age, enjoy it, and reap its benefits of socialization, community, and exercise. She was very hopeful that there would be a growing trend of older women playing tennis in the near future, and she hoped to help facilitate that in her area.

**Alternative Narratives**

Although Kara experienced a lapse in competition due to injury, she did not revert to a dominant discourse to make sense of this narrative wreckage. Also, instead of reproducing the “winning is the best or most important aspect” narrative common among professional athletes, she used the alternative athletic narratives more common to amateur athletes: performing at own highest level and engaging in a community of athletes (Carless & Douglass, 2012).

**Lack of Narrative Wreckage.** Like many competitive athletes, Kara experienced an injury that prevented her from playing competitive tennis for two years. Athletes at any level may experience “narrative wreckage” when they start or stop competing for any reason, which is when they change their narrative about who they are and why or how they play their sport. Kara, however, does not believe that the injury and time away from competition changed her narrative or sports identity because she was still coaching the high school boys’ and girls’ teams: “That kept me in it mentally and instructionally even if I wasn’t competing myself. That’s what made my transition back into it easier.” When reflecting on her two-year hiatus from competition due to a back injury and surgery, she said, “My plan was to get back into it. I didn’t anticipate having
to walk away forever. I knew it was a possibility depending on how my recovery went, but it went really well and I did not rush the return so I was able to get back into it.” Because she was able to stay connected so closely to her sport during her recovery, she did not experience any narrative wreckage or change in identity because of her break from competition.

**Performing at Own Highest Level.** When reflecting on her story in terms of these alternative narratives, she did not discount winning, but she clearly did not emphasize winning as the main purpose for playing tennis. She explained that “exercise is the number one reason [to play]. If you win along the way, it makes it all the more fun to exercise!” She explained that at the recreational level, no one is making money or earning a living: “We go out there and do our best, have some fun, get a little exercise and hopefully come out of it with a win for the team. Ultimately people want to win for the team so it can move on [to other competitions], and that’s a lot of fun, not necessarily just for the tennis, but for the travel. You get to go all over the country. That’s the fun part of competing and doing well.” So although, to her, winning is fun and something she aspires to, it’s not the reason she plays competitive tennis.

**Engaging in a Community of Athletes.** The number one takeaway point Kara had from reflecting on her story was that she noticed how important it is to her to continue to stay active within the tennis community: “The theme of reading through that is maybe how I’m progressing from maybe playing as much to getting ready for the point where I’ll still be playing but not as much as I’m playing now, but to continue to grow the sport and keep people involved in it.” Although she still has her own athletic and performance goals, she can also see how she’s transitioning to becoming more involved in the administrative side of tennis. Similar to when she
had to take a break from tennis when she injured her back, she wants to stay involved with tennis in some way, even if she cannot physically play as much later in life. In the time between telling her story and reflecting on it, she was selected to be part of the Central Pennsylvania Adult Tennis Committee, which really excites her because she will get to help grow the sport in Central Pennsylvania, stay committed to the sport even when she cannot play as often as she does now, and because “it’ll be an opportunity to meet a whole new group of people in tennis.”

**Conclusions and My Learning and Identity Development**

In high school, when I had shoulder injuries from swimming, I went to an orthopedic doctor. He manipulated my shoulders to see how they rotated and then, before knowing anything about my background, he said, “Let me guess. You’re a swimmer, softball player, and tennis player?” It was a good guess. I was a swimmer and I had been playing slow-pitch softball every spring since I was 5 years old. “You’re probably very good at them,” he continued, “because you can hyperextend your shoulder joints.” I had never played tennis before, and to this day still have never played tennis; however, I have remembered this comment and wondered if my shoulders would give me an advantage on the court.

Because I have never played tennis, I loved hearing Kara’s story and learning more about the sport. For example, I knew nothing about the rankings that determine a player’s level of competition and I had never heard of tri-level leagues. I knew there were singles and doubles tennis, but not that there could be mixed doubles in competitive tennis. Despite my lack of knowledge of the sport and the many differences between it and my main sport of swimming, I could relate to much of what Kara said about her tennis career, particularly the social aspects and recovery time.
Kara said the fun part of playing competitive tennis was going out to eat as a team after the matches, and that’s something I always loved as a kid and look forward to as an adult, too. When I was an age group (under 18 years old) swimmer, my club team often went to big three- or four-day invitational swim meets at La Salle University. We would stay in the same hotel, and nearby there was a TGI Friday’s restaurant. My parents, my teammates and their parents, and I would go there together every day for a late lunch between prelims—the first round of competition—and finals. The servers would push multiple tables together for us and we would take up one corner of the restaurant. Sometimes we’d see our competitors and their families in the restaurant, too, and it felt like the whole restaurant had been taken over by swimmers. I’d always order the same meal: broccoli cheese soup and garlic shrimp pasta. It was a great way to relieve the tension from prelims and unwind before the nerves of finals kicked in. At other competitions, there might not have been a TGI Fridays—I remember one instance of eating at a Hooters with my 13-year-old teammates and our parents—but the joy and relaxation of communing away from the pool was the same.

As an adult swimming in a master swimming league, my teammates and I still look forward to eating together after meets. We will carpool to the event—most of which are two hours away—swim, and then go to a restaurant local to the pool. Usually one of the swimmers has scouted restaurants days in advance and chooses somewhere that serves local craft beer. We come in with wet hair—even in the middle of winter—with goggle and cap marks still on our faces, order beers and multiple appetizers to share, and meals that we devour with our swimmer’s appetites. It’s nice to know we’re still a team, even outside of the pool. Sometimes, though, I want to swim at big competitions like Zones and Nationals that my teammates do not want or cannot go to because they don’t have the qualifying times, the money, and/or the time
off work, and I have to decide if I should go alone or not. Sometimes I go without them, and it’s not quite the same; sometimes I decide not to go, which isn’t much better because I feel like I’ve missed opportunities for fast races with swimmers from across the country. So, when Kara was conflicted about moving up to a 4.0 and not having teammates to go to meals with after the competitions, I could easily relate to that. It’s difficult for a competitive athlete to choose not to go to an advanced level of competition; however, it’s not as fun to go to that level alone.

Kara also talked about the difficulty of recovering after competition and other high-intensity physical activity as she got older, which I can definitely relate to. As I mentioned in the conclusion of Macy’s chapter, I am still young at 34 years old, but my body does not recover the same as it did when it was 24 or 14. Kara said that she and other women she knows have felt a specific and jarring decline when the reached their 40s, and I wonder if I hit that feeling early, or if I have that to look forward to in a few years. After speaking with both Macy and Kara, I published a blog post on my personal website about how my recovery time is so much longer than it used to be, and I had several friends—all in their 40s or older—respond with advice. Several of them said if I’m feeling run down, then I need more days off. A friend from my master’s swimming team shared that he felt frustrated having to take more time off when he got to his 40s, but he realized that the elite athletes to whom he was comparing himself did not have to hold down full-time jobs apart from our training schedule like we do, so they have more time to rest and sleep between workouts. Sleep, he said, was a key to recovery, and those of us who work full-time jobs do not have the luxury of everyday naps. A friend from my running community sells products for a dietary supplement company and suggested that I use pre- and post-workout supplements to combat fatigue and decrease recovery time. She told me about her
products at the same time I was working with a sports nutritionist and a group fitness trainer; both touted whole foods and no supplements, so I did not try her line of products.

Shortly after those conversations, though, I became a brand ambassador for GU—a company that produces and sells performance sports nutrition products—because of my affiliation with a women’s trail running group. Because I got a deep discount on GU products, I tried both the pre- and post-workout drink mixes and have found they make a huge difference in my energy and performance levels. I have since stopped taking the recovery drink because I found that chocolate almond milk immediately after a workout and a small meal within an hour or so afterwards have the same impact on recovery. I have not yet found whole foods to replace the pre-workout drink, which makes me feel like a brand new, shiny human being. I try not to take this supplement more than once a week, before my most difficult workout. I worry about adverse long-term effects on my body as well as building up a tolerance to it, which would render it ineffective. I will continue to try new pre-workout whole foods to see if any have as good of an effect. I am also curious when and if I’ll hit that 40-something-year old athletic slump. But, if I do, I will keep Kara’s words in mind: “It’ll pass. Keep at it, keep at it.”
CHAPTER 7
PENNY’S STORY

Penny is a 62-year-old white woman who played field hockey and basketball in college but fell in love with golf when she started playing it as a young adult. Below is a list of terms you will encounter during Penny’s story that may be unfamiliar for those who are outsiders to golf culture. Following the definition of terms is Penny’s story told in her own words, which is in italics. The second part of the chapter contains my analysis coupled with Penny’s reflection of her story as she discussed it in her second interview. It ends with what I learned from Penny’s story.

Definitions of Terms in Penny’s Story

USGA: United States Golf Association

Shotgun: a golf tournament format in which all groups of players tee off simultaneously from different holes

Fade and Draw: controlled movements of a golf ball. A draw curves from right to left and a fade curves from left to right.

Mulligans: when a player has a second chance to replay a stroke

Flights: a division in a golf tournament when players are grouped by age or skill level

Stroke and Match Play: scoring units in golf. In stroke play, players count the total number of strokes taken over the round(s) of golf. In match play, one point is awarded to the player with the fewest strokes on that hole.
I Learn from Watching

I grew up in a neighborhood with six boys and two girls and so we just played with the boys. My brother—I had a brother three years older than me—would pick me for his team because he’d say, well, she’s better than you guys! When I was in high school—this is how far I go back—my senior year of high school we finally got a field hockey team for the first year. Before that, we had no interscholastic sports for girls. We had intramurals. We got done with field hockey and told the coach, we’re bored, let’s get a basketball team, so she got us some games with some people she knew. Then the next year basketball became a sport. But we didn’t have a lot of choices. Cheerleading was what you were expected to do, and I didn’t want to be a cheerleader.

Then I went to college and played field hockey and basketball at Shippensburg. You had more opportunities there. I worked at the Cumberland Golf Club when I was in high school and college; I worked in the snack bar. I used to say that golf was the dumbest sport around because the guys would come in and they’d sit there, they’d be having a drink, they’d be hot, they’d be sweating, they’d be talking about how badly they played, and nobody was happy. I thought, that doesn’t sound like fun. But then my first husband—I started to date him in college and started to play golf with him—and I just got hooked on it. I’ve always liked any sport I’ve tried, pretty much, so that’s how I got started.

Before I got married the first time, I couldn’t break 100. We went to Bermuda on our honeymoon and played golf every day, so I was shooting in the 90’s when we got back. Golf came pretty easily to me. I never really had a lot of lessons. I just sort of picked it up naturally. We played at Range End for about five years. I won a championship there once or twice, I think. And then we came to Carlisle Country Club. That’s when I really got involved. Well, I had two
little girls at the time but my parents would keep the girls, but Carlisle gave me the opportunity to play in club events and women’s Harrisburg district events, which I have been very involved in for, I don’t know, since ‘81 when I joined the club. I played in the first district championship in ‘87. So that’s been very important. From there, there’s also a Women’s Central Pennsylvania Golf Association that takes in even more clubs that goes down to Reading and all around, and I play in those events. Then I got involved in the state organization. I am very interested in how a golf tournament runs, not just playing it, because I notice things, like, that’s not right. You shouldn’t do it that way. I just learn from watching.

“All I Do Is Play Golf”

Eventually I got divorced from my first husband and married my second husband who I met at Carlisle Country Club. And he is a USGA rules official and he does a lot of work for the USGA and does a lot of work for their local qualifiers. And again, we’re both very interested in how things happen. He was president of the men’s state organization, I was president of the women’s state organization, and we started working on getting the two organizations together because it can only be good for the game. We’re getting this to happen, and that’s a pretty good thing. Everybody’s pretty agreeable to it. We need a new set of bylaws. The structures of our two organizations are different, so now we’re deciding on how many people to have on this combined board. How many women, how many men. Again, they’re talking about a board of 12 or 15 and having a board with three women on it, which we think is a pretty good representation considering the numbers. Right now we run about three tournaments and they run about 15. We’re hoping with their help that we can get some more tournaments and get some more people involved.
There are lots of little teeny women’s organizations around. A lot of women only want to stay in their little clique where they know everybody and they don’t want to venture out too far. It is funny when you talk to the guys. They have tournaments. They’ll do tee times all morning. Then the guys get done and maybe they’ll stay around and have a beer or they’ll go home or whatever. Women usually have a shotgun and then have lunch because golf is more of a social event for women than it is for men. There are some who look at it as competitive golf, but not as many women as men see it that way.

I see it as a combination. We played golf Friday afternoon, my husband Jim and I, and then we had dinner. Saturday, I was busy doing things and then I took my four-year-old granddaughter out on the golf course in the afternoon. We got a cart and some snacks and went out and played. Sunday, I played with a friend of mine, then Monday I played in the Messiah Golf Outing with my daughter and my two nieces who both played field hockey at Messiah but don’t play golf. I told them if they want me to support the athletic network at Messiah, you’re going to go play golf with me and they said, OK!

People think, and I heard one time, that all I do is play golf. And I thought, oh that’s interesting because at the time I had a full-time job and two kids. I wasn’t one to hang out at the country club that much. I’d just go out and play golf. Through the stress of life, people say you have to take care of yourself. Take a bubble bath, go to the spa, or whatever. I say, no, I don’t need to do that. I just need to go play nine holes of golf and I’m good. Even by myself. I just enjoy being out there. Before we were married, my husband’s brother died. I remember seeing him on the golf course out there by himself. He does that too. That’s what we do.

I play a variety of serious, social, fun, whatever. I play any number of things. People seem to think that because I am a pretty good golfer that I’m real serious about it but not always.
I really enjoy golf. Someone once asked me if I was ever going to get really serious about my golf game and I said probably not because I have too much fun at it. I play in the district championship every year, and the central championship, and the state championship. I love to play in the state championship and try to make the championship flight. We have some really good golfers in Pennsylvania and they just stomp all over me. It’s fun playing with them, getting to know them, watching them play, watching their game.

**Pretty Good for a Local Golfer**

I used to be very fit. Naturally fit. I didn’t exercise to stay fit, but I stayed fit because I was so active. As we get older we’re not as fit. My exercise now consists of walking the golf course, mowing the grass. I’m not one to go to a gym just like I’m not one to hit balls. But I do try to stay active. But my body is 62 now, so it’s not what it used to be. You can just tell a difference. My best golf was probably around the mid-90s to 2000. So how old would I have been then? Late 30s to mid-40s is probably when I played my best golf. Before that my girls were little and they just keep you busy. They got old enough that I could do things and relax a little. But that was my best golf.

I play probably three times a week. I still work part time. In the summertime there’re tournaments every week, so I try to limit it to one or two days a week and then I’ll play Saturdays and Sundays. In my old age, I won’t play Sunday if it rains. I used to maybe do that, but not anymore. Now Women’s Harrisburg District has a senior division so I’ve started playing in the Senior Championships because I get tired of getting beat up by the young people. But I’ve been successful at that. They said you can’t play in the seniors! And I said yes, I can; it says you have to be 60 years old and I’m 60 years old. I’m playing!
I’ve never been much of a practicer. If I have time, I just go out and play a couple of holes. I’ve never been a person that would go out and hit a lot of balls. Everybody always told me I should, that I could be better, but I don’t know. I don’t enjoy hitting that many balls, so I don’t practice a lot. It was kind of natural, most of it was natural. I had a lesson when I first started to play. My first husband, he actually kind of knew the golf swing and kinda got me started, but I developed this one swing. My natural swing is a little fade. In fact, when I was pregnant, I’d tell people – I played golf through both of my pregnancies – the bigger I got, the bigger my fade would get, but it would do exactly the same thing every time because your weight is so centered. The swing was exactly the same every time. I knew exactly what the ball would do. One time somebody got me to change my swing a little to draw the ball, but I had no idea where the ball was going, so I just went back to my natural fade. I’ve never been an extremely long hitter. My strength has been consistency.

I have 16 Carlisle Country Club Championship trophies. Eight district trophies. One Central Penn trophy. And, you know, a variety of other trophies from things I’ve played in. I actually had them in my living room on some shelves, but then I turned the living room into a playroom for the kids so some of the trophies went away, in a box, some of them went to our office, which is mostly golf stuff in the office because we’re both involved in so many golf organizations. Every once in a while, I’ll take people in there and show them. I’m pretty good for a local golfer. People will say, when are you going pro? They have no idea how good the pros are. I am nowhere near that. I would see the pros when I would go to states. There are a couple of them. They’re way out of my league. I never aspired to go pro. I had two girls, and golf has been put in perspective for me a few times. You get all caught up in planning for this tournament
or that tournament or doing this or that but both of my girls were in the hospital before they were a year old, in golf season. That just puts things in perspective.

I can remember the first district championship I won in ’88. I was playing Joan Schaffer (pseudonym) who was sort of a legend in the Harrisburg district. And Randy (pseudonym) was caddying for me because I beat her the day before or Joan beat her the day before or somebody did. She lost, so she wasn’t playing in the finals. So, she was caddying for me and, on the 9th hole, I remember it was a par five and Joan was on a two and I hit my third shot up there and was ready to putt. I said, “What do you think about this putt?” Randy said, “I think you just better make it.” That’s it. Well, I did. I ended up winning that match. I’m not sure how, but I did because I made a lot of putts, I guess. That was pretty exciting. And she was the nicest loser, she was just a class act.

I had the opportunity to play, a couple years ago, a match in the state championships against Cathy (pseudonym). She’s in the hall of fame. She never turned pro, she’s an amateur. She was runner up at the Open one year. I had the opportunity to play with her and that was a really good experience because she’s been all over the world playing with everybody. You meet some of the nicest people in golf. And you can play golf with most anybody.

I have to tell you another story about Randy. I said how we played in the finals almost every year. We used to get a lot of press with the district finals because the Patriot News originally sponsored that tournament so they’d send a reporter to the finals who would kind of follow us around. I don’t remember what year it was but Ruth and I were being interviewed and I said something to her like, hey, you didn’t do that last night when you were over at my house. And the reporter said, “She was at your house last night?” I said “Yeah, we’re friends, she comes over all the time.” “She was there the night before you were playing in the finals?” I said,
“Well, yeah.” The reporter thought it was strange. We didn’t see anything strange about it because we were friends. When we’re on the golf course we’re trying to beat each other. But they thought that was really strange that we were such good friends but could beat up on each other on the golf course.

One of my fondest memories, three of my friends, we started matches where Beth (pseudonym) and I would play against Bethany (pseudonym) and Joan Schaffer. Each team got to say to the other person, “I’d like to see you hit that again,” so if you hit a really good shot, I’m going to say, “You have to hit that again,” and they had to hit it again. We had the most fun. But one time we didn’t use all three of our, we called them “overs.” They hadn’t had any good enough shots to make them take any over so we made Joan Schaffer putt a 6-foot putt four times in the last hole and she made it every single time. We had the most fun doing that. We all got along. It was just fun. It wasn’t an official tournament, but we were very competitive.

**Tony’s Team Tournament**

Now my husband and I have been involved in golf for so long and have so many friends from all over central Pennsylvania and the whole state. Six years ago, our youngest daughter and her family were in an accident and their six-month-old son died. Last year was the first we did it, we had a Tony’s Team Tournament in his memory to raise money for Children’s Miracle Network. For my 60th birthday my girls asked me what I wanted to do and I said, “Nothing. We’re not having a party, we’re not doing anything.” They said we have to do something. It happened to be a Saturday, so I said OK, we’ll have a little golf tournament. So I sent out an email to the district clubs in Carlisle – I just said, do you want to come play? – and 32 women showed up to play. So we had this birthday party for me. That’s how it started. I kind of forget
what we played but I said “I’m selling mulligans for 5 bucks” because at that time I was doing a walk to raise money for Children’s Miracle Network in Tony’s memory. So I said, “I’m charging you 5 bucks and that’s a donation to Tony’s team.”

After we were done, they said, can we do this again next year? I said 61 is kind of an odd thing to celebrate but I said OK we’ll have a Tony’s Team Tournament. I planned it and I had like 40 women going but it rained that day so we didn’t play. But I charged them 20 bucks and it was a donation and they were coming to Carlisle to play and we were running this little tournament. I have all kinds of golf stuff at home so I gathered up some little prizes and stuff. I said to Jim, if I can get 40 women to come, you can get 40 guys to come. Why don’t we have a real tournament? So we got the Country Club for a Monday in August. We had no idea what was going to happen. We were hoping to get 72 people to get a foursome on each hole and a hundred of our friends showed up. We raised $14,000 our first year. We were really happy with that.

This year it’s going to be bigger and better now that we know people will come. Somebody said to me you two are pretty well-respected in the golf community so people showed up. We have used golf for a number of things. I’m not a fundraiser. I’m not going to ask people for money, but I will ask them to come play golf. And they’d come. We’re having it August 20th, at Carlisle. I think we can fill it this year. We can take 120 people. I think we’ll get that many this year. I didn’t know what to expect last year. I don’t think I realized how well-respected we were in the golf community until then, that people came to that, made it a point to come, and bring their friends. That really made us feel good. It made me feel good.
Pine Needles: You Eat Well, You Play Golf

My new husband—we got married in 2000—went in 1999 down to Pine Hurst to the US National Open. He went down with two friends of his and rented an RV in Raleigh and drove down and parked in Pine Needles. Pine Needles is owned by Peggy Kirk Bell. She has done an awful lot for women’s golf, if you ever want to look her up. Jim got there and he called me on the phone and said, “I know where we’re going on our honeymoon—we’re coming here!” It’s a wonderful place. A family owns it. It’s very female-oriented for golf. It’s pretty equitable. They have what they call golfaris where you go for three or four days and get lessons. It’s pretty intense. I’ve never been to one of them because I don’t like to practice. But Jim and I go every November and play in a couple’s jamboree. We’ve been lucky enough to win that four times. Somebody said to me, what do you get for that? How much money do you get for that? I said, nothing. You get your name on the bell. It’s owned by the Bell family and there’s a big bell on the first tee and you get your name on it when you win the couple’s jamboree. It’s not monetary. It’s just fun! That’s our vacation. It’s a three-day tournament with different formats each day. We just love it there. It’s our place to go when we need to get away. It’s a really nice place.

She passed away last year. We were at the jamboree and we went to visit her and she wasn’t doing well, wasn’t very good. That was in November, and we ended up going back down 10 days later for her funeral. The family has carried on the place. They’re having the second US Senior Women’s Open there next year. And they’ve had two Women’s US Opens there and they’re having another one in ’22, I think. They’re very women-oriented there. But it’s just a really nice place. Nice atmosphere. We tell people we like to golf and eat and that’s all we do for five days there. Golf and eat! You eat well, you play golf.
**Stir Up Interest in Women**

The other thing I’ve done through my years of golf—we just did this Saturday as a matter of fact—we had 12 Carlisle women playing a match against 12 Colonial women from Colonial Country Club. It started because I had a lot of friends at Blue Ridge and one day they challenged me and I said OK! Let’s have a match. So now we have been doing that for about six or seven years. I’ll gather up some women and they’ll gather up some women and we’ll have these matches and we play for this little trophy my daughter made. Everybody loves those things. I have women at Carlisle standing in line to do these matches but I can’t get them to play in real tournaments but they’ll play in these. A lot of them think they’re not good enough, but they haven’t seen what other people play like. But at least they’re interested in golf and they’re meeting new people. It’s still helping to grow golf, I think. I try to do things to keep people interested in golf, like those matches we have with the other clubs. We do it with West Shore, too. It’s just fun. Anything I can do to stir up interest in women.

I started at Carlisle Country Club getting involved in the Ladies’ 18-hole called Chip ‘n’ Chatter. I was the chairman of that for a while. Then I got on the district board and I was district president for a while. Then I stayed on as past president. Now they have me on as tournament chairman so I could stay on the committee. They said, “You have to stay on the committee. We need your thoughts on things.” Then I got involved in the state board. I just enjoy it. You need a lot of volunteers to run golf tournaments and I just enjoy figuring out the best way to run them. We talk about the best way to run them. Right now, we are talking about our state championship. It takes a whole week because we have a qualifier on Monday and then we push flights of 16 so we have four days of match play. Would it be better for us if we went to three days of stroke play? Would we get more people to play? Maybe. We just happen to love match play. It’s a
debate. We discuss the way to do it. There’s no right or wrong way but we are considering how to do it because time is so much a deterrent in golf because it takes a long time. And when you take the whole week from somebody – and if they lose, they’re done – they’ve taken the whole week off work. Whereas if we have three days of stroke play, they’re guaranteed to play those three days. They know what to expect. So things like that. I enjoy the discussions. I don’t have a very strong opinion on that, what I just told you, because I can see both sides of it.

It’s interesting to hear what other people think and the best way to do it. Some people have strong opinions about it. We’ve had many disagreements in our time. There have been a number of disagreements. When I was state president, we were in the midst of—that’s a long thing you don’t want to know all the details, but I knew at our spring meeting there was going to be some controversy, a lot of controversy. The spring meeting just happened to be the day of my niece’s bridal shower that my daughters were running. That’s one time I was really torn about what to do. I was going to let the vice president run it until I kept hearing about these discussions that were going to come up. I talked to my niece about it, who has been very involved in sports, and she said you probably need to go to that meeting, so I went to the meeting and missed the bridal shower. It was a very controversial meeting. It wasn’t a lot of fun but I probably made the right decision about it. I was trying to keep peace between certain things that were going on. It was challenging. There were some people who weren’t very happy after that meeting, but we got it worked out. But I missed her bridal shower. I try not to do things like that. Family really comes first. I missed a lot of golf tournaments because of family. It’s kept it in perspective a few times when things happen, you realize it’s just a golf tournament...even though you want to win. It’s still only a golf tournament.
Women just physically can’t hit the ball as far [as men]. There are very few women who can hit anywhere near as far as the guys. I think it’s just because of body build. And distance, now they have golf courses set up that you can play from different yardages, so that’s fair. It’s more than fair. I have no problem competing against him [my husband] if I can play from shorter tees. I just can’t hit as far. I never could. When a friend of mine was president of the state, they had a person who transitioned from a male to a female, who wanted to play in the state championship. That was a huge discussion. They let her play because they didn’t have anything in place. For a while—and I think this has been changed—the USGA, and the Pennsylvania state organization followed suit, said you had to be female at birth to play in one of their tournaments. That’s another big discussion! I think they have changed that now. That has certainly been an interesting discussion in women’s golf because, you know, 50 years ago, no one did it. But now it is an issue. And golf, the USGA, has addressed it. And that happened in Pennsylvania about 15 years ago.

I can remember one time being in a discussion—that was probably about 20 years ago—and somebody said, “I don’t know why people [women] complain about not being able to play at Carlisle in July.”

I said, “Well, you have the 4th of July tournament and you have the Club Championship.”

They said, “But you have your own member-guest tournaments.”

And I said, “Yeah, and that would be on Wednesday when I have to work. I have to take off work. You guys have it Saturday, Sunday.”

They said, “You have your own district tournament.”

I said, “That’s right, we have one day on a Wednesday here. Yours is Thursday, Friday, Saturday, Sunday.”
Now I understand that there are more guys who play. I said I can’t play in any of those things so that’s why people complain about not being able to play in July. He looked at me like I was nuts. He just didn’t get it.

At Carlisle, they have addressed a lot of those issues about holiday tournaments. They used to have morning and afternoon times and they would have maybe eight groups in the afternoon and they’d put four on each nine. They started putting them all on one nine so we [women] could get the other nine to play in the afternoon. Now they only have morning times. Participation in golf all around is down. We can play as soon as they [the men] are done. I don’t have a problem with that because they fill the field in the morning. I can’t argue with that. I just want a place to play. It used to be all focused on the guys who played in the tournaments. At least at Carlisle now they’re venturing out to, “We have some members who don’t play in these things or can’t because they’re women. Let’s see if we can free up some time for them to play.” So things are much better. I still know that it’s a man’s game. You can’t argue with that.

A Juggling Act

Golf is a very important part of my life. Right now, I’m still working part time because I enjoy it. I quit my full-time job and I’m lucky enough that I can work part time. When I applied for the job 10 years ago, I said I want the flexibility to play in golf tournaments. I told them that right up front. People say, and they hired you? And I said, yeah, they did. We just had somebody quit so I’m trying to juggle giving them enough hours, being able to play golf, and babysitting my grandchildren. It is a juggling act. But I enjoy all of those things, so I try to fit them all in. I try to find a way to do everything.
Penny’s Reflection on Her Story

This section contains a combination of my analysis of Penny’s story and Penny’s reflection on her story after reading it a few weeks after her first interview. The discourse of Penny’s story is dynamic because of its combination of dominant and resistance discourses and alternative discourses. First, I will describe how Penny reproduced the dominant discourse, then how she subverted it, and then how she provided alternative narratives to the dominant sports narrative. Throughout each section, I also describe Penny’s reflection on her story and her discourse.

Reproducing the Dominant Discourse

Penny used two of Bruce’s (2016) rules of representation—Rule 4: Non-Sports-Related Aspects and Rule 5: Comparisons to Men’s Sports—when she reproduced the dominant discourse.

**Rule 4: Non-Sports-Related Aspects.** Discussing non-sports-related aspects could be problematic because it takes away the focus from a woman’s sports accomplishments and puts it on other areas that may be used to enhance the sportswoman’s traditional roles as mother and/or wife thus devaluing her sports accomplishments. While telling her story, Penny discussed her family, how her family always comes first, and about juggling family obligations with her sports obligations. For example, she described the difficult decision between attending her niece’s baby shower or going to a golf board meeting in which they were discussing and voting on a very controversial topic. In that case, she decided to go to the golf meeting, but that was an unusual case and she emphasized that she does not typically choose golf over family.
On the other hand, she also described how her family enabled her to play more golf: “I wouldn’t have been able to play as much golf as I did when I was younger except for my parents,” Penny said when reflecting on her golf career. “They would come and take my girls. They’d say, ‘we’re coming to take them Saturday.’ And I’d say, ‘Well, I don’t have a golf tournament.’ ‘We’re taking them anyway!’” She could then use that free time to play golf. Stating that family is first might deflect from the fact that golf took Penny’s time away from her children and family and possibly devalue her commitment to sport; however, golf is something she also participates in with her family. As she says several times, she is not a professional golfer, nor aspires to be, so golf is not and never was her profession; therefore, I do not think this rule applies to Penny, or other amateur athletes, in the same way as it applies to professional athletes. For professional athletes, their sports careers are their livelihoods that support them and their families; for amateurs, their sports careers are what they enjoy doing apart from their livelihoods.

**Rule 5: Comparisons to Men’s Sports.** The other rule of representation (Bruce, 2106) Penny reproduces is Rule 5: Comparisons to Men’s Sports. Like Lynn and Kara, Penny described playing sports with the boys in her neighborhood when she was growing up. Also like Lynn and Kara, she did not make any comparisons to herself and those boys at that time; she noted that she liked sports and she found other in her neighborhood who liked them, too. Though it may be significant to note that she said she played with the boys rather than that they played with her or they played together.

Later, when Penny described one of the founders of the LPGA as the “female Arnold Palmer,” she caught herself because prior to our interview, I told her how journalists called
Olympic and World Record Holder swimmer Katie Ledecky the “female Michael Phelps” and how that kind of language posits men as the norm to aspire to. We did not include that language in her story.

Although Penny competes with women in tournaments and plays with female friends, she also often plays with her husband—originally with her now ex-husband who introduced her to golf and now with her current husband who plays and is involved in local golf boards—and other men. From these experiences, she has seen consistent physical differences between men and women, which has led her to conclude that men are physically stronger than women and can therefore hit the ball farther than women. To accommodate this difference in physicality, women are allowed to hit from the shorter “women’s tee.” On reflection, Penny said, “It is fair [that women have a shorter tee]. I play golf with a lot of different people, and [women] can’t hit it as far. They just can’t. Physically can’t do it. I don’t know why.” Kara said something similar when reflecting on the differences between men and women tennis players. And, like Kara, Penny never said that men are better or more capable golfers, only that most men have the advantage of strength to help them hit the ball farther.

The final instance of comparison to men’s sports from Penny’s story was when she said, “Sports are a man’s game,” meaning men still have the advantage and that sports are still male-dominated. But at the same time, she acknowledges that it is not that way in her family, that sports were and are an equal and welcome domain for all in her family regardless of gender. Considering the inequalities that have existed and continue to exists in many sports, including golf, it is no wonder Penny said “sports are a man’s game.” She readily acknowledged that golf—and sports in general—are male-dominated, yet she has also done a lot locally to equal the playing field in her sport.
Potential for Resistance Discourse

Penny’s story displays pockets of inequality within golf but also shows some instances of progress for women in the sport. First, she plays within a sport whose professional organization shows Bruce’s (2016) Rule #2: Gender Marking: it’s called the Ladies Professional Golf Association (LPGA) whereas the men’s equivalent is just the Professional Golf Association (PGA). Locally, the sport is still not equal either, but she sees and advocates for more equality than existed in the past. For example, she has been a member of the Carlisle Country Club for years and, originally, women weren’t allowed to play golf on the weekends. At the club now, women have no restrictions for when they can play, but Saturday and Sunday mornings are still often dominated by men, and men’s tournaments are predominantly on the weekends but women’s tournaments are during the week. Penny said some local clubs still have restrictions on when women can reserve a tee time. To get around this, Penny said, some women will “cheat. They get their husbands to get a tee time at 9 o’clock that says ‘guest,’ then they play with their husbands. They find ways around it, but it just makes it more difficult.”

Penny explained that the restricted tee times and the weekday women’s tournaments occurred because originally men were working and the women were not, so the women could play any day of the week and men could only play on the weekends. “It’s a big carryover,” she said, recognizing the outdated concept. On the other hand, though, she says it does not bother her that men get most of the morning tee times on the weekends because there are more men, it’s “still a man’s game,” and she prefers to play in the afternoon anyway—which may be true, though that may also be a sign of coping or resignation to the situation.
Yet based on other actions, Penny does not seem like she is ready to acquiesce to men dominating the sport. She actively seeks to involve more women in the sport from casual games to competitive tournaments. For example, while she was president of the Women’s PA State Golf Association, she helped to initiate a merger with the Men’s PA State Golf Association because it would create more opportunities for women to play golf, even if the merged board allowed for fewer board positions for women. She believes the ratio of men to women on the board is a fair representation considering there are many fewer women members in the organization.

While reflecting on her story, Penny and I discussed the importance of passing on sports stories to new generations of athletes: “Sometimes I’m talking to the friends I play with now and they don’t remember the people I used to play golf with. Sometimes I have to tell them. Like, this District Championship I’m playing in the next two days is named after Joanne Creason, a woman who had seven kids, she’s 95 now, so she played golf in the 50s and 60s, but it was harder. She had kids but she played and she won this championship enough times so we named it after her. But a lot of the women I play with now don’t even know her. She was a really great lady.” We also discussed how she learned about women’s golf history through other women golfers, such as Peggy Kirk Bell, an original founding member of the LPGA and former owner of Pine Needles, the place where Penny and her husband like to vacation. “She had some great stories,” Penny reflected. “She used to play with Babe Didrikson in the area a lot. They played in tournaments together. The one thing I found going through some stuff was a picture of her when she had her first baby in the hospital with Babe there holding the baby. To me, that’s just a great piece of memorabilia. Some people are like that’s no big deal, but I’m like, look at this! Two of the greatest women golfers ever!” Passing down these stories to new generations of athletes is an
important aspect of advancing women and girls in sports because they show where athletes and
the sports have come from and where they are going or could go.

**Ambivalent Discourse**

Penny acknowledged that there is still sexism in sports—and in golf in particular—but
also that there have been changes for women in golf. She has even noticed slight changes in
language: “I have a lot of old articles, especially from Women’s Harrisburg District, and when
you look back to 30 or 40 years ago when they’d have a picture of somebody, it would always be
‘Mrs. So-and-So.’ Now it doesn’t. It says her full name. It’s interesting. It’s changing. Things are
moving.” These examples show that in some ways Penny’s actions and language reproduce the
dominant attitude towards women in sport, yet many of them also show a progression; therefore,
Penny overall uses an ambivalent discourse that see-saws between the dominant discourse and a
resistance discourse. This shows that her discourse reflects the changes occurring in her sport.

**Alternative Narratives**

Penny did not reproduce the dominant sports narrative that winning is the best and only
or major goal of sports and competition. Instead, she created an alternative narrative of engaging
in a community of athletes and emphasized the enjoyment of competition, but did not use the
performing at the highest-level alternative narrative. She also displayed a humbleness about her
golf career and accomplishments.

**Engaging in a Community of Athletes.** Like the other participants, Penny discusses her
role in her sport’s community, which includes encouraging new and novice players and meeting
and competing against professional and accomplished players. She said, “99% of the people you meet, probably in all sports but I’m speaking about golf in particular, are really nice people.” Not only does she enjoy being a golfer within the local golf community, but she has also served on the local women’s golf boards in various capacities including as president, and she actively organizes events and recruits women to participate. In reflection on this, she says, “I just want them to play. The PA Women’s State Golf Association, that’s competitive golf. But then I also do these little friendly matches with clubs in the area. We’ll get 10 or 12 from Carlisle and then 10 or 12 from Harrisburg, which is competitive but not really. We compete for a little trophy my daughter made. There’s no money or anything. It’s just camaraderie, getting them to meet people, introducing them to competition. I don’t call that competition, but they call it competition because we add up the scores and compete against the other team, but it’s mostly for bragging rights. We have fun at those. Those are fun.”

She acknowledges she has become a respected member of the golf community and she uses that respect to engage women golfers at all levels, but she had to build up to that reputation and to being a golf community leader. A friend of Penny’s, who was the president of the Women’s Harrisburg District before Penny became president, told her, “when you’re at a golf tournament, be a little more outgoing” because, Penny said, “everyone knows who I am at those golf tournaments and I need to make them feel welcome. She said I could do a lot of good in golf because people know who I am. She said do some encouraging, some mentoring. I never really thought about it that way before. But I have thought about it and I try now. I try to do those things.”
**Friendly Competition.** Friendly Competition is not one of Carless and Douglas’s (2012) alternative narratives, but it is one I’ve seen among the participants of this study. It is this balance between competition and having fun. As Penny explains it, “It’s a combination [of competition and fun]. People would think I was really serious because I was pretty good. I’d say I play golf because I have fun. I enjoy the competition. I would go to the state championship and play with [an athlete] who was inducted into the Golf Hall of Fame. I played with her. Then I’d also go play with my children and my grandchildren. That’s one thing about golf. I went to a tournament one time, a fundraiser for one of my niece’s field hockey teams, and I played with three people who hardly ever play golf. It was hysterical though! I wouldn’t want to do that all the time. I like the competition, too, but I wouldn’t want to do that all the time either. I like the variety.” She has noticed that other women golfers enjoy playing golf, but do not enjoy—or at least do not actively pursue—competition.

But for Penny, the competition is part of the enjoyment and her motivation for continuing to play and to play well. For example, she reflects again on the friendly competition between her and her friend: “We would fight it out all the time at the club championship. And we would fight it out at the district championship. I bet there were 10 to 12 years where the two of us were in the finals. It was pretty much split down the middle. But it was fun. It made you, kind of, have to have your best game.” Although competition motivates her to play well, she did not use the alternative narrative of performing at her own highest level. She emphasized within her story and during her reflection on it that she doesn’t like to practice and was never interested in “going pro.” She wanted to keep golf a combination of competition, fun, and socialization.
**Humble Attitude.** Despite being a very accomplished local and state golfer, Penny—like Lynn and Macy—had a humble attitude towards her sports career and sports success. She acknowledged that she is a strong player and a leader in the golf community, but simultaneously remains modest about it. For example, Penny disclosed that when I contacted her to ask her to be a participant in this study, her first thought was, “No, I’m not going to do that, I don’t have anything interesting to say. My daughter said, Mom! You’ve been around golf a long time. You have a lot of stories.” And her first reflection upon reading the stories she shared with me, she said she “hit a lot of different topics” but seemed surprised and uncertain about sharing them. “I don’t usually talk that much,” she said. I will explore this narrative theme more thoroughly in chapter 8.

**Conclusions and My Learning and Identity Development**

What interested me most about Penny’s story was how she works towards equality for women in sports, yet also calls her sport a “man’s game.” For example, she was happy about combining the men and women’s state organizations because it will provide more opportunities for women, yet it will also provide fewer leadership opportunities for women on the board of the combined organization; however, she said that representation was fair. Also, she was pleased that the country clubs have made changes to be more inclusive for women yet men still dominate the early tee times and weekend tournaments. Penny’s story—and the language she used to tell it—represent this struggle that happens within sports when people strive to create equal opportunities for men and women. Reading and reflecting on her story made it apparent to me that at a local and amateur level—in addition to the professional level—there is still plenty of room for women to progress in sports.
One aspect of her golf career that Penny emphasized was that family comes first and puts golf into perspective. Events like having to take her infant daughters to the hospital allowed her to realize that golf is “only a tournament.” When listening to Penny’s story, it is clear that golf is a very crucial element in her life and it is probably more than “just a tournament;” however, when juxtaposed with her family’s health and well-being, it becomes less important. This allowed me to reflect on my attitude towards my swimming career when I was a child and young adult versus my attitude as an adult and master’s swimmer.

When I was 13 years old, my goal was to break two minutes in the 200-yard freestyle. Every time I swam the event—even at non-championship meets when I was not rested or training for a personal record—I would swim my hardest and expect to see 1:59 on the scoreboard after my race. And each time I didn’t see the number I wanted, I got upset. At one unimportant meet, I won the 200 free by several body lengths, which is a lot in a race that short, but I didn’t meet my sub-two-minute goal. I got out of the water bawling because I hadn’t met it. My dad said he thought I injured myself. In fact, he said he wanted to tell the other parents and swimmers that I injured myself because there is no other reason why someone who won by that much should be upset about the race. He said it was poor sportsmanship. So then I was embarrassed.

This wasn’t the first or last time I cried because of a swim race. The year before, I cried when I missed winning the YMCA Pennsylvania State Championship meet in the 200 free by two hundredths of a second, not even swimming my fastest time of the season. I cried when I didn’t swim my goal time in the 500 free at the Mid-Penn Championships my freshman in high school. I cried when I was unfairly cut from the 4x100 free relay in college at the championship meet of the season, even though I was consistently one of the top four fastest 100 freestylers on
the team all year. I remember not being able to sleep the night before our 12 Days of Christmas workout for my club team when I was in middle school because I was so nervous that I wouldn’t be able to complete the workout.

Swimming so often stressed me out because I put so much pressure and so many expectations on myself. And, yes, I spent most of my free time swimming and training to be fast, so yes, I wanted to be the best I could be all the time. I thought all of the time and effort wasn’t worth it if I wasn’t the best all the time, if I didn’t get my goal times every race. I don’t want to say that swimming was “just a sport” because it was more than that to me. It was a lifestyle. But when it came down to it, it wasn’t worth that stress. I wasn’t earning money from it, I didn’t need to be fast to get into a good college, I never planned to be a professional swimmer. There was no reason to cry or to lose sleep over a race or a workout. Yet I cried and lost sleep many times because of swimming.

Being an adult with adult responsibilities like holding down a job, keeping a roof over my head, staying fed, and taking care of my dog does put swimming into perspective. I still consider swimming to be more than “just” a sport—it’s still a lifestyle to me. It is important because it is something I do that fulfills me and helps me to find joy and meaning in my life. But I no longer feel the same pressure. Swimming is what I do to relieve the pressure from the other parts of my life. I enjoy swimming and competing and the people I meet through the sport. I also enjoy winning and swimming fast times. My current swimming goal—as a woman in her mid-30s—is to, again, break two minutes in the 200 freestyle, even though my lifetime best—from my late teen years—is several seconds below two minutes. It feels a little strange that I am going after the same goal I had as a 13-year-old—nearly two-thirds of my life ago. But now, instead of feeling pressure to perform, I can laugh about it. I want to reach that goal, and I’m working hard
to accomplish it, but it’s no longer worth the tears and lack of sleep. So, hearing Penny say that family puts golf into perspective allowed me to reflect on how my adult responsibilities put swimming into perspective for me, too, and this perspective allows me to enjoy swimming much more than I used to.
PART THREE

CHAPTER 8

IMPLICATIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

The purpose of this study was to gather and analyze the discourse of the stories, images, and artifacts that sportswomen used to narrate their athletic careers, bodies, and lives. With narrative adult learning and poststructural feminist theoretical lenses, I explored their stories with narrative autoethnography and feminist critical discourse analysis and then encouraged them to reflect on their stories in a way that affected learning/identity formation and will possibly facilitate social change. Through this collaborative writing process, I hoped to elicit a series of sports stories that are free of sexist language and images, and portray the athletes as they want to be portrayed. Such narratives, I believe, will and inspire future generations of athletes.

My study addresses the following research questions:

1. In what ways do participants assimilate and/or subvert dominant discourses when describing their athletic careers, bodies, and lives?

2. What do participants learn about their athletic identities when they are educated about sexist discourse and then critically examine the discourse they use to discuss their athletic careers, bodies, and lives?

In the previous chapters, I shared four athletes’ stories, their reflections on their stories, an analysis on their discourse, and my reflections on their stories. In this conclusion, I summarize the themes of findings from the study and then provide implications for theory and practice as they relate to the research questions. Next, I discuss the study’s limitations and propose ideas for
future areas of research related to sportswomen’s narratives, identity, and discourse. After that, I conclude with a reflection on my own sports career and what I learned from this study.

**Summary of Themes of Findings**

This section contains a summary of the study’s themes of findings related to the discourse participants used when discussing their athletic careers, lives, and bodies. The four athlete participants only moderately assimilated and/or subverted the dominant discourse—according to Bruce’s (2016) rules of representation—or neither assimilated nor subverted it. All participants used alternative narratives (Carless & Douglas, 2012), which neither reproduced the dominant discourse nor deliberately subverted it. The alternative narrative most common among the participants was engaging in a community of athletes. In addition, most athletes used a humble discourse, which was not mentioned in any of the current literature on sportswomen.

**Assimilation and Subversion of the Dominant Discourse**

The four athletes in this study rarely reproduce the dominant, sexist discourse often heard and seen in traditional sports media. Lynn, Kara, and Penny all mentioned playing with the boys when they were younger and Kara and Penny discussed playing with and against men as adults; but in none of these instances did they reproduce a dominant discourse by comparing themselves to the boys or the men; they played with boys and men, and that was how they became interested in sports and strengthened their competitive edge.

Penny briefly assimilated the dominant discourse when she called sports, and golf in particular, a man’s game, but she equally used a subversive discourse to show the changes occurring in the sport, particularly the ones she is helping to facilitate at a local level. Because of
this, I concluded that Penny’s story—and the ambivalent language she used to tell it—shows that there is progress towards equality in sports, but some inequalities still exist. Her discourse reflects this shortcoming of equality in sports.

Macy and Kara do not use a subversive discourse when talking about women and sports, though they do subvert the discourse in terms of age and sports, which was somewhat outside the scope of this study. Both women spoke about the effects of aging on themselves and other sportswomen and both acknowledged that athletic performance tends to decrease with age; however, Macy had some of her best races in her 60s, Kara is aiming to advance to a higher level of competition in her 50s, and both women are advocates of people of all ages continuing to train for and compete in their sports.

**Alternative Discourses**

Although participants infrequently used the dominant discourse when telling their stories—and therefore had little need to edit or change pieces of their story when reflecting on them—each participant learned something different about her athletic identity through the process of telling and reflecting on her story. Despite the variations among their responses, the main theme of their reflections is how they fit into their athletic communities.

I mentioned earlier that when Lynn reflected on her story, I suspected that the rules of representation (Bruce, 2016) might not apply to amateur athletes who are not often depicted in the mainstream sports media. Lynn disagreed with this, citing numerous amateur triathletes on Instagram who post sexual photos to grab their audience’s attention and get more likes. Although Lynn, at the time, was preparing to be a brand ambassador for a well-known sports nutrition
product and would need to use social media to support the brand, she said that she would not post sexual photos.

Macy, on the other hand, did not, at first, remember any instances of sexism in her experiences as a runner, though with deeper reflection and more time to think, she did cite a few examples when race directors treated women runners differently than male runners, like when the race director called the women “little ladies,” thus mimicking infantilizing language that posits women and women’s accomplishments as lesser than men’s. In addition to this, Macy reflected on how she learned about running and how to be a better runner, which she concluded she learned by reading books about technique and narrative accounts of other runners.

Upon reading her narrative, Kara said what most stood out to her was how she is continuing her goal to stay active and involved in tennis as she gets older. She reflects on how she will continue to try to improve in her sport, but also how she will become involved in the tennis community in other ways, like by joining the Adult Tennis Community to help grow the sport for women in Central Pennsylvania and meet new athletes. She sees tennis as a constant in her life, but foresees her role evolving over time.

Penny’s reflection reinforces the idea that her golf career and legacy are important and worth sharing with future generations of women golfers even though she originally did not think she would have anything to contribute to this study about women athletes. She shared stories about other women golfers who laid the foundation for the sport and emphasized how important it is to share those stories to current and future generations of women golfers. She also reflected on her role as a mentor and leader within the local golf community all while being very humble about her accomplishments.
Humble Discourse

Three of the four participants discussed their athletic careers and lives with a noticeably humble discourse, which was not an observation presented in any previous research studies on athletes’ narratives. This humble discourse or attitude can appear as a lack of self-confidence in their abilities as athletes; however, I suspect that they are humble and modest about their accomplishments because they are amateur athletes, not professional or elite athletes. As much fun and success as they have had in their sports careers, they are not competing to earn a living, and although they may be competing—and winning—against some of the best athletes in their age groups in the state and nation, they are not competing against the most elite athletes on a world stage. Because of this, they may feel like their accomplishments as amateur athletes are inferior, perhaps unimportant or not worth discussion. In fact, each participant made comments about not being the best in her age group, not making money, and/or not being a professional athlete, including Kara when she said, “We’re not making money, not making a living at this.” And Kara was the only one of the four participants who did not use a noticeably humble or self-deprecating discourse.

To an extent, I relate to this humble discourse, or at least the reason for it. I do not lack confidence in my swimming ability—in fact, it is probably the area in my life in which I feel most confident—and I do not use a particularly humble discourse to discuss my swimming career; yet, I sometimes feel embarrassed when talking about my accomplishments because although I had the 7th fastest time in the nation in my age group in the 200-yard freestyle in the 2017-2018 Master Swimming season, my time was not quite as fast as my best times when I was 12 years old. So, although I am proud of my adult swimming accomplishments, I also feel embarrassed by them, like I am still chasing an old dream and still not achieving it.
In addition to humble discourse, each participant seemed hesitant and/or uncomfortable discussing her body when answering the question, “How would you describe your athletic body?” Macy, for example, described her body as underpowered even though she also recognized that her “fitness level was pretty good.” Similarly, Penny’s response was that she “used to be very fit,” implying that she is not as fit now: “It’s not what it used to be.” Kara’s initial reaction was that she would “like to lose some weight” but was quick to acknowledge that she is “in good shape” and is “really very, very fast.” Likewise, Lynn commented that she is “a little pudgy some places” but also said, “I appreciate what my body can do for me, what I ask it to do.” Each participant acknowledged a positive aspect of what her body can do physically, but was also quick to point out her body’s physical and/or performance flaws due to her age and/or body size and shape. A focus on women’s bodies in the media—sports media or otherwise—undoubtedly has had an effect on the participants’ bodily self-perceptions. To clarify, although these participants had a humble discourse, I cannot extrapolate this finding to the broader sample of athletes; this may be an area worth exploring in future research.

**Themes of Findings Conclusion**

In summary, each participant used an alternative discourse which neither subverts not assimilates a dominant, sexist discourse; instead, it provides a discourse separate from a common sports discourse that winning is the ultimate goal of sports competition. In this case, the participants all learned about and/or reflected on their place within their sporting communities and how they can or are already sharing their experiences and expertise with other women in those communities. It is my hope for them that they continue to share their stories—free from the dominant discourse—to continue to inspire future generations of athletes.
Implications for Theory and Practice

Poststructural feminist theory and narrative adult learning theory worked in conjunction to inform this study. To review, poststructural feminist thought assumes that women can end women’s oppression by creating new identities through de/constructing their language and discourse. This means that if people—in this case, women—can change the language and discourse they use to describe themselves and other women, they can create new identities and thus possibly improve social institutions (St. Pierre, 2000; Weedon, 1997). Narrative adult learning theory similarly assumes that people form identities through telling personal narratives about who they are or who they are not and who they used to be (Rossiter, 2007). It also assumes that people make meaning through telling, retelling, and reflecting on personal stories they tell and hear (McAdams & McLean, 2013; Rossiter & Clark, 2010, 2007). These theories informed this study because I conducted it with the understanding that by telling, retelling, and reflecting on their stories, the athlete participants could form, strengthen, and/or create their athletic identities and, in doing so, could potentially improve the conditions and treatment of themselves and other sportswomen. Below, I discuss the implications of the research questions in terms of these theories. In doing so, I first highlight issues related to the second question on learning and identity, and then I discuss specific implications for theory, and end this section for specific implications for practice, both in formal and nonformal education settings.

Learning and Athletic Identity

The section above titled “Summary of Themes and Findings” summarizes the answer to this study’s first research question, which is “In what ways do participants assimilate and/or
subvert dominant discourses when describing their athletic careers, bodies, and lives?” In that section, I discussed the ways the participants’ discourse rarely subverted or assimilated the dominant, sexist sports discourse and how, instead, the participants used alternative discourses that showed their engagement in their sports community while mostly maintaining a humble attitude towards their accomplishments. These themes arose during the participants’ first interview, which was their first opportunity of the study to tell their sports stories.

The answer to this study’s second research question—“What do participants learn about their athletic identities when they are educated about sexist discourse and then critically examine the discourse they use to discuss their athletic careers, bodies, and lives?”—mainly comes from each participant’s second interview. During the second interview, I asked participants to read the story they created from their initial interview, to discuss sexist discourse and instances of sexism in their sports, and then to reflect on their story in light of that discussion and consider making changes to their story if needed. Through this narrative process of telling, retelling, and reflecting, participants de/constructed their identities as sportswomen (McAdams & McLean, 2013; Rossiter & Clark, 2010, 2007; St. Pierre, 2000; Weedon, 1997). All participants agreed that their original story well-represented them and none of the participants chose to edit anything within their story even after I provided an overview of an analysis of their discourse. Neither I nor they believed they had used a dominant, sexist discourse that needed to be edited. Although no one chose to retell their story, they all reflected on the stories they told, which is where their learning and identity development took place in this study.

Both theories that inform this study assume a person’s identity is fluid and can change when learning occurs and that learning can take place when someone tells, retells, and/or reflects on a personal narrative (McAdams & McLean, 2013; English, 2010; St. Pierre, 2000; Weedon,
Grace and Gouthro (2000) argued that from a poststructural feminist lens, individual women’s different subjectivities, histories, identities, identifications, and ways of knowing should be valued. Similarly, according to Flannery (2002), there are common themes of identity formation among women but “women differ in how they experience those common themes because their unlearnings and recreations are unique and singular in that personal histories, cultures, and meanings differ” (p. 55). This appeared to be true among the participants in this study, too, who largely identified as athletes in terms of how they fit into their sporting communities; as they get older, they get injured, and/or their goals change, their roles within their sporting communities change, too. The language they used to discuss these changes showed their fluidity of identity (St. Pierre, 2000; Rossiter, 2007). Each athlete participant differed within the theme of sporting communities because not only were they participants in different sports, they differed in athletic histories, age, and goals. What this shows, then, is that no sportswoman—or any person—needs to be locked into a single or essential identity. Even when women have something in common—like being sportswomen—it does not mean that their experiences are the same and it does not mean that they are locked into only one identity. Identity as a fixed category can be dangerous for groups and individuals because it doesn’t account for differences among people, so they can be more easily slotted into unequal binaries and hierarchies (St. Pierre, 2000).

This study has shown that women’s identities change as their experiences change, and those experiences, and thus their identities, are depicted through their personal narratives. As stated previously, the women chose not to edit any of the particular language they used from their original interview, but the process of answering questions, reading their story, and reflecting on it provided evidence of identity de/construction. This mimics Rossiter’s (2007) idea
that “learning stimulates and reflects changes in identity. Furthermore, it implies a view of the
person as multidimensional and dynamic, rather than static and unitary” (p. 91); thus, this study
provides evidence that the learning that takes place when people narrate and reflect on their
stories can change their identities.

**Implications for Theory**

Below I consider the implications for theory relating to poststructural feminist theory and
then in relation to narrative adult learning from a narrative autoethnography perspective.

**Poststructural feminist theory and identity.** The fluidity of identity is important in this
study for multiple reasons. In Freysinger and Flannery’s (1992) study of women and leisure, they
found that women wanted to know who they were apart from their socially prescribed roles.
Leisure time—such as the time to play sports—provided opportunities to discover themselves
and create new identities, which in turn changed the culture (Schultz, 2014). This relates to
Rossiter’s (2007) writing on “Possible Selves in Adult Education” when she discussed the
importance of letting go of old views of the self to embrace a new possible self. For example,
consider any individual athlete in this study, but I’ll use Macy as an example. She did not start
running until she was an adult, so in her childhood and young adulthood she did not consider
herself to be a runner or an athlete of any kind. It was not part of her identity. But then she had
the experience of running, which she enjoyed, and the experience allowed her to then develop an
identity as a runner. Without the fluidity of identity as dictated by various life experiences, Macy
would not have been able to identify as a runner, would not have made meaning from her
experiences as one, and her life would not have been enriched from that experience. In fact,
without identifying as a runner, she may not have continued to run at all.
That is an example of how a fluid identity can affect a person on an individual level, but the fluidity of identity is crucial in changing not just individual identities, but collective identities, too. For example, historically men competed in sports and women did not. Men could identify as athletes, but women did not. However, some women did start to compete in sports and these experiences helped to shift their self-perceptions from traditional roles as only wives, mothers, and feminine beings into identifying as athletes (Schultz, 2014). As Penny noted during her interview, many people today still consider sports a man’s domain; however, if more women identify as athletes and share stories that display their athletic identities, it may help to shift this perception of sportswomen being unequal to and lesser than sportsmen. Just because Penny described sports as a man’s domain, doesn’t mean that sports are essentially a man’s domain. Poststructuralist theory “troubles the idea that language mirrors the world” (St. Pierre, 2000, p. 481); instead, and what is shown in this study, is that language “helps to construct [things] and, by extension, the world as we know it. In other words, we word the world” (p. 483). If Penny and other athletes can use language that reflects sports as a woman’s domain, too, it can change this perception. As Weedon (1997) stated, “We need not take established meanings, values, and power relations for granted.” It is possible to deconstruct them, which people can do through narrative storytelling.

By changing identity—which one can do through gaining new learning/experiences and sharing them with others through narrative storytelling with equitable discourse—people can change perceptions and thus improve social conditions (Weedon, 1997). You can see this shift occur in different ways within each one of the participants’ stories. For example, Penny, at first, didn’t think she had anything useful to share about being a golfer. However, as she spoke about her experiences as a golfer, it was clear that her experiences were not only personally fulfilling,
but they assisted her in helping to recruit more local women golfers and strive for equality for local men and women golfers. She identified ways that sharing her experience as a golfer facilitated change within the local golf community. So not only are stories powerful for the storyteller, they are powerful for the audience, which is one of the assumptions of both poststructural feminist theory (Weedon, 1997) and narrative adult learning theory (Rossiter & Clark, 2010, 2017). Stories help individuals to de/construct their identities, shift perceptions, and expand the minds of audiences; therefore, stories have the power to create histories, build camaraderie, and facilitate social change.

**Implications for narrative adult learning theory.** This study also has implications for narrative learning theory, particularly from a narrative autoethnography perspective. One of the shortcomings of poststructural feminist theory is that although it discusses the importance of the fluidity of language and discourse on identity formation, it does not do much to discuss how identity formation occurs or what learning occurs from identity formation; therefore, I also use narrative adult learning theory to address these concepts.

Similarly to poststructural feminist theory is the idea that identities are fluid. Rossiter (2007), speaking from a narrative learning in adult education standpoint, wrote that a narrative understanding of identity is one in which “the self is understood as an unfolding story rather than as a static state” (p. 92). Similarly, McAdams & McLean (2013) writing from educational and psychological viewpoints define narrative identity as “a person’s internalized and evolving life story, integrating the reconstructed past and imagined future to provide life with some degree of unity and purpose” (p. 233). Each of this study’s participants displayed an “unfolding story” or “evolving life story” within her narrative. Kara, for example, discussed how she is simultaneously striving to break into the next highest level of competition while also planning
how she can stay involved in tennis when she is no longer able to play at that higher level. And in Lynn’s story, she started by discussing her background as a competitive swimmer and how she moved from that background into becoming an Ironman triathlete.

As noted in Chapter Two, Goodson and Gill (2011) used the Spiral Process of Narrative Learning to describe how adults use narrative to create meaning and de/construct their identities, and this is the process I used with my participants. First, I asked them to narrate their stories. Simultaneously, I listened and also provided pieces of my own story for them. Then we discussed their stories in context of the western sports culture, particularly within the dominant discourse of the culture, to help place their stories within that context. Next, I encouraged participants to reflect on their stories, which allowed them the opportunity to better understand them. Goodson and Gill (2011) wrote that this is the stage in which personal narrative can help learners break free from dominant, oppressive narratives. Rossiter and Clark (2007) cited this stage of interpretation as very empowering:

While we do not have control over many of the events or circumstances of our lives, we do have some choice as to how we interpret them. [...] This realization of choice in meaning making is one of the most valuable aspects of the narrative orientation in adult education because it opens up possibilities. Adult learners can choose to see things differently, to reinterpret the past. (p. 34)

The final stage of this spiral of learning is a transition point in which learners would examine their stories again and take their stories through each of those stages to de/construct new meanings and identities based on new experiences and/or reflections. This stage was not a part of the current study, though a longitudinal study of each athlete’s narrative would make an interesting study.
Implications for Practice

The study also offers several implications for practice. While the study was grounded in sportswomen’s narratives largely from a narrative learning perspective about their nonformal and informal learning experiences from coaches, mentors, and teammates, there are also implications for formal learning settings such as colleges and universities.

**Nonformal and informal learning.** This research contributes to the body of research on public pedagogy, which is a form of education and learning that occurs outside of formal schooling and includes sites such as popular culture and the media (Sandlin, O’Malley & Burdick, 2011), which are the sites I explored in this study. In light of this study’s findings, I conclude that there should be more stories about sportswomen told in their own words and that those stories should be shared with more athletes on local and/or global scales. Journalists, coaches, team captains, and other team leaders should encourage storytelling among athletes and educate themselves and other athletes about how to eliminate a sexist, dominant discourse from their narratives. Some media companies—like espnW—and nonprofit organizations—like Women’s Sports Foundation—do help to promote women’s competitive sports, though the stories are primarily about elite and/or professional athletes. In addition, Wolter (2012) found that espnW often slips into a dominant discourse when it covers nonsporting topics that have little or nothing to do with athleticism and uses direct references to physical/personality attributes of sportswomen. Wolter (2014) also argued that espnW is more of a money-making scheme for the Disney Corporation than it is a promotion of women in sports; therefore, traditional media outlets, even ones that cater to sportswomen, still have room for improvement to promote sportswomen in an equitable way. Coaches and team leaders will have to look for
other outlets to educate themselves about sports discourse, like blogs, social media, and other publications written by athletes.

Amateur athletes do not often get to share their stories on a global scale, but many share their experiences in local publications or through social media. Trail Sisters: Women’s Trail Running Community is an example of a website run by an amateur trail runner whose mission is “to increase women’s participation and opportunity in trail running through inspiration, education and empowerment” (Trail Sister, 2019). To reach this mission, the organization’s founder hosts an online journal and women’s discussion panels, awards adventure grants, hosts trail running retreats for women, and more. She encourages women to join the community to “experience the camaraderie of an awesome group of empowered women making change” (Trail Sisters, 2019). This is similar in concept to the Skirtboarder’s website I described in Chapter Two that MacKay and Dellaire (2014) described as a community of women who have a critical awareness of their societal and cultural struggles as women skateboarders. It is also a trend I hope continues and spreads to other amateur women’s sports. Other researchers (Antunovic & Linden, 2015; Hardin, Zhong & Corrigan, 2012; Wolter, 2012) have also made a call for more women’s sports social media and other publications that consciously subvert the dominant discourse for both professional and amateur athletes. In the future, I hope to see more communities like Trail Sisters that compile and share sportswomen’s stories, and that a wider audience has access to and reads those stories.

**Formal learning.** Although this study focuses on informal and nonformal learning through popular culture, media, and other forms of storytelling, the study does reveal implications for formal learning. Writing from a poststructural feminist perspective, Grace and Gouthro (2000) argued that the connection between informal learning and living to formal
learning is valuable, and the facilitation of this connection creates opportunities for inclusive and transformative educational experiences. What that means in this case is that formal educators—such as teachers and university professors in addition to the coaches, team leaders, and journalists mentioned previously—should recognize the importance of informal learning and living and help students make those connections. One way is to provide students with opportunities to tell or write their personal narratives and reflect on them (Rossiter & Clark, 2010, 2007; Goodson & Gill, 2010).

In her discussion about classroom dialogue, Kauffman (2010) made suggestions for how educators can facilitate discussions—including the use of personal stories—using a deconstruction of their own discourse and language “to illustrate a critical practice without creating any ripple effect” (p. 472). What she means is that educators—which could include coaches, journalists, and team leaders—should pay attention to the language and speech patterns they use to speak to adult learners because the way they approach language “may plant seeds of critical reflection and give the students tools to deconstruct their own and each other’s dialogue” (p. 472). Like the narrative adult learning theorists (Rossiter & Clark, 2010, 2007; Goodson & Gill, 2010), Kauffmann (2010) also noted the limitations of telling personal stories, describing them as incomplete unless coupled with more analysis or reflection to make meaning from those stories. Formal learning institutions like universities and other schools can provide those opportunities for adult learners to reflect on their stories, and the educators’ own discourse could provide positive examples for how to do that.
Limitations and Suggestions for Further Research

Among this study’s strengths are its contributions to the fields of adult education, feminist, gender, and identity studies, and sports studies because the study provides evidence of learning and identity formation that takes place when participants tell and reflect on their personal narratives. One of the study’s findings is that sharing sports stories creates history, builds camaraderie, and could possibly facilitate social change, so by sharing these participants’ stories, this study contributes to these goals. Although this was an academic study grounded in literature and adult education theories, it does have some limitations such as my interviewing style, the homogeneity of the study’s participants, and the adult education theories I chose to inform the study.

As mentioned previously, this study’s participants rarely reproduced the dominant discourse while telling stories about their athletic careers, bodies, and lives. Likewise, they also rarely deliberately subverted it or discussed instances of inequality within their stories or reflections unless prompted. This lack of reproduction and lack of deliberate subversion may be due to my interviewing style. For example, I asked general, open-ended questions about their sports careers, did not myself use dominant discourse or deliberately subvert it, and did not ask specific questions related to sex and gender. An interesting study for the future would be to examine the discourse that journalists and/or coaches use when interviewing or meeting with athletes to determine if their discourse directly affects the athletes’ discourse.

I also chose a narrow spectrum of women athletes for this study: only those who currently play individual sports in Central Pennsylvania. Future studies could include athletes from a wider range of individual sports as well as team sports like soccer or basketball. The studies could also include women from different geographical locations, which would also likely
create a greater diversity of women in terms of race and class. This study included a homogenous group of middle-class, suburban, white women. With a greater diversity of participants, one could seek comparisons of learning and identity development among individual vs. team athletes and amateur vs. professional athletes in addition to any similarities and differences among athletes with different races, socioeconomic status, and/or geographic location.

Although some researchers like Somerville (2004) have analyzed the body using poststructural feminism, this theory and narrative adult learning do not fully analyze corporeal experiences. I asked each of the participants to describe her athletic body, but regardless of what they said and how they said it, an analysis of embodied experiences is limited when examined from this study’s theoretical frameworks because, as Somerville (2004) wrote, the main philosophical concepts of poststructural thought (language, discourse, power, knowledge, truth, and the subject) absent the body as a possible site of analysis. There is, however, another emerging adult learning theory called embodied learning which may shed more light on the analysis of sportswomen’s experiences with their bodies and how and what they learn and/or how they de/construct their identities from their embodied experiences. Embodied learning, according to Merriam, Caffarella, and Baumgartner (2007) is a type of experiential learning—just as narrative adult learning is a type of experiential learning—because people learn from their experiences with their bodies. More recently, a study using embodied learning theory has shown how getting in touch with their embodied experiences has helped educators better assist their students: “As [educators] developed a more acute internal perception of themselves, they learned to equate it with the way they perform their professional actions in the world” (Lachance, Emond & Vinit, 2019, p. 36). So although embodied learning is closely related to this study’s theoretical frameworks, it is a bit outside the scope of this study. Future studies may want to examine
sportswomen’s embodied experience from an embodied learning lens to further explore the identity formation and learning of sportswomen.

An exploration of the data from this study from a transformative learning perspective would be an interesting one. According to the theory, transformative learning occurs when “an alternative perspective calls into question a previously held, perhaps uncritically assimilated, perspective” (Taylor & Cranton, 2012). For example, Rossiter (2007) wrote about the importance of letting go of old self-identities to be able to embrace new self-identities, and I related this to the idea of women forming new identities as athletes. These shifts in identity could relate to the process of transformative learning. Some approaches to transformative learning are constructivist and focus on storytelling and reflection, and could have been a useful tool in analyzing this study’s data. Again, exploring this data from a transformative learning theory lens was outside the scope of the study, but could be a beneficial addition for adult education research.

**Conclusion and Final Reflections**

This study contributes to the fields of adult education, feminist, gender, and identity studies, and sports studies because it provides evidence of learning and identity formation that takes place when sportswomen tell and reflect on their personal narratives. One of the findings of this study is that sharing sports stories created history, built camaraderie, and could possibly facilitate social change, so by sharing these participants’ stories, this study contributed to those goals. Although this study’s participants are sportswomen, similar studies may find similar evidence of learning and identity development among other demographics of people when they
are encouraged to tell and reflect on their stories using equitable discourse, thus facilitating social change in other ways.

On a personal note, and because this study is a narrative autoethnography, which means that this study is about my learning and identity development, too, I conclude with a reflection on my own athletic career and what I learned from speaking with each athlete. Even when the athlete’s sport and experiences differed from my own, I still related to and learned from each participant. After speaking with Lynn, I reflected on how much I appreciate my body for what it does for me and considered how to better take care of and fuel my body for sports performance. From Macy I considered how sports participation is a privilege and my sporting career and performance isn’t always just about me. Kara’s story allowed me to reflect on how it can be lonely when an athlete progresses to higher competition; it also encouraged me to keep training and competing, even as I get older. Penny’s story helped me to see that sports are more than just something I do—they are a lifestyle—yet family and community put the pressure of sports performance into perspective. Each athlete’s story excited me because I could compare and contrast my athletic stories with theirs, learn about myself as an athlete and as a woman, and know that it is OK to be who I am and who I want to be. I am neither a “man” nor a “beast.” There are plenty of women who compete in sports, and by sharing our stories, we are breaking out of the neat little boxes created by outdated expectations for girls and women.

In turning the analysis on myself and the personal narratives that I wove within each participant’s chapter, I recognized that I, like the participants, do not use a dominant, sexist discourse to describe my sports experiences. I occasionally deliberately subvert the discourse—like when I discuss the privilege of being an athlete—but even then, I don’t subvert it in terms of gender. What most interests me about my narratives is how they allowed me to notice a change
in my narrative from when I was a child/adolescent swimmer to an adult swimmer. When I was younger, I followed a dominant narrative in which competing, winning, and getting the right qualifying times was the most important aspect of the sport. As an adult, my narrative changed to show that competing at my own highest level and joining a community of like-minded individuals became more important. Had I not been able to change this narrative—thus still stuck on believing that winning was the most important aspect of swimming—I would not be able to enjoy and finding meaning in competitive swimming as an adult. I have spoken with many former swimmers and teammates who are still stuck on their childhood narratives of competing to be the best, and that narrative limits them from continuing sports participation and competition as adults. If they could hear more stories from athletes who have experienced similar situations, they may be more likely to rejoin the swimming community.

While completing this study, I gained an even greater resolve to share women’s sports stories with others to inspire more women to participate in and take leadership roles in sports. It is my hope that the readers of these stories feel as inspired by these athletes as I have, that more women continue to train for and compete in sports, that sportswomen continue to share their stories with each other to build history and camaraderie, and that they continue to reflect on their learning and identity development through lifelong sports participation.
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