

# **The ease of hard work: distinction, boundary work, and embodied neoliberalism**

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## **ABSTRACT:**

In contemporary Western countries, thin, fit, and “healthy” bodies operate as important markers of social status. This paper draws together Foucauldian and Bourdieusian literatures on this topic to investigate how “embodied neoliberalism” (internalized individualism and self-responsibility) intersects with performances of “embodied cultural capital” (high-status markers used to create social distinction). I ask *how* people with culturally valued thin, fit bodies employ performances of “hard work” to enact social status and produce exclusion in an interactional setting. Through an ethnographic case study of upper-middle class white “Fun Runners” in Boulder, Colorado, I argue that runners engage in two simultaneous (and seemingly paradoxical) forms of boundary work: First, they perform hard work, discipline, and deservingness – drawing boundaries against those without thin and fit bodies; Second, they perform ease, fun, and authenticity – drawing boundaries against those who lack the habitus to make these activities appear easy and natural. I contend that the resulting performance of the “ease of hard work” makes the status of thin, fit bodies appear both earned and natural, a doubly effective means of producing exclusion and legitimizing status.

**Keywords:** embodiment, fitness, cultural capital, healthism, governmentality, inequality

In contemporary Western countries, thin, fit, and “healthy” bodies operate as important markers of social status. These bodies are widely viewed as representative of hard work, deservingness, and moral superiority (Lupton 1995; Dworkin and Wachs 2009; Saguy and Gruys 2010; LeBesco 2011), whereas people with larger bodies are framed as lazy, immoral, and even deserving of stigmatization (Puhl and Heuer 2009; Saguy 2013). However, body size and shape are not distributed at random; in the U.S., poorer people and people of color are more likely to be classified as overweight than upper and middle class white people (Wang and Beydoun 2007). Understanding status performances related to thin, fit bodies is thus important for addressing the broader sociological question of how people in privileged positions claim to “deserve” their status despite evidence of structural inequalities.

Recent Foucauldian literature has tied the current emphasis on bodily discipline to the broader political and economic context of neoliberalism – the favoring of free markets, deregulation, and self-responsibility (Guthman and DuPuis 2006; Guthman 2011; LeBesco 2011; Cairns and Johnston 2015). The idea of “embodied neoliberalism” suggests that people have internalized the disposition of individual responsibility (Lupton 1995; Rose 1999; Dean 2010; Hilgers 2013). Thus, while neoliberal *policies* exacerbate social, political, economic, and health inequalities (Harvey 2005; Navarro 2007; Brown and Baker 2012; Hilgers 2013), neoliberal *discourses* explain inequality as a result of differences in self-discipline. Despite focusing on bodies and inequality, scholarship on embodied neoliberalism has remained somewhat isolated from related literatures, including research on “body work,” the Protestant ethic, and meritocracy in Western culture (Featherstone 1991; Gimlin 2002; Bordo 2003; Dworkin and Wachs 2009; Shilling 2012), and literature built on Bourdieu’s notion of “embodied cultural capital” – bodily forms or behaviors that operate as high-status markers and produce cultural and social exclusion

(Lamont and Lareau 1988). Scholars have extensively interrogated the rise of the “thin and toned” bodily ideal as a hegemonic form of embodied cultural capital (Gimlin 2002; Maguire 2007; Dworkin and Wachs 2009; Mears 2011; Hutson 2016).

This paper draws together insights from Foucauldian and Bourdieusian literatures to investigate more explicitly how “embodied neoliberalism” intersects with performances of “embodied cultural capital.” Few scholars have assessed precisely *how* people with culturally valued thin, fit bodies employ performances of “hard work” to enact social status and produce exclusion in interactional settings. This is an important question, given that scholars of cultural capital have argued that upper-middle class Americans increasingly signify status not by what they own or do, but by *how* they do things (Peterson and Kern 1996; Holt 1997; Lizardo 2008; Khan 2011; Currid-Halkett 2017). Bourdieusian scholarship highlights the importance of making status distinctions appear natural, whereas neoliberal scholarship suggests that status must now appear earned. Thus, although it is clear that a thin, fit body operates as cultural capital, producing status and exclusion may depend on *how* the body is achieved and performed.

To address this question, I use an ethnographic case study of white, upper-middle class, mostly thin runners at a “Fun Run” in Boulder, Colorado, asking how they perform status distinctions and exclusions related to “hard work.” Boulder is widely touted as the “fittest” and “thinnest” city in the country (Holohan 2014), and thus offers the heightened analytical clarity of an “extreme case” (Zussman 2004) where thin, fit bodies are a particularly important form of cultural capital. Further, the setting of a casual run offers a chance to explore embodied practices, “micro-politics” (Lamont and Lareau 1988), and interactional boundary work (Tavory 2010) in a mixed setting of friends, acquaintances, and strangers. I find that many runners engage in two simultaneous forms of boundary work to produce status distinctions – mostly against non-present

others. As expected, they perform the “hard work” and the merit of their thin and fit bodies, drawing a boundary against people who are lazy, unfit, and thus undeserving. However, many runners *also* engage in performances of “ease,” naturalness, and fun – drawing a boundary against people who appear to try too hard. I argue that runners create a double exclusion through this paradoxical “ease of hard work”: they subtly exclude people with larger bodies, as well as people who don’t perform thin bodies with the proper *habitus* (culturally-learned embodied practice and tastes).

My findings don’t undermine the concept of embodied neoliberalism, but they do complicate its embodied performance and the idea of “earning” one’s status through hard work alone. I build on the current revival of Bourdieu’s concept of ease – wherein elites and the broader “aspirational class” (Currid-Halkett 2017) downplay conspicuous effort and instead value authenticity (Khan 2011; Johnston and Baumann 2014; Cairns and Johnston 2015; Currid-Halkett 2017). Despite the rising role of neoliberal discourse and individualized responsibility for bodily discipline, distinction and boundary work can continue to rely on habitus-based performances of naturalness and ease (which are rooted in class and race backgrounds). The “ease of hard work” exacerbates the justification of inequalities – it makes it seem as if some people “naturally” have what it takes, rendering invisible the political and economic inequalities that shape peoples’ bodies *as well as* the cultural differences in habitus that shape peoples’ comportment and desires.

### **INEQUALITY, STATUS, AND THE “THIN, FIT” BODY**

There is an enormous literature on bodies and social class. In this paper, I focus on two strands: recent Foucauldian work on the idea of “self-disciplined” neoliberal bodies, and Bourdieusian scholarship on embodied cultural capital. First, I review the inequalities associated with body

size and shape in Western cultures, where being white and of higher socio-economic status is significantly associated with lower body weight, although mediated by different intersections of age, race, gender, and cultural versus economic status (Wang and Beydoun 2007). Sports consumption and participation are also highly classed and raced (Bourdieu 1978; Bourdieu 1984). These trends are particularly concerning because social and cultural exclusion are often based on bodily form: larger-bodied individuals face substantial stigma and discrimination that have actually *increased* in the first decade of the 2000s (Andreyeva et al. 2008). Critical scholars have argued that the current “obesity crisis” is a moral panic that demonizes certain “dangerous” classes and groups (read: mostly poor people and people of color), who are seen as lazy and irresponsible, while reifying the moral and “deserving” status of thin people (read: mostly wealthier white people) (Dworkin and Wachs 2009; LeBesco 2011; Lupton 1995; Metzl and Kirkland 2010; Saguy 2013; Bobrow-Strain 2012).

***Embodied neoliberalism: individualism and hard work***

Much ink has been spilled on the concept of neoliberalism, and scholars have debated the utility of a concept that has been widely applied to free-market policies, institutions, and even modes of thought (Peck and Tickell 2002; Hilgers 2013). While recognizing these notes of caution, neoliberalism may still offer a useful tool for analyzing homologies across disparate fields that are increasingly shaped by the “tyranny of the market” (Bourdieu 1998). We can draw parallels between structural adjustment policies and the logic of fitness regimes, wherein countries and individuals must “tighten their belts,” “trim the fat,” and become efficient and disciplined in order to succeed in the global economy (Price 2000).

Whereas economic aspects of neoliberalism have largely been studied from Marxist perspectives, the idea of thin, disciplined bodies “embodying” neoliberalism emerges from

Foucauldian literature on governmentality (Barnett et al. 2008). Governmentality – often summarized as “the conduct of conduct” (Dean 2010) – refers to *the way* that an entity exercises power over peoples’ bodies and conduct, whether states governing a population, or people governing themselves (Foucault 1991; Rose 1999). Viewing power as productive, Foucauldian approaches see neoliberal governmentality as producing new kinds of “subjectivities” (Rose 2001; Ong 2006; Dean 2010), where individuals come to govern themselves, taking individual responsibility for health and fitness as part of good, responsible, and deserving citizenship (Crawford 1980). Rather than making demands on the state or targeting a polluted environment, individuals seek health through personal consumption choices and self-discipline (Lupton 1995; Guthman and DuPuis 2006; Dworkin and Wachs 2009; LeBesco 2011; Ayo 2012; Brown and Baker 2012).

However, some scholars argue that the governmentality analytic problematically assumes a straightforward connection between political-economic systems and “cultural processes of self-formation and subjectivity” (Barnett et al. 2008). These scholars question the idea of a neoliberal program of rule, and whether or how this program translates into individual rationalities (Brenner 1994; Barnett et al. 2008). Cairns and Johnston refer to this as the “Foucault machine” of governmentality studies, which “insert social agent and then identify disciplined subjects who uniformly take up their individual responsibilities” (2015:156). I thus sidestep a governmentality approach, yet draw on this literature’s key insight: that there is a dominant cultural discourse that emphasizes individual responsibility, “choice,” and freedom in the marketplace – and that this discourse contributes to producing and justifying inequalities. We can thus ask how people of various intersectional identities negotiate or employ this discourse. Whereas Cairns and Johnston (2015) and Talukdar and Linders (2013) examine neoliberal discourses in relation to femininity,

I want to explore neoliberal discourse in relation to practices of social distinction. For this, I turn to Bourdieusian cultural sociology.

***Embodied cultural capital: habitus and ease***

Bourdieu (1984; Bourdieu 1986; Bourdieu 1990) argued that socially learned lifestyle practices and embodied tastes (*habitus*) invisibly reproduce within- and between-class distinctions. He introduced the concepts of cultural, social, and economic “capitals,” field-specific and sometimes “convertible” forms of power and prestige that represent accumulated time (Bourdieu 1990). In a seminal review, Lamont and Lareau (1988) operationalized cultural capital to mean “widely shared, high-status cultural signals (attitudes, preferences, knowledge, behavior, and goods and credentials) used for social and cultural exclusion.” These signals – often socially learned and engrained as part of one’s habitus – include college degrees, tastes in food, art, music, and knowing how to navigate institutions. Cultural capital can also be embodied<sup>1</sup> through particular bodily forms, engaging in certain sports, or ways of using the body (Bourdieu 1978; Bourdieu 1984; Desmond 1993; Stempel 2005). Increasingly, the “thin and toned” body has become the hegemonic form of cultural capital (Maguire 2007; Dworkin and Wachs 2009; Hutson 2016), particularly for women (Bordo 2003; Dworkin and Wachs 2009; Cairns and Johnston 2015).

Broader literature on cultural capital suggests that distinction in America is changing: high status people are increasingly open and “omnivorous” in their tastes (Peterson and Kern 1996), they increasingly appeal to the values of hard work and discipline to justify their success (Khan 2011; Johnston and Baumann 2010) and they increasingly produce distinction through the *embodiment* of subtle manners, practices, attitudes, or behaviors instead of goods or objects

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<sup>1</sup> Bourdieu used the term “embodied cultural capital” (1986) to encompass “bodily capital” (1984) and “physical capital” (1978). While others use physical capital (Maguire 2007; Shilling 2012) or bodily capital (Mears and Finlay 2005; Hutson 2013), I use the term embodied cultural capital to remind us of embodied behavior, not just bodily form.

(Peterson and Kern 1996; Holt 1997; Lizardo 2008; Khan 2011). The rising status of the thin and fit body also seems to match this picture of changing cultural capital, particularly because it is seen as an earned status. Yet, the importance of embodied practices suggests that the status of a thin, fit body may require more than *possessing* the right body. It may seem as though having a thin body or performing hard work would be sufficient, but this contradicts one of Bourdieu's (1984) foundational arguments: that status and inequalities are often legitimized by making them seem *natural*.

Bourdieu argued that habitus – which is shaped by class and race position – becomes so deeply embedded in bodily dispositions and unconscious preferences that it appears biological. This naturalizes class reproduction and inequality. Part of the embodied performance of distinction as natural is what Bourdieu (1984) called “ease” – a sense of self-assurance, casualness, and indifference. Ease is the unconscious *embodiment* of a privileged habitus in a form that renders the social roots of that habitus invisible, and serves to identify and exclude people who lack this comportment. Related literatures – particularly on gender, health, and the body – have also tied the performance of “naturalness” and “authenticity” to high status positions, as noted in Gimlin's (2002) study of upper-class women's preference for “natural” hair and beauty, and the foodie movement's valorization of “natural” food tastes (Guthman 2011; Johnston and Baumann 2014).

There thus appears to be a contradiction in contemporary distinction practices between naturalizing status and making status look like the result of hard work. Khan's (2011) study of elite adolescents at an East Coast boarding school finds that students appeal to discourses of hard work while engaging in performances of ease and natural talent. Johnston and Baumann (2010) find that foodies engage in omnivorous behavior, but create covert forms of distinction through

displays of “authenticity.” Cairns and Johnston (2015) argue that Canadian women dieters increasingly use narratives of balance rather than deprivation to discuss their food practices. These cases suggest that although high status people do appeal to discourses of hard work, they also engage in displays of naturalized taste that mark and reproduce their class and race background.

Similarly, this paper shows that runners who successfully activate the status of a thin, fit body are those who perform the paradoxical “ease of hard work” – the simultaneous performance of hard work and embodied ease. My case is unique in revealing precisely *how* actors produce exclusion and boundaries in an interactional setting through embodied practices and relational discourse. I argue that they achieve this paradoxical performance by drawing boundaries in juxtaposition to multiple others (Lamont and Molnár 2002), returning to Bourdieu’s conception of “multiple axes of distinction.” The performance of “hard work” draws boundaries against those further in social space, while “ease” draws boundaries against the aspirational “try-hards” closer in social space, who, like the *nouveau riche*, lack the proper habitus.

## **METHODS, DATA, AND SETTING**

This paper is based on extended participation observation – or what Wacquant (2004) calls “observant participation” – which allows for the observation of unspoken meanings, taken-for-granted behaviors, and interactions that occur within a natural social setting (Emerson 2001). This method is particularly useful for understanding the embodied and interactional dimensions of cultural capital (Holt 1997). I opted against interviews because I wasn’t seeking to understand how people view or justify their behavior – I was simply interested in their behavior. I collected data at a weekly running group in Boulder, Colorado nearly weekly for eight months (and then occasionally for another four months), where I identified myself to people as a sociologist

researching fitness culture in Boulder. I socialized before the run, ran with participants, and conversed casually, sometimes asking people more specific questions about why they run. I wrote field notes immediately after the run. For the sake of clarity and flow in reproducing conversations, I present some data in this paper in ‘single’ quotations, to signal that these quotes are not word-for-word but approximations. Although this is a limitation of my data, this method allowed me to access interactional moments that would have been inaccessible via other methods. Finally, I analyzed my data through an inductive and iterative process of coding and memoing. My themes and findings emerged inductively from this process. All names and identifying details have been changed.

### ***The setting***

Boulder, Colorado is an affluent, liberal, predominantly white, outdoors-oriented city (Hickcox 2012). The median price for homes is \$750,000, median family income is \$93,000, 70% of residents have a college education, and the city is 89% white (Boulder Economic Council 2016). The city also has the lowest rate of obesity in the nation, earning it the moniker of “America’s fittest city” (Holohan 2014). Boulder thus offers what Zussman (2004) calls an “extreme” case of upper-middle class, thin bodies. Extreme cases offer an opportunity to see a process in a heightened context, which is useful for studying the subtle and embodied aspects of the cultural capital of thin bodies. I chose a field site, however, that is not particularly “extreme”: a “Fun Run” where a varied group of friends, acquaintances, and strangers come to run and socialize. Although running appears “free” and easy accessible, Stempel (2005) finds that Americans with high socio-economic status are *twelve times more likely* to engage in running than people with low socio-economic status. The Fun Run thus offers a site where – in a broader cultural setting

that values thin, fit bodies – people with generally high socio-economic status engage in the micro-politics of distinction.

The Fun Run<sup>2</sup> is a free weekly evening run, open to the public, and hosted by a local running store. Before the run, runners socialize in the parking lot, listening to loud pop music. They then run either the short run (three miles) or the long run (five miles), at a wide range of running speeds. As runners trickle back into the parking lot, there is free beer and pizza, and runners socialize as they eat and wait for a raffle of free shoes and running gear. The group size ranges from 50 to 200 runners, with a small core of “regulars” who come nearly every week, a much larger number who come sporadically, and frequent newcomers. Ages range from early twenties to sixties, with the majority of participants in their mid-twenties to forties. Many people come to meet friends, but others come alone. Nearly all of the participants are white, and based on my conversations, appear to have relatively high socio-economic status and quite high educational levels and cultural capital. Some Fun Runners are current or recent PhD students (many in engineering), while other runners work in “corporate,” computer engineering, finance, health fields, and dentistry. Most of the Fun Runners do not self-identify as serious runners, but engage recreationally in a variety of other outdoor sports such as cycling and rock climbing. The group is generally evenly split between men and women. Importantly, the Fun Run isn’t a boy’s club; there are broad similarities between men and women in most aspects of Fun Run culture. While I recognize the extremely important gendered dimensions of body work and bodily ideals, my goal in this paper is to show that both men and women navigate the “ease of hard work.”<sup>3</sup> Finally, nearly all of the participants have thin and what would generally be considered “fit”

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<sup>2</sup> The irony and theoretical richness of the title of the “Fun Run” was not apparent to me when I chose the site, but emerged through my analysis.

<sup>3</sup> That said, future research could usefully break down more nuanced gendered dimensions.

bodies. This is likely not true for all recreational running groups, but it is the case for this group in Boulder.

### ***Embodied Positionality***

Most positionality literature focuses on race, class, and gender. Ellingson (2006) argues that, in addition, researchers' bodily form (size, shape, and capability) also plays a role in positionality.

My own body – its form, its “performance,” and my own embodied identity claims – affected my data and analysis (Wacquant 2004; Cherry et al. 2011). Early on, I considered myself an “outsider” because I don't identify as a runner. I quickly realized that as a thin, athletic woman in my thirties, I had an “insider” social position at the Fun Run. I shared athletic and outdoor interests with most Fun Runners, which gave me rapport-building common ground. My ability to run with the front group was achieved *via* my own bodily performance, but I could also choose to run at the far back of the group. This shaped the range of participants I could interact with.

Further, my body's performance shaped conversations and clued me in to certain behaviors. If I ran slower but was not breathing hard, people encouraged me to “run ahead,” and occasionally refused to talk to me, saying they were out of breath. If I ran faster and was breathing hard, I found myself encouraging others to run ahead. These embodied interactions were valuable sources of data as I began to think about the performative line between “ease” and “trying hard.”

Of course, insider status brings its own drawbacks and tensions (Emerson 2001). I was unable to experience the exclusion that other people might feel in this group. A colleague with a larger, darker skinned body pointed out to me that even the thought of attending the Fun Run made her cringe, because of the social exclusion and unease she predicted she would feel. Furthermore, my social closeness made it harder to be critical. In analyzing my data, it took me a long time to recognize the theme of “ease,” since *I too* participate in these embodied performances and

boundary work. This recognition helped me think about that the behaviors I describe in my findings as largely a result of habitus: a deeply engrained “feel of the game” in which preferences and behaviors tend to line up with one’s social upbringing – often at a subconscious level. This is important to emphasize, as I do not see peoples’ behaviors as intentionally exclusive, as consciously motivated by aspirations for status, or as merely performative. This paper is not about peoples’ motivations; it is about how external behaviors draw boundaries and produce exclusions, even if unintentional.

### **PERFORMING HARD WORK**

The first section of my findings highlights the performances of hard work and bodily discipline at the Fun Run. This is the first form of boundary work that runners engage in, and is consistent with Foucauldian literature. This section sets the stage to contrast the performance of hard work with the simultaneous performance of ease, which I explore in the following sections. Fletcher (2014) argues that upper-middle class white people carry their habitus with them into the recreational realm, performing through their sports and leisure activities the embodied – and specifically upper-middle class – habitus of risk-taking, hard work, delayed gratification, pushing through pain, and the continual quest for self-improvement (Ehrenreich 1989; Lamont 1992; Wheaton 2004). Perhaps because of this habitus, Fun Runners push themselves to run, cross-train, suffer, set goals, and monitor themselves to produce the thin, fit bodies that serve as cultural capital both within and outside the social field of the Fun Run. In the process, they draw boundaries against people who do not share this habitus.

#### ***Boundary work against lazy people***

The Fun Run, despite its moniker, is a competitive field where “being the best” is a sought-after status. People wear T-shirts and drive cars with local slogans such as “Sea Level is for Sissies,”

“Live Bolder Run Boulder,” “Fitter Faster Boulder,” and “Bolder Attitude Boulder Altitude.”

These statements make comparisons, and indicate how identity is often based on exclusionary claims of who we are *not* (Lamont and Fournier 1992). These slogans draw boundaries around an “in-group” (hard-working, risk-taking, fit people) and an “out-group” (lazy, out-of-shape, sissies), whether this boundary work is intentional or not. The valuation of competition and working towards goals is evident beyond T-shirt slogans. Famous athletes come to give advice on how to train harder and “perform one’s best.” Many Fun Runners race recreationally, and a frequent conversation starter is, “Are you training for any races?” Many runners mention that the city feels more competitive than other places. One woman in her late thirties and a newcomer to Boulder, told me that ‘People in Boulder are more interested in being the best.’

In addition to valuing elite athletic performance, Fun Runners value being “hardcore.” People often talk about runs, races, and activities as really “dangerous” or “hardcore.” I understand the word to describe activities that are physically demanding, perhaps dangerous, and that probably involve suffering. Fun Runners often tell stories that display these traits – and that subtly reference *others* who are not as hardcore. For example, Sara, a very thin woman in her early thirties, described to me an Ironman triathlon that she did as the ‘the coldest in the race’s history - a record number of people dropped out.’ She, however, swam until she came down with hypothermia and had to be rescued by paramedics. She said this proudly, as if to excuse herself for not finishing. Another runner in his mid thirties, Roger, explained to me why he loves 100-mile ultra-races: ‘You get to go to beautiful places that very few people go to – because you are human powered, you go really far into places, not just three miles up the trail. There’s a certain masochistic aspect to it... suffering. It gets you really raw, at your rawest, every atom of your body hurting, saying to stop, and you have to keep pushing through it.’ In their stories, both Sara

and Roger told narratives about embodying risk-taking, hard work, delayed gratification, and pushing through pain. They also made subtle comparisons: Sara noted that most other people dropped out. Roger pointed out that he goes where few people go, not *just* three miles up the trail. While likely unintentional, these comparisons draw an implicit boundary against other people who aren't as hardcore. Although this boundary work is more subtle than the explicit bumper-sticker claims – it leaves the “other” implied – it nonetheless produces a form of exclusivity.

### ***Performing hard work***

Fun Runners – despite the appeal to “fun” that I explore later – often frame running in terms of suffering, hard work, discomfort, and boredom. Many runners complain during the run about how tired they are, how hot it is, how cold it is, how their knees hurt, or that they wish it was over already. This embodied and interactional complaining about the shared discomfort of running – whether rooted in biological discomfort or not – seems to be part of the “Fun Run” performance of being willing to work through pain and suffering.

Further, runners constantly berate themselves about *needing* to run more. Both men and women frequently make “I should” comments along the lines of: “I’ve been unmotivated,” “I should be working out more,” “I need to be doing more,” “I should start cross-training,” “I need to work on my upper-body strength,” or, “I should sign up for a race to motivate myself.” This “motivation talk” is similar to Gimlin’s (2002) finding that fitness participants admonish themselves when they stop exercising as frequently. It is also similar to Khan’s (2011) finding of academic “work talk” – constant chatter about large workloads. This motivation talk seems to indicate (and *perform*) a middle-upper class habitus of continual self-surveillance aimed at a never-finished project of self-improvement.

Runners also engage in self-surveillance through fitness tracking; nearly all Fun Runners use watches, and most use running-specific, (expensive), GPS-enabled watches that track their mile “splits,” pace, and heart rate. Many say monitoring keeps them motivated and improves their times. One young woman told me that she didn’t have as much motivation to run fast without her watch. Another told me that she used the watch to see how far she had gone, to motivate her to keep going. Whether fitness tracking actually shapes people’s physical practices, people clearly use it to *perform* their running – to themselves and others – as a motivated, disciplined, goal-oriented practice. Motivation talk and self-surveillance are key pieces of performing the “hard work” of running, and consistent with Foucauldian literature on disciplined bodies and techniques of self-surveillance.

### ***Claiming deservingness***

Performing the hard work of running enables runners to claim the “merit” of their embodied cultural capital. At times, this sense of having earned one’s status emerges in open discourses of deservingness. Runners often frame supposedly “unhealthy” practices (such as beer and pizza) as justifiable as long as one engages in the proper physical activity to deserve those rewards. The very structure of the Fun Run, with beer and pizza awaiting the runners, embodies this logic. A dentist at the Fun Run told me that he sees more cavities among fit people in Boulder. ‘They eat more sugary foods because they think they deserve it,’ he said. Although the dentist was critiquing this logic, he was also identifying the widespread presence of a sense of deservingness.

I also observed conversations about deserving to eat certain foods (or more foods) after exercise. One evening, I was chatting after the run with Steve, a balding and talkative runner. I left to get another piece of pizza, and when I came back, he glanced at my pizza and said, ‘Ooh, sly. But you deserve it. You work hard, you bike everywhere.’ He said that when he runs, he

uses the same logic: ‘Every mile is another beer. Except when you get up to twelve miles, then that’s a problem.’ He laughed. Another time, I was standing after the run with a group of runners in their early twenties. A young man went back for a slice of pizza, and came back triumphant: ‘They gave me a second piece!’ A young woman commented, ‘Well, yeah, look at you, of course they did,’ gesturing to his thin body. She gestured to her own (flat) stomach to indicate that she didn’t see herself as thin, ‘Me, they look at me and say, um, no,’ and laughed. Despite her effort to frame her comment as a joke, she still indicated that certain people deserve to eat more than others, based on whether or not they have achieved a thin, fit body. Fun Runners appear to justify their participation in “unhealthy” foods because they have engaged in the necessary disciplinary practices. Yet, this logic of “deserving it” implies that others (those with larger or out-of-shape bodies) perhaps do not deserve it.

### **THE FINE LINE OF TRYING TOO HARD**

Simultaneous to the behaviors described above, many of *the very same* runners also express disdain for gym-goers, reject dieting, describe themselves as “not very serious,” and make fun of Boulder stereotypes. I contend that these runners are negotiating the component of distinction known as ease – a key strategy for differentiating against groups closer in social space. As Bourdieu (1984: 249) argues, “those who are held to be distinguished have the privilege of not worrying about their distinction,” whereas those who “overdo” it, who reveal their pretension, their effort, or their insecurities, are devalued “by the very intention of distinction.” Runners thus draw a second boundary against people who try *too* hard, which can happen through physical exertion without an accompanying thin, fit body (too much effort), or a too-noticeable effort to impress people (pretension and insecurity).

#### ***Embodying ease***

Khan (2011: 112) argues that the trick of ease is that “ease requires hard, systematic work, yet the result should be ‘natural’ and effortless.” At the Fun Run, I often had the distinct feeling that people don’t want to look like they are working or breathing too hard while running. Most people keep a conversational pace and rarely run hard enough to look like they are struggling – if someone begins to breathe hard, they frequently tell their running companions to “run ahead.” More than once, I sensed anger and embarrassment when I tried to run and chat with runners who were breathing heavily while I was not. Breathing easily while running indicates that you are already in shape and that you run frequently. It tells people that you have already invested the time and hard work into disciplining and training your body, which is Bourdieu’s (1986) exact definition of “embodied” cultural capital. Ironically, the result of this hard work is an embodied ease, where running no longer looks like (or *feels* like) hard work: it becomes effortless, enjoyable, and natural.

Thin and fit runners often accompany embodied ease with declarations and performances of not trying hard, while still achieving a thin, fit body or impressive physical achievements. Many runners openly claim before the run that “they are going to take it easy today,” and then proceed to run quite fast and with little indication of effort. Thin women in particular embody ease by overtly displaying a lack of concern about eating pizza and drinking beer after the run. This produces an embodied performance that even without having to watch their calories, they are fit and thin. For example, one evening, while a group of runners ate pizza, Leanne, a thin young woman, was the only person not eating. Although no one was discussing pizza, Leanne volunteered an explanation: ‘I had pizza for lunch, otherwise I would eat pizza now.’ She added, ‘I mean, I love pizza, it’s one of my favorite foods, but twice in one day, you know?’ She laughed, ‘and this pizza is really good too!’ Leanne’s unprompted ravings about pizza seemed to

be justifying behavior that might look like she was trying to watch her weight. Another time, I was offered a second slice of pizza with Molly, a thin young woman. Molly turned to me and said, semi-jokingly, ‘We must look too skinny.’ As we ate our pizza, she told me that she was glad she didn’t have to worry about what she eats. ‘I actually lose weight if I stop exercising,’ she said. In these performances, women such as Leanne and Molly not only displayed thin, fit bodies; they displayed the *ease* of doing so. Thin women can afford to not “try too hard” because they already have the status of the thin body.

### ***Trying too hard***

In contrast, Amy is a Fun Runner who performs all the components of “hard work” but goes too far, and thus misses the achievement of ease. Amy is a young woman with a high brown ponytail and a welcoming smile, slightly heavier than the average at the Fun Run. She comes frequently and records all of her activity on her GPS-enabled fitness-tracking watch. She trains and competes in races, and orients a great deal of her life around improving her athletic performance. Nonetheless, Amy fails to embody ease. For example, one evening we ran the short loop together with another runner, Kyle (a PhD student). Amy was breathing much harder than the other runners around us and repeatedly asked us to slow down. She carried a water bottle, wore a “nutrition belt” (a fanny pack for snacks and water), and took energy gels during the run, something I never saw another runner do. When the three of us arrived back at the running store, Kyle and I stopped running at the street corner (which is the norm), but Amy continued to jog the remaining twenty feet to the tent, giving us a wave as if to say “I’m going to keep going, you guys catch me up.” She jogged ahead of us, and stopped her watch at the exact border of the tent. Kyle shot me a look.

Aside from Kyle's "look," a subtle cue of social disapproval, it is difficult to pinpoint how or why Amy tried too hard, and what the social sanctions were. This is the challenge of studying ease. As Holt (1997) argues, taste and habitus may produce exclusion through extremely subtle processes of attraction and distancing between people. While it is true that Amy did not appear to run frequently with other women her age, which could indicate this process of distancing, my feeling that Amy failed to achieve ease – and that this produced exclusion – is largely based on my own reactions as a relative insider of this social circle. I was surprised by the contrast between her self-presentation as a "serious" runner and her heavy breathing and slow pace. Her exaggerated "push to the finish" only accentuated that she was trying hard, yet she had not achieved the embodiment of a thin body and easy breathing. Later, Amy told me that she came from a working-class, rural background. She told me that people back home thought she was crazy for running long distances. It is possible, though only speculative, that because of her class background, Amy lacks the habitus that enables ease.<sup>4</sup> Also significant is that she makes running look physically hard and invests in all the symbols of a "serious" runner *without* achieving the thin, fit body or the casual attitude. This contrasts with the downplayed statements of the thin women runners: "I don't have to diet or pay attention to my weight" (I'm just skinny without trying), or "I'm going to take it easy today" (but I can still run really fast).

However, runners can have the right body and still "try too hard" and miss the performance of ease. There is a strong norm at the Fun Run to not look like you are *trying* to impress people. Amy recognizes this; in a conversation about how she uses her fitness tracking data, she mentioned, 'You wouldn't want to post it on Facebook.' She scrunched up her face, as if to say, *who would do that?* Steve, the balding and talkative middle-aged runner, also told me

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<sup>4</sup> There were not enough negative cases to explore why people failed to achieve the ease of hard work. Amy had a lower class background, while John made a high-income (though I did not ask about his class background). Their cases are primarily interesting in how they reveal the boundary work that the *other* runners engage in.

that he feels self-conscious posting fitness content on Facebook because he worries that other people will think he is showing off. He worries about this, he said, because he judges other people that way: he told me about John, another Fun Runner who posts photos of himself at the gym lifting weights, with his biceps prominently displayed. ‘That’s going too far,’ Steve commented, shaking his head. His implication seemed to be that John was too interested in impressing people.

John is my second case of a runner “trying too hard” and failing to achieve the ease of hard work. John is a conventionally attractive, muscular, high-income professional (which I deduced based on his profession and car) in his late-thirties who frequently runs with his shirt off despite cold weather. Unlike Amy, John possesses both a thin, fit body and high economic capital, but I contend that he fails to achieve the *ease* of doing so. One particularly cold and dark evening after the run, as my can of beer froze to my hand, John joined Eric, a middle-aged runner and me. ‘It must be cold, you’re wearing a shirt for once,’ commented Eric sarcastically. Eric’s acerbic comment indicated his feeling that John’s motivations for running shirtless were, in fact, unrelated to the weather. John’s behavior – posting on Facebook and running shirtless in cold weather – seems to be viewed poorly because it looks too much like he is trying to impress people with his body. In Bourdieusian terms, because John’s actions reveal that he is *trying* to achieve distinction, he actually fails to achieve that distinction. It is also significant that Eric and Steve felt a need to police John’s behavior and engage in boundary work – their comments served to frame themselves as *not* trying to impress people.

### **ACHIEVING THE EASE OF HARD WORK**

In contrast to John and Amy, Fun Runners who achieve the ease of hard work draw boundaries against those who try too hard: they display disinterest, they appeal to narratives of balance, and

they frame their own involvement in running as part of an authentic and fun outdoor lifestyle that has very little to do with trying to impress other people or achieve status. I am not arguing that runners have ulterior motives and cover these up. I think they (myself included) genuinely enjoy and desire this fun, outdoor lifestyle. What I'm trying to point out is that this genuine enjoyment is nonetheless contrasted to others who have different tastes and habitus – people who don't experience genuine enjoyment. Runners who achieve the “ease of hard work” obtain a thin, fit body *while having fun at it*. I propose that this performance/experience of authenticity – like that of hard work and discipline – is still linked to a white, upper-middle class habitus (Fletcher 2014). Scholars have argued that upper-middle class Americans tends to see themselves as independent of social influence; they believe they follow the authentic expression of their innate, distinct selves (Lamont 1992; Bellah et al. 2007; Khan 2013). In this logic, a thin, fit body should not be “hard work” in the sense of coercing oneself to comply with society's standards. It should be the by-product of one's natural desires to be healthy, to be active, to care for oneself. This corresponds with the governmentality literature's argument that “healthism” is a productive power, appearing as a choice and a desire rather than a compulsion (Cairns and Johnston 2015). In line with these arguments, I find that runners achieve the paradoxical ease of hard work through boundary-drawing performances of disinterest, balance, and a fun outdoor lifestyle.

***Disinterest: “I'm not really trying”***

Bourdieu argues that cultural elites gain a “supplementary profit of being seen (and seeing themselves) as perfectly disinterested” (1984, p. 86). One way that Fun Runners perform disinterest is through explicit comparison with groups of people who take things too seriously: extreme athletes and “fanatics.” One way of thinking about extreme athletes is that these people simply “outdo” everyone else; they are what the deviance literature calls “rate-busters,” and they

are sanctioned because they make everyone else look bad. However, I think this group serves as a chimera for drawing boundaries. No one at the Fun Run self-identified as a fanatic or as an extreme athlete, even in cases where their behavior matched up with what other people would call fanatic. By framing themselves *against* the fanatics, people can stake a claim of not trying too hard, thus producing a performance of disinterest.

Both men and women ubiquitously engage in pre-emptive justifications before the run to indicate that they will be intentionally running slow: “I’m going to take it easy today,” “I haven’t been training much,” “I have a hurt knee,” “I had a race this last weekend,” “I worked out hard this morning,” “I have a hard workout tomorrow.” That people feel compelled to explain why they won’t be running fast suggests that they do not want their performance to be judged as an indicator of their best effort. These accounts may serve for people to deflect judgment – which indicates they feel judged by their running speed. However, these accounts may also serve to downplay one’s effort; ironically, many of these runners still run quite fast – giving the impression that they can run even faster when they aren’t “taking it easy.”

Runners also emphasize that they try not to be drawn into competing. Following the run, men frequently said to me that they “got sucked into” competing and that, “the other guy(s) started it.” One middle-aged man told me that he was training for races but trying hard to not get competitive. Furthermore, both men and women frequently say that they just “compete with themselves” – they frame their involvement in running as motivated by goals of self-improvement. For example, Cara, a thin young graduate student, told me that she was going to run a race at sea level and was hoping she would be faster. She then laughed, saying she knew it was silly to get competitive; she mainly just competes with herself, she told me. Another evening I was chatting after the run in a small group with Helen, a woman in her early twenties who had

recently moved to Boulder. She made a comment about sometimes comparing herself to people in Boulder, and then laughed, ‘But it’s hopeless. Why even bother competing? The answer is just to drink beer and eat pizza!’ Everyone laughed. Yet, Helen had biked a 100-mile bike ride the previous weekend and was a nationally competitive ski racer. Both Helen and Cara were trying to frame themselves as “not trying to compete,” despite engaging in competitive activities.

The rejection of competition and a downplayed interest in bodily appearance is also noticeable in practices of fitness tracking. Amidst the widespread practices of fitness tracking at the Fun Run, performance-related forms of quantification (pace and time) are frequently discussed, while more appearance-related measures (calories and weight) are *not*. Not once did I hear anyone mention tracking calories or say that they were at the Fun Run to lose weight. Fitness tracking appears to allow Fun Runners to engage in self-discipline and surveillance while doing so in a “disinterested” way: their practice is motivated by personal performance goals rather than motivated by aesthetic norms or competing with others.

***Balance: “I’m not a fanatic”***

In general, by eating pizza and drinking beer, Fun Runners indicate that they are not health fanatics. Some Fun Runners draw explicit distinctions between fanatics – those who “try too hard” – and themselves. For example, the ultra-runner Roger told me that he follows a “paleo” diet, but emphasized that ‘I’m not a fanatic about it, like vegans. I take a much more balanced approach.’ After the run in the pizza line, I commented, ‘Oh right, you don’t eat pizza do you?’ Roger laughed and said, ‘Oh, I wish you didn’t know that, so I could just be normal, and no one would notice.’ In saying this, Roger recognized that his abstention from beer and pizza could be perceived (negatively) as a sign of going too far – the same way that he himself viewed vegans. Indeed, another Fun Runner told me he thought paleo dieters had “drunk the Koolaid,” indicating

that he himself was *not* a fanatic like the paleo dieters. Many Fun Runners indicated that they reject dieting, and choose a path of moderation.

This explicit distancing from fanatics is not exclusive to diet. The runners who emphasize that “they don’t too wrapped up in competition” are also drawing a boundary between themselves and those who *do* get too wrapped up in competition. The resulting narrative is a *narrative of balance* – which captures the simultaneous boundary work that Fun Runners engage in between hard work and ease. Pete’s story helps illustrate how runners engage in this narrative. When I met Pete, a tall and muscular man in his late thirties, he explained to me that his friends had “wimped out”: it was bike to work day that morning, and his friends were too tired from biking to work to come to the Fun Run. He scoffed – ‘Boulder’s not so big that it could be a long bike ride.’ In this exchange, Pete was performing the hard work of running, distancing himself from (lazy and “wimpy”) people who don’t work hard enough. Our conversation continued and I informed him that I was doing research on health and fitness culture in Boulder. He immediately said, ‘Oh, you must meet people who just get totally consumed by it!’ He said that he knew people that were so busy they could hardly fit in a date. ‘It’s like, work out, then go on a run, okay, I can fit you in for an hour here, and then I’ve got my lifting workout.’ He shook his head to indicate he saw this as crazy. ‘It’s all about balance,’ he added. Later, I learned that Pete hires private coaches and flies around the country to compete in ironman triathlons. Nonetheless, Pete recognizes the importance of the *narrative* of balance. He works to distance himself from “fanatics” who can’t find the sweet spot of ease between working hard but not working *too* hard.

***A fun outdoor lifestyle: “I’m not too serious”***

Finally, runners downplay their efforts by poking fun at themselves and situating their running as part of a fun and healthy outdoor lifestyle. This aspect of ease involves “the refusal to invest

oneself and take things seriously” (Bourdieu 1984: 34). As Fine and Corte (2017) have noted, the shared experience of fun can build group cohesiveness and create a shared narrative. Fun can also, as I note here, play a role in boundary construction. Again, my point is not that runners “fake” fun or that they display these attitudes merely for show or exclusionary effects. As a participant myself, I want to underline the real physical pleasures and shared sense of fun and community that outdoor running offers many Fun Runners. Nonetheless, these performances produce boundaries.

Fun Runners often use sarcasm and humor to make fun of – or at least poke fun at – the stereotypes of extreme healthism and extreme athleticism in Boulder. This comes out frequently in the expression “That’s *so* Boulder,” which targets the over-the-topness that is seen as stereotypical of Boulder. At the Fun Run, I heard the expression “That’s so Boulder” used to make fun of carrots as a topping on pizza, running in bad weather, vegan pizza, running a 50-kilometer trail race, Subarus with roof racks, and Patagonia “puffy” down jackets. Engaging in “That’s so Boulder” talk enables runners to subtly distance themselves by saying: “I’m not part of this,” or, perhaps more commonly: “I’m part of this, *but I don’t take it too seriously.*” The ability to present involvement in health, fitness, and sports activities as not very serious, even as partially tongue-in-cheek, downplays one’s efforts and investment.

In addition to making fun of Boulder’s over-the-topness, Fun Runners also engage in the affirmative practice of *having* fun – running as adventure, self-expression, and an authentic “outdoor” lifestyle. The very structure of the Fun Run is designed towards this end: the name, the loud pop music played before the run, the raffle and prizes, and running in costumes on Halloween. This attitude of silliness indicates that runners are there for self-expression and fun. Even suffering is framed as fun: runners use the term “Type 2 fun” to describe an experience that

is only fun after it is over. Type 2 fun is essentially suffering that makes for a great story and bragging rights once it is over (like getting caught on a mountain in bad weather). Seeing these experiences as “fun” indicates one’s authentic love and natural prowess for suffering – it wasn’t scary or dangerous or hard – it was “fun.” Talking about Type 2 fun thus illustrates one’s natural ability to enjoy suffering, and draws “hard work” into a narrative of ease.

In a similar vein, many runners express that they dislike “going to the gym.” Molly told me that ‘she doesn’t understand why people run on treadmills,’ and others said they like running because they get to ‘go to beautiful places outside of the concrete jungle.’ Many Fun Runners frame running in the context of an innate love for physical exertion in the outdoors – an embodied experience of joy. Motivation for exercise is thus rooted in desire and choice (a productive power) rather than a compulsion of what one *should* do (a coercive power), which corresponds with Foucauldian frames of governmentality. Fun Runners’ thin, fit bodies are thus a natural outcome of their innate love for being outside, being healthy, and simply “having fun.” This implicitly draws a boundary against people who must coerce themselves to work out, or who do so because of social pressures to shape their bodies. I am not arguing that this is a performance of covering up desires for social conformity; rather, it seems deeply rooted in the habitus. As with all expressions of habitus, its enactment appears and feels – to both self and others – as entirely natural. Yet because of this, possessing the cultural capital of a thin, fit body appears all the more legitimate because it doesn’t appear explicitly sought after. But, again, what kind of people “naturally” seek out the experience of “Type 2” fun? Mainly upper-middle class white people (Fletcher 2014).

## **DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION**

This paper has examined how runners with the cultural capital of thin, fit bodies activate the status of their bodies in interactional settings, and how they produce exclusion. I argue that upper-middle class white “Fun Runners” engage in a seemingly paradoxical performance of “hard work” and “ease” through embodied performances and multi-directional boundary work. First, they perform the hard work of running – producing the “merit” and deservingness of thin, fit bodies. They emphasize how “hardcore” and disciplined they are, drawing a distinction between themselves and people who are lazy, out of shape, or lack motivation (these others appear farther away in social space, such as the “sea level” sissies). However, many of these same runners also perform the ease and naturalness of running and maintaining a fit body, drawing a distinction between themselves and people who try too hard or for apparently inauthentic reasons (these people appear closer in social space – such as “fanatics” and those who try too hard such as John and Amy).

What does this case tell us about the intersection of embodied neoliberalism and embodied cultural capital? I did find evidence that people draw on and embody neoliberal ideals of hard work, discipline, and deservingness. Yet my findings complicate a straightforward translation of “hard work” into status. In this setting, status seemed to come from an un-self-consciously performed white, upper-middle class habitus, which engrains the values of hard work and discipline *alongside* the values of having fun and being authentic. I thus suggest that neoliberal discourses intersect with race- and class- based habitus – and that claiming distinction may still rely on more than simply claiming to “earn it.” Admittedly, this paper focused on a specific group of relatively homogenous upper-middle class white people. Future research could examine how other intersections of gender, race, class, and sexuality shape how people negotiate narratives of “hard work” and naturalized bodily performances, and how they may draw

boundaries against groups both near and far in social space. There are clear parallels here with the invisible performance of whiteness. Bonilla-Silva's (2006) work, for example, reveals how "color-blind racism" rests on a liberal ideology of merit and hard work that makes racial inequalities seem justified and natural – "just the way it is." We could also investigate how intersections of ease and hard work might appear in other settings such as academia or corporate workplaces.

This paper also inches forward a conversation between Foucauldian and Bourdieusian literatures on embodiment and inequality, taking us one step closer to a "carnal sociology" of embodied neoliberalism (Wacquant 2004; Hilgers 2013). For example, the productive powers of "choice" and "freedom" (Rose 1999) – as illustrated by people desiring health and finding suffering fun – may be an important component of distinction in the neoliberal era, like the upper-class "omnivores" who display status by engaging in a wide variety of cultural repertoires (Khan 2011). Yet Foucault and Bourdieu frame choice differently; whereas a Foucauldian/governmentality view would emphasize an internalized subjectivity, Bourdieusians would focus on habitus and embodiment. My data shed little light on this question, as I was focused on revealing interactional status performances, not on individual's interpretations. Future research could explore the intersection of subjectivity and habitus by drawing on recent work on embodied cognition (Winchester 2008; Pagis 2010) to examine how people experience, interpret, and embody various combinations of cultural narratives (like neoliberalism) – and how "choice" fits into this picture.

Finally, while complicating the performance of "embodied neoliberalism," this paper has revealed an even more troubling mechanism for rendering invisible the structural roots of inequality. In this study, status is not achieved by simply embodying self-discipline or by

shaming fat people; instead, status is achieved by embodying the *ease* of self-discipline. The position of “balance” that many runners strive for may appear less exclusionary than the ideal-typical exercisers of the healthism literature. However, they actually produce a double exclusion: they exclude not only those who do not achieve self-disciplined bodies, but also those who fail to achieve a disinterested affect and a “natural” performance of embodiment. The “ease of hard work” thus enables Fun Runners to fuse two (contradictory) cultural narratives of deservingness, both of which obscure class reproduction and social inequalities. Making status appear “earned” disguises the distinctly uneven playing field of American society, while making status look “natural” disguises the role of habitus and class reproduction. Thus, in performing the ease of hard work, Fun Runners are doubly effective at legitimizing and naturalizing the social status of their bodies.

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