

AN ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS OF

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Title: Get off the Couch and Move! A Rhetorical Analysis of *American Idle*.

Abstract approved:

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Mary Collins composed the award-winning book *American Idle* in 2009 after her recovery from an awful bicycle accident. This bicycle accident inspired Mary Collins to take a trip of discovery. Mary Collins visited historical locations to see changes in peoples' physical activity over time. Collins interviewed individuals whose professions varied from archaeology, brain surgery, fitness, non-profits, etc. These professionals provided additional experiences to the large narrative of sedentary living in the United States. Bitzer's Rhetorical Situation, Fisher's Narrative Paradigm and The Social Ecological Model acted as lenses to observe Mary Collins' personal research, narratives and interviews. These perspectives drew attention to some reasons why Americans often embrace a sedentary lifestyle. This paper supported how *American Idle* is a piece of rhetoric that incited a response from the audience. The narratives in *American Idle* satisfied Fisher's Narrative Paradigms' aspects of narrative fidelity and coherence.

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Get off the Couch and Move! A Rhetorical Analysis of *American Idle*

by
Melodee Cluster

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I understand that my thesis will become part of the permanent collection of Oregon State University libraries. My signature below authorizes release of my thesis to any reader upon request.

Melodee Cluster, Author

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Part I. Introduction

It is no surprise that North Americans are heavier on average than ever before and engage in large amounts of sedentary activity on a regular basis. While the exact average of hours adults spend in sedentary behavior is not entirely known, teenagers over 16 and adults typically spend at least 7 hours per day engaging in sedentary behaviors (Charles E. Matthews et al., 2008). Excessive amounts of sedentary behavior increases the risk of a plethora of health problems, including cardiovascular disease and cancer. Fortunately, support from family and peers may lead to individuals developing healthier living habits. Positive social support for physical activity such as attending an exercise class with a friend is one example of social support as an exercise enabler (Withall, Jago, & Fox, 2011). The Center for Disease Control recommends companies to offer incentives for employees choosing to engage in physical activity such as, additional time off, recognition, free promotional items and insurance discounts, among others (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2012). North Americans can benefit by reducing their levels of sedentary activities and incorporating more physical activity into their daily routines.

Sedentary living and its health effects receive little attention in the overall field of communication. This seldom discussed topic deserves more focus because there are many negative consequences to health from engaging in a sedentary lifestyle. For the purpose of this paper, sedentary behavior is defined as “a unique class of behaviors that involve being in a seated or reclined position and expending low levels of energy” (Maher, Doerksen, Elavsky, & Conroy, 2014, p. 167). Many

North Americans engage in high levels of television viewing, such as binge-watching Netflix, as well as other forms of media consumption, which contribute to sedentary behavior.

Obesity and declining health receive media attention; the effects of sedentary behavior trickle down to conversations held at dinner tables, physicians' offices and school board meetings. Yet, few articles in family communication and health communication directly discuss the relationship between interpersonal communication and exercise. Health communication scholars often discuss topics such as; uncertainty of family health history (Rauscher & Hesse, 2014), affectionate communication between spouses (Floyd & Riforgiate, 2008), issues of caregiving and elderly health; (Bevan, Rogers, Andrews, & Sparks, 2012; Majerovitz, Mollott, & Rudder, 2009), but little research focuses on exercise and fitness. Some communication scholars write about the importance of familial influences in individual's health and exercise behaviors (Baiocchi-Wagner & Talley, 2012) and the ways framing impacts decisions to engage in healthy exercise behavior (Siu, 2010).

Communicated attitudes about health can be part of social reality, just as conversations about other subjects influence social settings. Media events and platforms have attempted to foster conversation and learning about fitness and health. Millions of people regularly watch popular shows such as Dr. Oz ("The Emmy® Award-Winning 'The Dr. Oz Show' Reaches One Million Registrations For Dr. Oz's Transformation Nation," n.d.), hoping for answers to questions they may not ask their primary care physician; but often conversations prompted by these types of shows

often take place in the family setting. Television offers a vast array of shows through many different mediums besides cable, and there are many viewing possibilities.

Communication norms and patterns within the family may encourage or discourage these conversations from flourishing; nonetheless, media impacts perceptions of physical activity in various forms. Large amounts of media consumption beckon individuals to engage in more sedentary activity for long periods of time. One popular type of leisure time activity is watching television. Additional time spent sitting accumulates rapidly and a lack of physical exercise contributes to obesity. For adults, obesity is “defined as a BMI greater than or equal to 30” (Ogden, Carroll, Kit, & Flegal, 2014, p. 807). Of course, diet and exercise go hand-in-hand for obesity prevention. However, people may be attracted to the sedentary lifestyle because modern life facilitates a sedentary life. The actual amount of time spent sedentary is unknown, as there is not an easy way to measure all sedentary behavior (Matthews et al., 2008). Professions require long hours behind a computer, sitting at a desk. Individuals may sit for long periods of time in the morning and in the evening during their commutes to the office.

With these issues in mind, I will be conducting a rhetorical analysis of the narratives in Mary Collins' book, *American Idle*. While there are many books discussing sedentary activity, I chose *American Idle* as a focal point for my study because it is pleasant to read; it is a book that combines narrative with research to describe factors contributing to sedentary behavior in the greater backdrop of American culture. Mary Collins, a professor of creative writing at Central Connecticut State University, employs narratives to focus on issues of healthy

lifestyles in day-to-day living. Therefore, I will examine the narratives in *American Idle*, describing them in light of Bitzer's Rhetorical Situation, Fisher's Narrative Paradigm and the Ecological Model of Physical Activity.

As a wife, mother, and student of rhetorical criticism, I have been concerned with the cultural shift towards sedentary behavior. I am concerned about my family's health and the health of future generations. There are many fine books that discuss the negative effects of sedentary lifestyle, but as a rhetorical critic, I chose the award-winning book *American Idle* written by Mary Collins because it is packed with narratives that many people can relate to in their everyday lives.

The discussion proceeds in five more parts. Following this introduction, I provide a descriptive analysis of *American Idle*. I follow that with a contextual analysis. Then I discuss my critical perspective for analyzing *American Idle* as a rhetorical act. In Part Five I present my critical analysis. I subsequently end the discussion with concluding thoughts.

Part II. A Descriptive Analysis

In this section I describe *American Idle* as a rhetorical act. The descriptive analysis provides a foundation for the critical analysis. First, though, I want to reflect on a telephone conversation I had with the author of *American Idle*, Mary Collins.

An Interview with Mary Collins. On February 6th, 2017, I found Mary Collins' contact information and sent her an email seeking clarification on the number of books sold. I gave her a brief overview of what direction my thesis was taking with her book as my artifact. She responded two hours later, and told me I could call her. On February 7, 2017, I had the privilege of asking Mary Collins more questions

about the text during our phone conversation. Rarely does a rhetorical critic have the opportunity to ask the author who their intended audience was when they composed the work; Mary Collins had originally written *American Idle* to encourage the average person to incorporate unstructured exercise into their everyday routines. However, I learned that many health practitioners and public health policy makers picked up the book. Mary Collins mentioned during our conversation how she also intended the book for those in wellness programs and physical fitness programs to read the book, but they didn't like it, or see the book as something for them. Perhaps this is due to Mary Collins' insistence that structured exercise is not the sole panacea to our health crisis in the United States.

I told Mary Collins that I was doing a rhetorical analysis on the narrative she presented in the text, and I'm comparing that narrative to what I see in our culture. Collins mentioned to me that her perception of the narrative in U.S. culture is how the United States thinks we have solved our problems through organized sport and healthy food consumption, but obviously this isn't the case as the numbers of people plagued by health conditions relating to their sedentary living keeps climbing. Collins mentioned to me that it is important to take a step back and have a conversation about this overarching narrative, and to talk about why it is not the solution to the problem. She asked me to consider what the public narrative about exercise is compared to what the real story of how people fit exercise into their busy schedules. She mentioned a limitation to *American Idle* is that it did not focus as much as it could have on the barriers to everyday exercise. I had mentioned to her how I saw time as a

huge limitation to people engaging in exercise, especially for working class individuals. It was refreshing to get her perspective on these issues.

Even though Mary Collins had intended the book to be for those who were engaged in physical fitness, she mentioned that city planners snatched up copies of *American Idle*, and she sold thousands of books to these urban planners. Collins mentioned she felt this book intrigued city planners because they were interested in the positive health benefits people could receive by city planners improving the walkability of their cities. Finally, Mary Collins mentioned that her topic received attention from various talks and presentations she's given. She was a keynote speaker at a national center for bicycling and walking, and has worked with people in Yale to improve office spaces, encouraging people to engage in mobility in their everyday working lives. As a critic, it was great to get Mary Collins' perspective on her intended audience and the issues presented in her book and that exist all around us in our culture. The critic is to see the potential effect the message has on receivers (Andrews, 1990). In order to discover this effect, the critic must first understand the message, decide the point of the message and then see how people are moved through the message (Andrews, 1990). It was incredibly helpful having Collins' perspective (Collins, 2017).

Describing American Idle. Published in 2009, *American Idle* includes in its 168 pages many stories about different factors that influence the lack of physical activity in an American's life. Collins' drive to write *American Idle* was initiated by her bicycle accident and the long, painful recovery period (Collins, 2009). This experience catapulted Collins into a trip of discovery; a trip that began with observing

movement patterns of ancient peoples through archeology and ended with reflection on modern influences of sedentary behavior. *American Idle* was the grand prize nonfiction winner in the 2010 division of Indie Book Awards and earned an honorable mention by the American Society of Journalists and Authors in 2010 (“Books & Essays,” n.d.). Collins’ book has emerged at the center of the cultural discourse in the United States surrounding sedentary living.

Mary Collins’ journey of discovery began with the bicycle accident she couldn’t quite recall (Collins, 2009). She spent a great amount of time reflecting on her recovery process and the physical state of her body after her shift of athlete to average person (Collins, 2009). Collins wrote:

“I decided as I rebuilt my body I would also embark on a journey to see what could be done about the broken national body. I had read again and again that 65 percent of Americans are overweight or obese and engage in moderate activity less than three times a week. Record numbers of us suffer from heart disease, diabetes, and a host of other lifestyle-related problems. For the first time, the younger generation may live shorter, less vital lives than their parents, despite advances in medical care. Essentially, our culture has immobilized us as effectively as a shattered body part” (2009, p. xv).

The various narratives Mary Collins presents in her text offer relatable examples of various factors that lead to sedentary living and negative health effects associated with the lack of exercise. Collins intends these narratives to be persuasive as she urges positive change. A critical reader should focus on Collins’ persuasive efforts presented in the text (Andrews, 1990). Narrative criticism is a fitting tool for

observing Collins' work because Americans' sedentary lifestyles are heavily influenced by culture and environment; for instance, typical Americans spend the majority of their leisure time watching television ("American Time Use Survey," n.d.). Not only do individuals engage in sedentary behavior while watching television, but they are the "targets of intensive commercial marketing campaigns promoting soda, fast foods, and high-calorie snacks, along with passive leisure-time activities, including TV, movies, and video games" (Kumanyika & Brownson, 2007, p. 222). Many individuals have access to hundreds of shows, and television may seem like an appealing option after a long day of work. Cultural influences on sedentary behavior offer a competing discourse to the discourse of a healthy lifestyle. These examples demonstrate how social norms promote sedentary behavior.

Mary Collins implicitly encourages new social norms in *American Idle* and mentions,

"Studies show that something as simple as a bike path near a neighborhood can increase people's activity levels as much as 25 percent. But *fear* and *lack* are hard to get a handle on, slippery abstractions that require not just physical changes in the landscape but *emotional* and *mental* changes in individuals. I traveled to a conference in San Diego, California, which pulled together experts interested in precisely these more abstract issues that lie at the root of Americans' declining physical-activity levels" (2009, p. xxi).

As Collins mentions, a lot of the barriers preventing people from engaging in physical activity are somewhat abstract, because they are not limited to physical barriers such as no sidewalks in a neighborhood, or lack of time, but deeper, more

psychological barriers, such as belief in one's ability to achieve physical activity, and fear of not being able to achieve the level of physical activity one desires to achieve.

The social norms Collins implicitly recommends are to include sprinkling in physical activity into everyday life, and does not encourage people to limit physical activity to organized sessions at the local gym (Collins, 2009). Health campaigns, such as ones initiated by the Center for Disease Control always look for ways to have American audiences relate to their health promotion messages. Individuals with careers in health and health promotion and policy makers most likely will be receptive to the messages in *American Idle* because *American Idle* promotes practical daily movement for a healthy lifestyle. Hopefully this book does not only incite desire for action in the health professional or policy maker, but that typical individuals who are interested in living a more active healthy lifestyle pick up *American Idle* and see its relevance in current society.

The critic is to see the potential effect the message has on receivers (Andrews, 1990). In order to discover this effect, the critic must first understand the message, decide the point of the message and then see how people are moved through the message (Andrews, 1990). It was incredibly helpful having Collins' perspective (Collins, 2017).

Mary Collins emphasized the extent to which the cultural barriers to exercise are deeply rooted as she reflected on her own healing process after her accident. She realized that recovery from her horrific bicycle accident was a slow process, and she knew she would have to avoid certain activities such as jobs requiring lengthy periods of time sitting (Collins, 2009). She had mentally prepared herself for this, but she

didn't anticipate such ill feelings as a result of not being able to exercise during her recovery period (Collins, 2009). Collins personally noticed the consequence of her lack of mobility, and admitted she felt inferior (Collins, 2009).

Many people struggle with feelings of inadequacy, guilt, and other types of emotional stressors. Collins noted that a source of stress "often presses people to seek out unhealthy forms of relief, including, in my case, poorer eating and depression" (2009, p. 128). Once someone finds themselves in this cycle, it can be difficult to break out of it and change habits. Unfortunately, many people who are experiencing low moments, or depression do not have energy or motivation to exercise. But moving may be the best thing for those struggling with depression. For example, Collins noticed when she didn't take the time to exercise enough she almost felt smothered (2009). She mentioned much of her research concerning the positive impacts of exercise on the health of the brain revealed that many "scientists believe that depression is a form of hibernation, a deliberate attempt at no movement because regular movement means an active life; and if things aren't going well, you naturally want to withdraw into some sort of holding pattern (Collins, p. 131, 2009). Suddenly there is a cycle that begins with an accident or temporary lifestyle change, then when extra pounds start appearing and a person feels stuck in this rotation, they can become depressed. If someone's employer or lifestyle creates more barriers to living a healthy life, they may have a harder time breaking out of the cycle.

Mary Collins decided to investigate the effects of exercise on the brain. She interviewed Dr. Fred Gage at the Salk Institute located in California; Dr. Gage and

colleagues study mice, focusing on how physical exercise creates neurons in the brains of mice (Collins, 2009). Dr. Gage shared details about his recent findings,

“Normally a brain generates cells [neurons are just one type of cell in the brain] all the time but almost 50 percent of them die unless you engage in some complexity; if you do that, then a greater percentage of them survive. If you combine physical activity with engagement of complexity you get an increase of cells and an increase of their survival. So they work together” (Collins, 2009, p. 136).

For the average aging person this is great news, but Collins mentioned how this is fabulous news for those fighting the effects of brain degenerative diseases (2009). But people need to desire that exercise experience. Dr. Gage found when he performed the experiment that the mice who did not run on the treadmill willingly did not generate any new neurons (Collins, 2009). The struggle is to get people to choose to want an active lifestyle, and make exercise fun. Collins insists it will take time to shift a culture away from preferring a sedentary lifestyle.

Finally, Mary Collins addresses the importance of getting out in nature and away from our climate controlled lifestyle. The benefit to exercising outside is that it keeps people in tune with their environment; something that is all but lost in our modern jam packed lifestyles. Mary Collins interviewed Kevin Coyle, who managed a program called Green Hour through the National Wildlife Federation (Collins, 2009). Kevin insisted so many youth are always connected through technology but are hopelessly disconnected from their natural world, and have virtually no stamina when they do go outside to play; this provided Kevin motivation to start a green hour

program, which provided information to parents about activities children could do outside for an hour (Collins, 2009).

Advertisements in many parts of the United States that urge parents to disconnect and get their children out in nature provide a reminder of how something as spending time outdoors is challenging nowadays. In her last chapter, Collins reflected on her journey to rediscover exercise in the United States and in our culture. Humans have been physically active for centuries, and American culture really encourages sedentary behavior without people even realizing the forceful impacts of the cultural structure. Simple things such as unkempt stairwells, lack of sidewalks, missing bicycle lanes, desk jobs, access to safe outdoor space, and technology are all factors in keeping Americans sedentary (Collins, 2009).

For instance, the industrial revolution has certainly improved access to labor saving devices, such as the automobile. The average person spends 55 minutes a day driving (“National Household Travel Survey Daily Travel Quick Facts | Bureau of Transportation Statistics,” n.d.). Americans may not realize the extent the automobile and labor saving devices have on their sedentary behavior. While it is impossible to go back in time, a study of Amish individuals found that one hundred percent of the 98 individuals surveyed met the Center for Disease Controls’ recommendations of thirty minutes of moderate physical activity per day (Bassett, Schneider, & Huntington, 2004). The study showed that only 4% of Amish individuals were classified as obese, and 26% as overweight compared to 30.9 percent of obese individuals and 64% of overweight individuals in rest of the United States (Bassett et al., 2004). This study demonstrates the impact labor saving devices and technology

have on sedentary behavior, as Amish believe in traditional forms of work and farming without modern conveniences (Bassett et al., 2004). Additionally, this study highlights the cultural influences of sedentary behavior as the Amish culture does not engage with modern technology.

American society normalizes dependency on the automobile and other labor-saving devices. The top ten companies who spent the most in advertising in 2015 included advertisements from General Motors, Ford, Fiat, AT&T, Verizon and Disney (O'Reilly, 2015). Automobiles and entertainment have a large impact on Americans' sedentary behavior. While there is a healthy balance between activity and rest, Collins wanted to see the ways humans balanced action and rest compared to animals in nature; this inspired her take a trip to the National Zoo in Washington D.C. (Collins, 2009). Collins met John Gibbons who took her on a tour of the zoo; the two of them discussed the activity habits of the zoo animals, and their balance of rest and activity.

Collins shares her journey through her own experiences and the stories of others in *American Idle*, and as she and John Gibbons toured the zoo, Mary Collins had to reassure her guide she was equipped and ready to walk the extra half mile to the ape house (Collins, 2009). John Gibbons appreciated Collins' desire for an extended tour of the facility, and then told her about the resistance he met when he informed his friends that he was selling his car because he could walk the mile to work without any problems. His friends were skeptical, insisting that a mile was an incredibly long distance to walk (Collins, 2009). Collins just marveled at how we

have evolved as a culture to assume that a mile is almost an unachievable distance for the average person to consider walking.

The next day, Collins ventured past the zoo into a nicer part of town where most people had college degrees and access to fresh produce and organic foods (2009). Collins lined up some interviews with young, single, white professionals who lived in this part of town (2009). She was filled with excitement about the interviews and wrote,

“I admit that I entered the elevator of the apartment building brimming with assumptions about the twentysomething recent college graduates I was about to meet. I figured they took full advantage of the great food markets in the neighborhood, the simple walk to the Metro, and the exercise classes offered at places like Gold’s Gym. I assumed their world was packed with healthy choices and any struggles they might have to stay physically active and to sustain a healthy diet were self-created issues” (Collins, 2009, pp. 60–61).

When Mary Collins met Rachel Winch, she was immediately offered a different perspective than she imagined. Rachel Winch was still frustrated from lack of access to fresh produce and even though she lived in a nicer part of town she stated, “even those of us for whom all of this is central to our lives, who care deeply about physical activity and nutrition, the conditions are stacked against us” (Collins, 2009, p. 61). Rachel Winch mentioned to Collins how she had sworn off using elevators with the hope of stairs in high rises offering a fair way to squeeze in exercise in the middle of the day (Collins, 2009). After Rachel Winch woman made the goal of using stairs instead of elevators, she realized how scary unkempt stairwells

are; thus reinforcing how the physical structure of environment promotes sedentary behavior (Collins, 2009).

Mary Collins interviewed Rachel Winch's roommate, Taylor Godfrey, and asked her how much exercise she would like to engage in a typical day in a perfect world (Collins, 2009). Taylor Godfrey responded, "I could easily see myself running three to four miles a day and walking another four to five" (Collins, 2009, p. 62). When Mary Collins asked Rachel Winch the same question, Rachel Winch answered, "What my body wants, to bike thirty miles a day and walk five. Right now I bike about fifteen miles a day and walk two or three most days and I still feel a little antsy" (Collins, 2009, p. 62). Rachel Winch added, "I want to live a life where exercise becomes hard to quantify. It just is" (Collins, 2009, p. 62). Collins reflected on this interview and wrote, "This young woman, still pressing the boundaries of what she wants her professional and personal life to be, as just captured the essence of what I want to see in terms of physical activity in American culture. It just is" (Collins, 2009, p. 62). This interview captured some fitness goals of a couple of people, but they expressed how they seemed held back in some way by implicit boundaries.

Mary Collins spends a large amount of time in her text focusing on the physical and structural limitations to living an active lifestyle. She recognized several low-income earners have no safe place for people to just be out to enjoy the environment (Collins, 2009). Collins recalled a time when she took her car into the dealership for service and noted how many Hispanic mothers were pushing strollers, dodging traffic on a six-lane highway because the nearest crosswalk was over a half mile away in either direction (2009). Collins mentioned, "While access plays a huge

role in healthy diets, most low-income minorities cite safety and time as their two main concerns when it comes to exercise (Collins, 2009, p. 107). Many inner cities have few safe spaces for residents to enjoy the outdoors. While churches and schools attempt to take charge, many people slip through the cracks.

Access to healthy food is an important piece to maintaining a healthy lifestyle. Often, first generation North Americans and those who recently immigrated often gravitate to fast food options. This is because fast food is affordable. Mary Collins interviewed Matilde Palmer, who was originally from the Dominican Republic (2009). Matilde helped facilitate interviews with women from El Salvador and Guatemala and Mary Collins. Matilde discussed the ways fast food impacted immigrants and stated,

In my country and their countries, you did not have the privilege of going to a restaurant. But then people came here and they see McDonalds and are so excited that they can take their family to a restaurant. But it's not a real restaurant, you know what I mean, and it's bad for them, but they don't know that. All they know is that they can afford it
(Collins, M, 2009, p. 59).

This narrative describes many common struggles low income and immigrant families experience. These people want to be able to take their families out to restaurants but cannot afford the places that serve healthier food options. This income restriction in of itself provides additional barriers as the family accesses healthier food options. Additionally, many low-income families have unpredictable schedules due to limited career options. This time factor may also drive more families to depend

on fast food several times a week to make up from the lack of time to prepare healthy food. Also, time and financial constraints certainly impact exercise as Collins mentions, “As a writer and college professor, I have tremendous control over my schedule and yet ‘lack of time’ remains a major obstacle even for me when it comes to getting the activity I want in my day. How is a single Hispanic mother with two jobs and three kids supposed to cope with the problem” (Collins, 2009, p. 72)?

Aside from time constraints, technology plays a huge role in limiting physical activity. Mary Collins reflected upon her interview with Dr. Karen Bradley of the Laban/Bartenieff Institute of Movement. Dr. Bradley “is an expert at reading faces and other mannerisms” (Collins, 2009, p. 120). Collins mentioned Dr. Karen Bradley has “been hired to analyze the facial expressions of presidential candidates and even President George W. Bush during his State of the Union Address” (Collins, 2009, p. 120). In the interview, Dr. Bradley mentioned how many children nowadays do not engage in diverse activity; and stated, “They might be good at one thing, but the rest of the time they’re sitting down in front of the TV or at their computers” (Collins, 2009, p. 121). Dr. Karen Bradley reminded Collins of the importance of being in tune with one’s physical self; Dr. Bradley insisted how “body intelligence is the first intelligence” since “we’re born to physically interact immediately” (Collins, 2009, p. 122). Collins reflected and wrote, “we’ve developed a culture that has forgotten how to center the physical self. Today so much movement is concentrated on the hands as we work remotes and keyboards. The play of the rest of the body becomes irrelevant” (Collins, 2009, p. 122). Collins’ argument brings attention to how little

people choose to develop general movement skills beyond the skills for the modern office career.

Part III. A Contextual Analysis

American Idle is a sharply written narrative that encourages the audience to take a step back and look at factors that influence Americans' levels of sedentary behavior. *American Idle* is a rhetorical act because it was “an intentional, created, polished attempt to overcome with obstacles in a given situation with a specific audience on a given issue to achieve a particular end” (Campbell & Huxman, 2003, p. 7). Mary Collins composed *American Idle* with the intent of inspiring change in her readers. In order to understand how *American Idle* is a rhetorical act, some contextual background must be addressed. This portion of the thesis discusses the nature of sedentary society specifically in the United States. This portion of the thesis looks at the influences places of employment, schools, and general life experiences and how these influences contribute to sedentary behavior.

Constraints to Physical Activity and Potential Solutions. The United States has become a culture that lacks participatory behavior, seduced by the ease of sedentary life. Some of these factors, such as access to safe places to exercise, time constraints, and financial constraints in the United States show how the ways these influences whisper sweetly, persuading people to engage in easier behaviors. Throughout the days and months missed climbing of stairs for the favor of the elevator, and missed walking breaks in favor of sitting begin to add up. Long days at the office and lengthy commutes home on traffic filled freeways mean more time is spent sitting, instead of moving.

Many social norms require participation in sedentary behavior and people are often made to follow these norms. For instance, most meetings happen around a table, most students remain seated in the classroom, and some classes and movie theaters do not permit people to stand (Owen et al., 2011). Even insurance companies take note of the sedentary behaviors of their customers. Collins cited Dr. Robert Steinbrook who created a plan for Medicare patients in West Virginia. Dr. Steinbrook believed good health practices would reduce spending overall, and suggested that people attending their typical checkups and screenings would be eligible for receiving additional incentives (2006). Some of the proposed incentives included “fitness-club memberships for adults or vouchers for healthful foods for children” (Steinbrook, 2006, p. 754). Collins mentioned these incentives would be helpful because it encourages people to have higher levels of personal accountability (2009).

If these incentives were implemented, perhaps more people would have access to fitness resources. There are many reasons people choose not to exercise, and it is difficult to discover all the reasons people do not engage in sufficient amounts of physical activity. Often people do not feel they have the time, money, or are exhausted from a taxing day at work (Heesch & Mâsse, 2004; Sonnentag & Jelden, 2009; Withall et al., 2011). Many lower income individuals are especially susceptible to these pressures, as many entry level jobs offer inconsistent schedules. Often the few financial resources minorities and other low-income individuals obtain is not sufficient to pay for fitness classes (Collins, M., 2009). Some barriers for ethnic minorities and low income individuals materialize as “barriers such as unaffordable facilities and unavailable childcare, high crime rates, fear for personal safety and

culturally inappropriate activities are of primary importance” (Seefeldt, Malina, & Clark, p. 2002, 143). Even if people can carve out time to participate in physical activity, their work or home environment may act as a barrier. These examples illustrate some constraints to physical activity which demonstrate the need for change on a societal level.

Families and Media. Collins published *American Idle* in 2009. Both then and in the years since, numerous Americans live sedentary lives. Many Americans are impacted by their families. The family is a social unit that may emphasize activity or passivity with parents serving as role models. Mary Collins did not discuss the influence of family on physical activity in detail, but she did mention her hesitation to her daughter engaging in too much screen time. Collins was skeptical even with the advent of active gaming solutions and mentioned, “In the end the Wii, and other games like it, just reinforces a screen-based worldview that will never lead to the more dramatic lifestyle changes Americans need to make” (Collins, 2009, p. 127). Collins was concerned Americans would not be able to shake their sedentary habits unless screen time was limited.

Many American families experience tension by disagreeing with each other on appropriate amounts of screen time. Family communication style impacts the ways families come to decisions over issues such as screen time. Families that have high amounts of conversation between all members tend to generate individuals that are more likely to self-disclose (Huang, 1999). Individuals that come from families with high amounts of conversation are more confident, and may be more motivated to

engage in healthy behavioral patterns such as seeking familial and peer support for positive exercise habits (Huang, 1999).

However, if the family members do not agree on the amount each member should engage in physical activity there might be tension. It is important to understand the orientation each family member has toward the issue, such as physical activity in a family communication scenario. Family members may have different perspectives, or orientations to the issue of physical activity, which leads to “two distinct types of cognition for each person. The first type of cognition is a person’s own beliefs about the object. The second type of cognition is a person’s perception of the other person’s beliefs regarding the object” (Koerner & Schrodts, 2014, p. 3). If one person does not agree with the other on their evaluation of a certain object, there may be tension, or a lack of congruency within the dyad (Koerner & Schrodts, 2014). For instance, if a child believes playing video games is a better use of their leisure time, but parents prefer the child to go outside and play, the difference in orientation will lead to tension. Previous research found when a parent tries to limit the amount of time children spend on electronics, it can be challenging, and often they cave into the child’s wishes (Evans, Jordan, & Horner, 2011).

A family’s communication style and decision-making style can impact the level of physical activity individuals participate in because they might be encouraged not to disturb others by engaging in exercise. Also, the home environment typically has a wealth of electronic devices to distract family members, comfortable furniture and labor-saving devices to encourage family members to spend long periods of time in sedentary behavior (Owen et al., 2011, Figure 1).

High amounts of media exposure are commonplace in modern society. The American Academy of Pediatrics recently changed their screen time guidelines for children from their previous two hour a day limit for children over two years of age (CNN, 2016). The new recommendations do not have a specific time limit set for children over six, but parents are recommended to monitor the content of the media, and set reasonable limits (CNN, 2016). Screen time is not less of a problem, but more of an issue. Children in homes with no rules about media content tend to watch more than two hours of television each day (Gingold, Simon, & Schoendorf, 2014). Additional factors for extended uses of screen time include family dinner less than three days a week and a television in the child's bedroom (Gingold et al., 2014). Perhaps this is because these children rely on their televisions as entertainment when other family members' schedules do not permit them to spend long periods of time with their children. Social norms play a large role in moderating physical activity inside and outside the home. In the immediate environment of the home, physical space, outdoor space, equipment and number of television sets will likely impact the amount of physical activity families achieve. As demonstrated, media consumption influences the amount families engage in sedentary behavior to a great degree.

Children whose parents lack financial resources to participate in extracurricular activities may spend a lot of time at home watching large amounts of television (Evans et al., 2011). Parents reason that television is a practical way to keep their child entertained, requires little financial commitment, and minimizes fights between siblings (Evans et al., 2011). However, more screen time often means less time is devoted to free play and physical activity. If teenagers reduced their

screen time even a by a modest amount and spent at least an hour each day engaging in physical activity their health could improve (Rosen et al., 2014).

Aside from television and media, influences in society impact everyday family life in various ways. For instance, one manifestation of sedentary culture is found in the educational system. In the typical academic setting, students are encouraged to pay attention for several hours of the day with little breaks for recess or physical activity. Elementary students are being misdiagnosed for attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) because they are required to sit still and pay attention to academics, and have less access to outdoor activities (Strauss, 2014). Budget cuts have taken a toll on physical education and often physical education is one of the first cuts a school will make in tight economic times (Rutherford, 2017).

Social Cognitive Theory of Mass Communication and Effects of Mass Media. In *American Idle*, Mary Collins spends a good deal of time discussing the results of many different cultural influences on sedentary living, such as the physical structure of our environment limiting physical activity, the fast-food culture of the United States, and influences of technology. The United States has become a culture where less than 50% of adults receive the CDC's recommended levels of physical activity ("Physical Activity and Health | Physical Activity | CDC," n.d.). Public Health professionals have tailored many interventions towards the prevention of obesity, and only some have been successful. It is difficult to determine which interventions will be effective, as people are the object of study. Many factors play into people's personal choice regarding exercise maintenance as "People are self-organizing, proactive, self-reflecting, and self-regulating, not just reactive organisms

shaped and shepherded by environmental events or inner forces” (Banda, 2001, p. 266). Often it seems that people are in a hurry to place blame, and to insist the exact reason for inaction after a failed campaign. After all, external influences, such as media, inspire action through cognitive processes; people need to be able to decide which environmental influences they wish to embrace, and organize the information for future guidance in decision making (Bandura, 2001). Mary Collins mentions how we are born to interact with our physical environment, and over time we learn how to maintain delicate levels of controlled bodily movement (2009). Collins argues that turning to media is not beneficial as a form of recuperation from a stressful day at the office (2009). Media campaigns focusing on increasing physical activity recognize the need for Americans to unplug and focus on their fitness.

It is interesting to observe the different effects of the media campaigns that have targeted physical activity, or to note the effects of media promoting the behavior outside of a campaign. For instance, the extent of weight stigmatizing in media can alter perceptions and motivations of people to engage in physical activity. Seventy-two participants of varying levels of body mass index watched various clips of shows that ridiculed overweight women, as well as clips of neutral things such as ads for everyday insurance products (Pearl, Dovidio, Puhl, & Brownell, 2015). The results of this study showed “an overall negative effect of previous weight-stigmatizing experiences of women, regardless of their current weight status” (Pearl et al., 2015, p. 1010), suggesting how women of all sizes do not ingest these messages with a positive outlook. Additionally, if a woman had personally been stereotyped for her negative weight, she might be frustrated that she is never going to achieve desired

levels of thinness (Pearl et al., 2015). These frustrations “may contribute to worse psychological functioning and attitudes toward exercise that do not promote engagement in physical activity” (Pearl et al., 2015).

Collins does not specifically focus on stigmas in the media, but she does place focus on more of an integrative type of lifestyle exercise; exercise that folds into the rest of daily routine. She wrote, “Right now most people measure their fitness by looking at their weight and body-fat levels, very egocentric and individual concerns. But under the Integrative Exercise umbrella, a person would also care about the amount of time their kids had for free play outdoors, the amount of time they themselves had in the sun, and the chances for simple movement breaks at work that enhance concentration, lower blood pressure, and improve mood. These numbers should matter to Americans as much as their cholesterol readings” (Collins, 2009, p. 162). Collins calls for her readers to fold practical forms of exercise into their routines; to engage in fitness within their ability, but to take personal responsibility for their level of activity.

Social Cognitive Theory suggests people are most comfortable performing tasks within their “perceived self-efficacy range” (Bandura, 1989). It is important to give people the tools they need in order to overcome the barriers that prevent them from exercising in their everyday lives so they may have higher levels of self-efficacy as they truly believe maintaining fitness is possible. Here is where Mary Collins’ touches on the environmental factors that contribute to sedentary living: “As my interviews at the Family Place proved, in the poorest urban areas, where the levels of physical activity are especially low, people have to worry about not only finding time,

but also safe and tidy public spaces” (Collins, 2009, p. 71). Many parents keep their children inside after school out of safety concerns. This often results in higher amounts of media consumption, which may be an additional inhibitor to physical activity.

Organized Sport and Sedentary Behavior. Some families choose to enroll their child in extracurricular sports outside of school time to attempt to get children moving. Sports provide great opportunities for children to have structured exercise, but there is little room for children to play freely with their peers. But yet sports offer a way for children to make friends, and friendship is motivator to keep children participating in sport (Turman, 2007). Parents often find themselves in the role of supporter or encourager, and they have to commit to getting their athlete to the game, and encourage the athlete to continue trying (Turman, 2007). Sport participation is valuable because it gives the youth skills to lead healthy active lifestyles, have higher levels of self-efficacy which may lead to lower rates of substance abuse (Coakley, J., p. 2011, p. 315). The benefits of participation in exercise leads to healthy life behaviors for the lifespan.

In order to understand the impact organized sport has on sedentary behavior, Mary Collins went to the United States Olympic Center in Colorado Springs, Colorado (Collins, 2009). When Mary Collins interviewed Bill Sands, who directs sports science at the U.S. Olympic Center, he mentioned “Humans are not built to repeat one task. We’re built for variety. And this focus on winning...” (Collins, 2009, p. 22). Bill Sands went on to mention how little actual time children move in organized sport practice; Mary Collins reflected on their interview and wrote,

“As I left Sands and his house of superathletes in the late afternoon as a thunderstorm moved into the area, I considered, again, all of the attention lavished on the fringes—the elite performers and the extremely unhealthy—while most of us struggle in the middle with will power, unforgiving work schedules, limited access, money, and more” (Collins, 2009, p. 23)

This divide between elite athletes and everyday people only makes it easier to place professional athletes on a pedestal. Initially, sport is marketed to youth and their parents as something fun that promotes team building, and is healthy. However, athletes competing at the professional level deal with additional pressures that take a toll on their health, such as adhering to the sport ethic and playing through pain, or taking performance enhancing drugs. To clarify, the sport ethic is a term coined by Sociologists to describe the normalized process of playing in spite of pain; a concept that is widely embraced in the world of sport (Malcom, 2006, p. 497). This practice is so common that many athletes think playing through pain is just part of the game, and athletes have a higher pain tolerance compared to others (Brogan, 2012). These common sport practices do not support healthy attitudes about physical activity for children. Collins discusses the role of pain in sport and mentions “As a girl, I sustained injuries that I feel everyday of my adult life, from my slippery left ankle to the click in my right shoulder, where I ripped some muscles while blocking an inbounds pass” (Collins, 2009, p. 25). Collins shared how she kept abusing her body through exercise, and failed to approach it in a healthy manner until her bicycle accident (2009). Aside from the issues of playing through pain, sport participation requires immense time and financial commitments, even for children that do not seek

a career in professional sports. These examples demonstrate how organized sport alone will not be the panacea to sedentary behavior.

Cultural Influences and Sedentary Behavior. *American Idle* provides many examples of the ways the United States is a sedentary culture. Social support is a factor Mary Collins discusses many times in *American Idle*. Often there are social consequences for choosing physical activity over other sedentary behaviors. Mary Collins made this point,

“When I was in grammar school in the late 1960s, 50 percent of kids biked to school; today less than 1 percent do. Somewhere in that thirty-five-year span, Americans stopped feeling comfortable moving through public spaces. They came to prefer their cars, homes, offices, indoor exercise rooms, and organized day care centers. Of course walking eight to ten blocks at a moderate pace doesn’t burn off many calories so I’m not sure how much this cultural change has directly contributed to a rise in obesity, but it does reflect a general drift to a more sedentary attitude and has had profound *social* consequences” (Collins, 2009, p. 91).

Collins mentioned how her daughter would go shopping with friends occasionally, but many teens do not engage in enough exercise due to technology and a lack of physical education classes (Norton, 2016). Of course, a short physical education class cannot make up for the rest of a day spent in sedentary behavior. Collins noted,

“Effective solutions seem to involve social pressure and support. The most astounding story of the power of peer pressure that I found in my research

involved 333 patients recovering from open-heart surgery. The insurance company, Mutual of Omaha, wanted to know why 90 percent of them returned to the lifestyle habits that led to their heart problems in the first place, even though the surgery itself is incredibly traumatic and involves sawing open a patient's chest, among other intrusions. Why would anyone do anything that might cause them to repeat the experience? To find out, Dr. Dean Ornish, professor of medicine at the University of California, in San Francisco, and his team of researchers took the patients through a twice-weekly group support session and provided instruction in yoga, meditation, and aerobic exercise. The program lasted only a year, but after three years, 77 percent of the patients had stuck with the lifestyle changes and avoided surgery altogether. Mutual of Omaha saved \$30,000 a patient despite footing the bill for the yearlong program" (Collins, 2009, p. 126).

This passage reflects the great pull cultural influences of continuing to engage in a sedentary lifestyle have on a person. These powerful examples demonstrate some of the challenges people have to overcome in order to go against the grain sedentary behavior in order to live a healthy life. Collins noted this is not as possible without immense amounts of social support.

As mentioned before, media plays an immense role in people's sedentary lifestyles. Aside from the act of remaining sedentary while consuming media, there are many advertisements individuals encounter while viewing television, and many advertisements promote unhealthy lifestyles. Young people are especially susceptible to these messages. How many messages do youth consume? "On average, children

and youths view approximately half an hour per week of fast-food advertising messages” (Chou, Rashad, & Grossman, p. 614, 2008). These messages are just from one source of media, and do not take into account the amount of billboards and other advertisements youth and others are exposed to on a daily basis. The food that is portrayed on these advertisements appeals to the busy and overburdened lifestyles that many families in the United States experience. The convenience, price and ease of accessibility of these items make them even more enticing.

While the focus of *American Idle* is certainly toward a lifestyle of physical activity, healthy food impacts an individual’s overall health. Mary Collins did not place a great deal of focus on fast food in her text, but she wrote about when Dr. Tom Farley, who is the co-author of *Prescription for a Healthy Nation* and a public health professor in New Orleans was the keynote speaker of a conference about active living (2009). Dr. Tom Farley discussed the public health issues in New Orleans before hurricane Katrina and after. Collins wrote how Dr. Farley shared a PowerPoint presentation that showed signs advertising hotdogs, cigarettes and beer in the convenience store windows before hurricane Katrina (2009). Dr. Farley mentioned how people often see advertisements for unhealthy foods, but rarely do you see grocery stores chocked full of fresh produce; he noted how access to fresh fruits and vegetables is a problem for many people (Collins, 2009).

This example shows one way advertising greatly influences culture. “Four networks, allied to giant transnational corporations—our private ‘Ministry of Culture’—control the bulk of production and distribution that shape the cultural mainstream” (Gerbner, 1998, p. 176). Mary Collins wrote how Dr. Farley drew more

focus to fast food in the presentation and said he showed the audience “images of a Burger King and McDonald’s within walking distance of a New Orleans high school, more convince stores plugging junk food and liquor, pizza joints, and, the crowd favorite, a drive-through Daquiri Shop” (Collins, 2009, p. 85). Dr. Farley mentioned when city planners were working on rebuilding New Orleans after hurricane Katrina, they understood the importance of having a walkable city, but failed to understand the importance of access to healthy food (Collins, 2009). Dr. Farley stated, “things like access to healthy food just fly over planners’ heads. It’s just too abstract and refined an idea for them” (Collins, 2009, p. 87). These passages reflect the great impact fast food has on American culture and how these products focus more on the convenience of fast food and less on the negative health effects of a consistent fast food diet.

In today’s society, families might suffer from time constraints and spend less time around the table with each other. The amount of time families spend together around the dinner table can positively impact a healthy lifestyle. Something as simple as warm family conversation during mealtime might help combat expanding waistlines. A study conducted with 120 children from low income and minority families showed the more warm communication a family has during mealtime, the less likely the children of the family will be struggling with weight issues (Berge et al., 2014).

It is notable that lifestyle changes in typical eating behaviors over the past few generations may influence healthy decisions. As noted, dependence on fast-food items due to lack of time to prepare healthier meal options. Busy schedules often demand families to participate in fluid communication patterns. Families must

consciously choose to streamline their communication and focus on the goals of their family's health and wellness.

An Ecological Approach. So many factors influence sedentary behavior in the family that it is necessary to take an ecological approach to determine some of the influential factors at large. An ecological approach also captures reasons why single adults may not participate in recommended levels of physical activity. The ecological approach to *American Idle*, is necessary in order to understand how Mary Collins' constructs the various narratives. Collins takes an ecological approach when she reflects on her journey at the end of the text,

“Humans physically moved through the landscape for tens of thousands of years and never once thought of measuring their mileage, checking their weight loss or comparing their muscles. And when we paced fitness out there we put nature with it. With each succeeding generation, children spend less time in gardens, around streams, in woodlands, and around any type of creature besides house pets. The rise in organized sports, with its emphasis on structured activities, coincided with the rise in obesity, as people became less and less at home with free play and other spontaneous movement. In the same way, the increased focus on indoor life and entertainment has coincided with global warming and a general destruction of natural habitat. The more out-of-touch we become with our bodies and our place in the natural cycle of life, the more out of balance every aspect of our life becomes, not just our weight or blood pressure” (Collins, 2009, p. 156).

Collins' described the things she perceived are reasons why we have become more sedentary. The ecological paradigm describes Collins' perspective and permits focus on the ways different aspects of the environment affect sedentary behavior. For instance, the social culture environment focuses on an individual's perception of safety, the information environment includes mass media campaigns promoting physical activity, the natural environment takes into account the weather and air quality of an area; all of these factors impacts an individual's physical activity behavior (Sallis et al., 2006). The social cultural environment, also includes societal norms, culture, and perceived norms regularly influence the individual (Owen et al., 2011, Figure 1).

When children attend class, the social norm insists they remain quietly seated for long periods of time. For example, "Norms are implemented socially by questioning why someone is standing in a meeting" (Owen et al., 2011, p. 191). If someone refuses to follow these norms there might be drastic consequences, such as disciplinary action. There are multiple ecological approaches that will be discussed in more detail in the critical approach of this thesis.

Individuals can only struggle against the cultural current for so long. Many people do not have the freedom to tell their employers that they would prefer a walking meeting for one-on-one meeting sessions. People are not able to demand their employers provide them with treadmill desks so they can walk for a portion of their day if they so choose. The amount of factors influencing the level of sedentary behavior are so imbedded into society people can scarcely recognize the factors and their effects on individual behavior. Professionals in the health industry have been

noticing the negative effects of healthy living for some time; they work tirelessly to discover ways to communicate to the general public perceptions of casual factors.

Barriers to Engaging in Exercise. Many individuals struggle to participate in exercise after the workday ends and have limited means of engaging in physical activity during the workday. Often people do not have the freedom to tell their employers that they would prefer a walking meeting for one-on-one meeting sessions. Employees may not feel comfortable to suggest their employers provide them with treadmill desks so they can walk for a portion of their day if they so choose. The factors that influence the level of sedentary behavior are so imbedded into society people can scarcely recognize these elements and their effects on individual behavior. Professionals in the health industry have been noticing the negative effects of healthy living for some time and they work tirelessly to discover ways to communicate to the general public their researched perceptions of casual factors.

Employees need more opportunities for physical activity in the workplace. A study of over 50 companies and 38,000 people showed some worksite “interventions improve physical activity in some subjects, and these changes may in turn improve selected health outcomes, work culture, and job stress” (Conn, Hafdahl, Cooper, Brown, & Lusk, 2009). Some more research is needed to determine which workplace interventions are most helpful (Conn et al., 2009). Hopefully these interventions would let employees return home less stressed. Not surprisingly, the employee’s workload stressors often predict levels of work-to-family conflict (Ilies et al., 2007). Worker’s moods are affected by fluctuating changes in the workload; meaning even if workers do not often have a demanding workload, a demanding workload on a

specific day might negatively impact the worker's mood and encourage a rise in work-family conflict when the employee returns home for the day (Ilies et al., 2007). Naturally, there is spillover between the domains of work and home that affect the employee long after they return home (Ilies et al., 2007).

It is important to determine the impact of work stressors on family life because work stressors are an ecological issue that impacts the motivation of the individual. Why is it important to acknowledge work-family conflict in context with physical activity? Research shows that "perceptions of work-to-family conflict impact the degree to which employees engage in social activities with their spouses and children" (Ilies et al., 2007, p. 1376). Essentially, if the employee is too exhausted after a demanding day at work, they are less likely to engage, at least for a while in meaningful communication with their family. By the time the worker recovers from their workday, it may be too late in the day to engage in anything active with their family, then they will likely choose less active forms of entertainment. The effects of the amount of time employees spend at work and the level of intensity of the workload and these variables impact family life are reinforced in the following passage, "Our finding that both of these variables significantly influence work-to-family conflict supports the existence of a psychological strain process (associated with high workloads) that prevents employees from fulfilling their family roles" (Ilies et al., 2007, p. 1377). This is problematic because demanding work days can temporarily prevent the smooth functioning of the family as a machine. Working parents may not be able to fulfill their role as parent immediately upon returning

home for the day, and might seek the television's entertainment for a while so they may recover.

Only after their recovery would parents even imagine doing something active with their children, or for themselves. But yet, adults need at least two and a half to five hours of moderate levels of activity a week to achieve a decent amount of health benefits ("Physical Activity and Health | Physical Activity | CDC," n.d.). It can be challenging trying to fit physical activity in the schedule as a full-time employee. Interventions should focus on helping working families overcome these time barriers.

A solution that may minimize the negative effects of sedentary behavior are to have specific goals relating to a regular exercise plan. If people sign up for an exercise class they may decide to attend (Spink, Wilson, & Bostick, 2012), instead of depending on their own motivation to get them to the gym. The physical environment or available activity classes might influence the choice to engage in exercise (Spink et al., 2012). As previously alluded, the intent to be active only carries one so far. It is necessary to have many options to overcome barriers of time, accessibility, and to prioritize physical activity as something of high importance.

This contextual analysis provided some practical examples of contributors to sedentary behavior. This section previewed the social ecological perspectives, and specifically focused on environmental and social factors that influence sedentary behavior, such as: employment stressors, media and technology effects, familial influence, access to recourses, and environmental safety. Because *American Idle* is a book about sedentary behavior in the United States, it is necessary to understand many cultural contextual factors that influence individuals' sedentary behavior. Mary

Collins' *American Idle* contains many narratives focusing on the environmental and social factors that influence sedentary behavior elements. The contextual analysis provides some additional examples often found in greater American culture.

Part IV. The Critical Approach

This analysis employs three different critical perspectives to examine American Idle as a rhetorical act. Prior to discussing the perspectives, American Idle as rhetoric and the nature of rhetorical criticism are addressed.

American Idle as Rhetoric. Any rhetorical situation calls for “functional uses of discourse to adjust people, objects, events, relations, and thoughts” (Hauser, 2002, p. 43). Hauser’s definition suggests rhetoric is fluid, and can be easily modified to focus on the issue at hand. Rhetorical style depends on the way the author wishes to express their art. Aristotle defines rhetoric as “the faculty of observing in any given case the available means of persuasion” (Roberts, 1984, p. 24). This definition would assume rhetoric is fluid, and should be composed in a way to act as a solution to a problem or potential problem. Essentially, the rhetorician may purposefully employ strategy in their rhetoric that reflects their personal style, while the rhetorician attends to the issue at hand. For instance, some rhetoricians prefer to use metaphor as a stylistic device, while others may choose to use narratives as a source of rhetorical strength. Therefore, the rhetorician can shape their medium of persuasion to reflect their personal style. Mary Collin’s *American Idle* fits Aristotle’s definition of rhetoric because she used combinations of her personal experiences and interviews to compose a narrative meant to bring attention to the consequences of American sedentary lifestyles.

Rhetorical criticism is different from other types of analysis, and rhetorical criticism “is most sensibly reserved for that assertive discourse produced by expert-spectators whose judgements as to the execution of (in this case) rhetorical phenomena are supported by forensic arguments” (Rosenfield, 1968, p. 57).

Essentially, the critic creates a rubric to determine the quality of the rhetoric.

Rosenfield mentioned critics should create their method by determining what data is relevant to the study and what measurements are appropriate for the study (1968).

The method of the rhetorical critic can be calculated to a certain extent.

Rhetorical criticism is the most popular way communications scholars analyze a text (Cosmin-Constantin & Claudia, 2015). Rhetorical criticism includes various methods proposed by individuals such as Kenneth Burke, Walter Fiseher, Earnest G. Bormann (Cosmin-Constantin & Claudia, 2015). Each of the methods proposed are different, and rhetorical criticism is by nature an art, not a science (Cosmin-Constantin & Claudia, 2015). But the critic should develop a personal connection to the rhetoric that they analyze. The critic should first embrace the role of spectator and observe the facts in rhetoric to compare them against a sort of rubric. Essentially, “The critic’s commentary is analogous to that of the trial lawyer who bases claims as to the proper verdict in a case of his interpretation of the facts in light of some legal code” (Rosenfield, p. 55, 1968). This description suggests how this code can be flexible, meaning the critic’s rubric can be created and defined by the critic.

Of course, the critic must be aware of their own biases, just as any jury must keep their biases under control while they are judging the defendant. The critic must then decide upon the artifact to use as the main premise for a critical analysis, what

data within that artifact is relevant to the study, and how they will explain the findings from the study (Rosenfield, 1968). There are a few different ways to observe a piece of rhetoric, and there are strengths and weaknesses to each formula. Many previous works of rhetorical criticism have used a triadic formula such as message-sender-environment (Rosenfield, 1968). It is important to consider the critic as a receiver because the critic must see the particular elements in the rhetoric to help it along. The critic “occupies the office of mediator, receiving from one source and conveying to another” (Black, 1965, p. 6). The quality of criticism would fail miserably if the critic divorced themselves as an additional receiver and failed to account for their personal reaction to the rhetoric. The critic’s creative ability suffers if the critic attempts to employ a strictly scientific process to rhetorical criticism, as criticism is an art form (Fisher, 1969). However, the critic does need some sort of method for evaluating the rhetoric, such as Rosenfield’s triadic formula.

This triadic formula ensures a less-biased approach to criticism, and can provide an additional rubric for Aristotle’s faculties of persuasion to be observed in a more structured manner. Often scientists consider the methods of social scientists to be unreliable because there is no set equation to guarantee duplicable results. The social scientist realizes this is a natural progression because after all, people are the object of study, and it seems brash to expect people to all act in a completely predictable way. A comfortable medium would provide the best space for a solid critical study, as “we cannot expect to be able to apply intact the standards of science to the enterprise of criticism” (Black, 1965, p. 8). This does not mean the critic has nothing consistent to bring to the observation, but rather there is space for the critic to

create something fluid, appropriate for the occasion of the rhetoric. Just as the scientist strives to completely understand the structural makeup and interactions of things in the physical world, the critic wishes to thoroughly understand humankind (Black, 1965). A critic must attempt to understand why the rhetor chose the specific medium manifested in the rhetoric to express their art. This understanding might account for any gaps between the rhetor's intent and the actual effectiveness of the message on the audience.

For the purpose of this research, the "triadic formula" employs critical lenses. First, it applies Lloyd Bitzer's rhetorical situation to *American Idle*. Second, it draws on Walter Fisher's narrative paradigm to understand how Collins' attempts to persuade the reader to become active, particularly through the use of stories. Third, the discussion turns to the social ecological perspective on physical activity to examine Collins' advocacy.

The Rhetorical Situation. Bitzer's rhetorical situation assumes "rhetoric is situational" (Bitzer, 1968, p. 3), and the "rhetorical situation may be defined as a complex of persons, events, objects, and relations presenting an actual or potential exigence which can be completely or partially removed if discourse, introduced into the situation, can so constrain human decision or action as to bring about the significant modification of the exigence" (Bitzer, 1968, p. 6). Bitzer describes exigence as "an imperfection marked by urgency" (1968, p. 6). Bitzer's assumptions credit the rhetorical audience as including "only of those persons who are capable of being influenced by discourse and of being mediators of change" (1968, p. 8). A significant principle of the rhetorical situation is how the "situation contains a set of

constraints made up of persons, events, objects, and relations which are parts of the situation because they have the power to constrain decision and action needed to modify the exigence” (Bitzer, 1968, p. 8). Bitzer notes, “these three constituents—exigence, audience, constraints—comprise everything relevant in a rhetorical situation” (1968, p. 8). As mentioned, the constraints lead to a rhetorical situation as a fitting response to those constraints. For instance, an inaugural address, or a national time of crisis often elicits a rhetorical response (Bitzer, 1968).

Even though Bitzer mentions the rhetorical situation can be an official call to a speaking event, he insists it does not have to be limited to an expected event such as an inaugural address (1968). The rhetorical situation can include a scenario that is urgent in some way, and at times the situation catapults the rhetorical discourse (Bitzer, 1968). Additionally, the rhetorical situation is not solely limited to a physical speaker and audience, but it may include poetic, philosophical, and scientific situations (Bitzer, 1968). Mary Collins’ *American Idle* thus fits Bitzer’s inclusive definition of the rhetorical situation. Many urban planners interested in the physical environment’s effects on individual’s movement snatched up *American Idle* as they saw the impacts city planning had on individual health and wellness (Collins, 2017).

The Narrative Paradigm. The narrative paradigm is a critical framework developed to investigate persuasive discourse that features stories as a primary form of support. Within criticism, the narrative paradigm is an especially relevant tool for observing informal, accessible and personal forms of discourse. Fisher mentions good stories include narrative coherence and fidelity (Walter R. Fisher, 1987). The narrative paradigm’s structure includes the following assumptions: first, people are by

nature storytellers. Second, the typical styles of communication are influenced by communication situations, media and genre (Fisher, 1984). Third, culture, personal experiences, personal character, and history provide “good reasons” for participating in decision making and communication (Fisher, 1984, p. 7). Fourth, narrative rationality is influenced by the “nature of persons as narrative beings” (Fisher, 1984, p. 8). And fifth, “the world is a set of stories which must be chosen among to live the good life in a process of continual recreation” (Fisher, 1984, p. 8).

Fisher argued that “good reasons are the stuff of stories, the means by which humans realize their nature as reasoning-valuing animals” (Fisher, 1984, p. 8). The components of the narrative paradigm are “symbols, signs of consubstantiation, the good reasons, the communicative expressions of social reality” (Fisher, 1984, p. 8). These narrative components may include personal experiences which influence the motivation of persons to engage in the narrative experience, as often personal experience influences one’s social reality.

The various narratives Mary Collins presents in her text offer relatable examples of various factors leading to sedentary living and negative health effects caused by lack of exercise. The stories Collins shares in *American Idle* highlight key themes of individuals’ relationships with physical activity. The narrative Collins’ presents is meant to be persuasive, as she urges positive change. The critic should focus on Collins’ persuasive efforts presented in the text (Andrews, 1990). Narrative criticism is a fitting tool for observing Collins’ work because Americans’ sedentary lifestyles are heavily influenced culture and environment. Media discourse in the United States often glorifies sedentary behavior. The cultural discourse promotes

engagement in sedentary behavior through leisure time activities such as television consumption.

The Social Ecological Model. Finally, this study uses an interdisciplinary approach by employing the social ecological model. This “social ecological model is rooted in certain core principles or themes concerning the interrelations among environmental conditions and human behavior and well-being” (Stokols, 1996, p. 285). When the social ecological model is applied in the arena of health promotion, it becomes “a broad, overarching paradigm that bridges several different fields of research” (Stokols, 1996, p. 285). This perspective is influenced by earlier biological perspectives of determining the interaction of the environment and health of plants and animals (Stokols, 1996). The social ecological model suggests factors in the environment contain physical, social, and cultural scopes that effect various parts of individual health such as one’s physical, emotional and psychological health and development (Stokols, 1996). Additionally, “human health is influenced not only by environmental circumstances, but also by a variety of personal attributes, including genetic heritage, psychologic dispositions, and behavioral patterns” (Stokols, 1996, p. 285). This “social ecologic perspective is inherently interdisciplinary in its approach to health research and the development of health promotion programs” (Stokols, 1996, p. 286).

The ecological approaches originated from the socio-ecologic framework and included micro and macro level influences on one’s behavior for the purpose of developing health interventions (Ammerman et al., 2007). Expanding on the socio-ecologic model, the ecologic model of four domains of active living demonstrated

factors such as the social cultural environment, natural environment, information environment, policy environment and perceived environment as impacting the sustainability of one's level of active living (Sallis et al., 2006).

Finally, the ecologic model of four domains of sedentary behavior build on previous ecological models and suggests that transportation, occupation, leisure time and the household play a tremendous role in moderating physical activity (Owen et al., 2011). The ecologic model of four domains of sedentary behavior places focus on how a family's choice of leisure activities impacts sedentary behavior.

Any of the social ecologic perspectives noted above offer insight on environmental influences that impact behavior. For instance, the physical structure of office equipment can impact employee relations for better or worse (Stokols, 1996). Low socioeconomic status can be attributed to a multitude of other environmental and personal factors that are often associated with negative physical and emotional health (Stokols, 1996).

Applying a multilevel framework, such as the social ecological model, to *American Idle* provides a comprehensive picture of all of the factors that influence people to engage in sedentary behavior. With a multilevel framework, health professionals can approach interventions with the idea that the cause of the unhealthy behavior in the community may not be immediately seen; they must dig a bit deeper into the community, culture, environment, and other factors to find the effect of these factors on the individual. It is beneficial to apply a multilevel framework in order to organize the intervention solutions (Kumanyika & Brownson, 2007). Their assumptions of a what makes a social ecological model are:

- “1. Individual factors include characteristics of the individual such as knowledge, attitudes, skills, and a person’s developmental history.
2. Interpersonal factors are formal and informal social networks and social support systems, including family and friends.
3. Organizational factors involve social institutions, organizational characteristics, and rules or regulations for operation.
4. Community factors include relationships between organizations, economic forces, the physical environment, and cultural variables that shape behavior.
5. Health policy factors include local, state, and national laws, rules, and regulations” (Kumanyika & Brownson, 2007, p. 522).

Together, these factors support factors present in the Ecological Model of Four Domains of Active Living. The Four Domains of Active Living is a multilevel model which “was developed to illustrate the roles numerous disciplines can play in research on active living with multiple levels of influence specific to each domain” (Sallis et al., 2006, p. 300). This perspective encapsulates many of the narratives in Collins’ work, especially since she often discusses barriers, such as cultural influences, to active living.

Part V. The Critical Analysis

As introduced in Part Four of this thesis, I apply Bitzer’s rhetorical situation, Fisher’s narrative paradigm and the ecological model of physical activity as a three-part critical framework to analyze *American Idle*. I intend to observe the information with each of these frames, recognizing that more than one frame can apply to a singular passage of text.

American Idle and the Rhetorical Situation. Bitzer emphasizes three elements that constitute a rhetorical situation: exigence, audience and the constraints that influence the rhetor (Bitzer, 1968). A situation becomes rhetorical when it creates space to include potentially reality changing discourse, and that discourse continues to function as an appropriate response to the situation (Bitzer, 1968). Essentially, the situation is rhetorical when individuals are capable of producing change through their discourse. There are three elements in Bitzer's Rhetorical Situation that I will cover in my analysis. Bitzer mentioned, "Besides exigence and audience, every rhetorical situation contains a set of constraints." This third element, constraints, is "made up of persons, events, objects, and relations, which are parts of the situation because they have the power to constrain decision and action needed to modify the exigence" (Bitzer, 1968, p. 8).

Exigence. Bitzer defines exigence as, "an imperfection marked by urgency; it is a defect, an obstacle, something waiting to be done, a thing which is other than it should be" (Bitzer, 1968, p. 6). The following section describes two exigencies. First a societal exigence will be discussed, followed by a personal exigence. Mary Collins' book addresses this urgency; a current situation in which at least 80% of adults do not receive the recommended amount of physical activity guidelines, and many children spend over 7 hours a day behind some sort of screen ("Facts & Statistics - President's Council on Fitness, Sports & Nutrition," n.d.). Obesity rates have skyrocketed and keep rising, with approximately 16.9% of adults and children in the United States classified as obese as of 2010 ("Facts & Statistics - President's Council on Fitness, Sports & Nutrition," n.d.). The projected rates of obesity are projected to increase to

50% by the year 2030 (“Facts & Statistics - President’s Council on Fitness, Sports & Nutrition,” n.d.). These numbers do not include overweight persons, simply obese persons. This urgent situation is a marker of imperfection within our culture that persuades people to embrace a sedentary lifestyle.

Collins laments at how the Center for Disease Control recognized the problem but failed to articulate what factors promote sedentary behavior. She mentioned,

“I also noticed that all government sites use passive voice which means the verbs have no clear subjects. That allows the CDC, Health and Human Services (HHS) the USDA, and any other federal program to let the individual off the hook. The rise in weight ‘has been’ dramatic. The decline in physical activity ‘has been’ steady. Precisely who has gained the weight and caused the decline is rarely stated outright. Some sites might mention the impact of sprawl on people’s walking patterns, but rarely call for Americans to accept blame for their own eating and physical habits” (Collins, 2009, p. 70).

My discussion of American Idle in terms of the rhetorical situation begins with exigence. Mary Collins discusses a cultural shift that embodies the definition of exigence:

“The shift to office work began well before 1920, however, and with it the growing divide between physical activity and labor. By the 1850’s, authors—like Cate Beecher, sister of Harriet Beecher Stowe of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* fame—wrote bestsellers about the health problems caused by a gradual shift from farm life to city life and desk jobs, including depression, back problems, and anxiety disorders” (Collins, 2009, p. xviii).

Archeologists echo Collins' observations about the past and note that while life expectancy was certainly shorter in ancient times, obesity and cancer were just about nonexistent (Killgrove, 2015). Humans have not adapted to the lifestyle changes caused by the industrial revolution and increased access to calorie dense foods, and prior studies indicate labor saving devices and other economic increases often lead to weight gain in individuals (Egger, 2011). These passages describe events and situations of urgency.

Aside from the societal exigence above, Mary Collins experienced a persona exigence. In the introduction, Mary Collins wrote that she had no memory of the bicycle accident that left her wondering how much of her body she would use again. She went from being an avid athlete to picking up the pieces of her physical body, trying to learn how to effectively move again. (Collins, 2009). She had decided she needed to take a step back from the situation and dig deeper into the health crisis that is occurring in the United States as a whole. Collins decided to go see what sort of archeological evidence she could find of human movement thousands of years ago in order to see how we've evolved as a species in our everyday movement today (2009). Collins discussed movement patterns with the archeologists she met with, and discovered that the average hunter-gatherer travels about 3.7 miles at a time; which is sufficient to offset the calories burned while seeking food (2009). The archeologists Collins spent time with in Kansas agreed that for the majority of history, people were hunter-gatherers (2009). It has only been recently that individuals have had large amounts of food at their disposal, and labor-saving devices, cutting out the opportunity to burn calories doing everyday activities.

A seemingly simple reason people may retain fat is because “hunter-gatherers who moved around all the time and rarely faced a season of plenty, the human tendency to retain fat was a useful tool, and it remained so even when people settled down on farms about 10,000 years ago because life on those homesteads was also harsh and physically demanding (Collins, M., p. 14, 2009). Combine this lifestyle change with engaging in massive amounts of media exposure, which encourages such a lack of physical activity, and the excess energy has no place to go (Collins, 2009). Fast forwarding to the 19th century, Mary Collins referenced the Pope Manufacturing Company’s advent of the bicycle (Collins, 2009). The vehicle rapidly expanded as a main form of transportation, leaving bicycles dust. Nonetheless, Pope had created a park for his employees to enjoy leisure time physical activity. However, now it is not permissible for more than we think and states, “Near my home most of the fields require a permit before a group can use the field. If my young daughter brought some friends to a local field for a pick-up game of kickball, city officials would chase them away” (Collins, p. 36, 2009). This cultural shift drives more children to structured activities or to the couch in front of screens (Collins, 2009).

Media is a popular way of engaging in sedentary behavior. In 2008, 11 hours of media was consumed by the average person; in 2015, an average of 15.5 hours of media was consumed (“Media consumption to average 15. 5 hours a day by 2015,” n.d.). North Americans use media for the majority of their waking hours, as these numbers demonstrate. The amount of television time per day each North American indulges in may increase levels of mortality. Matthews, et al., 2008 received reports from 240,819 adults about their television viewing habits.

The study discovered individuals who engage in more than seven hours of television viewing per day have a 60% greater risk of all-cause mortality, 20% increase of cancer risk, and nearly double the cardiovascular mortality risk when compared to people who watch television less than one hour per day (C. E. Matthews et al., 2012). These numbers include the adjustment for those engaging in moderate to vigorous levels of physical activity (C. E. Matthews et al., 2012). Additional research noted “Regular physical activity reduces the risk of overall mortality and, specifically, mortality from coronary heart disease, and of developing diabetes mellitus, hypertension and colon cancer” (Seefeldt et al., p. 144, 2002). Collins discusses this issue and mentions,

“Dr. Henry Lodge, an internist and professor from Columbia University, points out in his book *Younger Next Year*, “In nature, there is no reason to be sedentary except lack of food.” The streambeds dry up. The animals have fled. The plants have shriveled. What do you do? You hole up in the shade and move as little as possible. When we sit in front of a television, we trick our body into thinking it’s in precisely that sort of situation: a metabolically passive state because of some outside stress. The biological side of your brain does not understand that you like watching *Seinfeld* returns. It just knows that you’re sitting. A lot.” (Collins, 2009, p. 15).

This passage reflects how unnatural it is in a biological sense to spend long periods of time vegging out in front of the television. Collins remarks that “Some forms of sitting are more ‘active’ than others. The TV variety is the worst possible kind because passively watching a screen lowers your metabolic rate to a semi-

hibernating stage” (Collins, 2009, p. 15). This issue poses a significant risk to individuals who enjoy binge watching television for hours and hours.

Audience. Mary Collins' book is relevant to a general audience – mainstream Americans as well as people concerned about public health (Collins, 2017) .

However, many city planners embraced the ideas present in *American Idle*, and even Yale University was inspired to conduct a study on movement in the workplace as a result of the book (Collins, 2017). These audiences included a portion of the complex of the rhetorical situation as the Collins wrote to an intended audience, that was “constrained in decision and action” (Bitzer, 1968, p. 6). These audience constraints influenced Collins as the rhetor to produce a piece that can be applicable to the audience in a personal way (Bitzer, 1968).

Mary Collins encourages her readers to put away current social norms revolving around sedentary habits in *American Idle*. These social norms include sprinkling in physical activity into everyday life, and does not encourage people to limit physical activity to organized sessions at the local gym (Collins, 2009). The Center for Disease Control is always looking for ways to have American audiences relate to their health promotion messages. Individuals with careers in health and health promotion and policy makers most likely will be receptive to the messages in *American Idle* because *American Idle* promotes practical daily movement for a healthy lifestyle. Hopefully this book does not only incite desire for action in the health professional or policy maker, but that typical individuals who are interested in living a more active healthy lifestyle pick up *American Idle* and see its relevance in

current society. Collins intends to be persuasive and to encourage her audience to move in a way that is healthy for their bodies. She remarked,

“Americans have come to accept work conditions in offices and in factories that require them to repeat the same motion day after day. It might be typing or salting potato slices, but it’s definitely not good for their bodies. At least the Utz workers shift stations every thirty minutes, a concession that men like Henry Ford rarely made” (Collins, 2009, p. 46).

Collins encourages her audience to thoroughly think about the effects of repetitive movement on people in the workplace. Collins recognizes the growth in industrial practices over the years in companies who try to take care of their employees, and rotate those engaging in repetitive movements often. The passage above reflects the constraints in a rhetorical situation and insists companies and managers have the power to change policies to make employee’s lives better (Bitzer, 1968).

Collins continued her search to determine the impact of modern day employment on the quality of life of Americans. Collins cited Juliet Schor’s book, *The Overworked American*, and mentioned, “the economy and society demand too much of most adults, especially single others and minorities living on the edge” (Collins, 2009, p. 72). Collins then remarked, “The average person has just sixteen hours of leisure a week (that counts domestic chores and job-hours as ‘work’), which reflects a continual decline in leisure time in the United States since World War II”(Collins, 2009, p. 72). In this instance, the exigence, (Bitzer, 1968), is a gradual cultural shift through a series of small changes in the workplace and home life.

Constraints. Collins wrote in the introduction,

“This book is not about losing weight, will not provide a self-help guide on how to exercise, and will not dwell on the obvious consequences of being inactive while eating a diet high in saturated fat, salt, refined flour, and sugar. Instead you will reconnect with your own physical legacy by traveling with me to the Great Plains to retrace the walking trails of prehistoric people. You will visit factory floors and see the physical sacrifices so many people make at their jobs. You will walk neighborhoods with an eye toward rebuilding community life by getting more people on foot in public spaces. You will become aware, perhaps for the first time, of the spiritual and moral costs of our sedentary lifestyle. And if you follow my journey all the way to the end, you may find your own road back to physical grace” (Collins, 2009, pp. xxvii–xxviii).

This passage highlights the events and objects and their relation as part of constraints to the rhetorical situation (Bitzer, 1968). When considering *American Idle* and the constraints in the rhetorical situation, the author Mary Collins is the "sender" and the readers of the book are the "receivers." The events encompass the cultural context that promotes sedentary behavior, as discussed earlier in the contextual analysis. In addition, the objects include the messages and narratives in *American Idle*. The relations portion of this study comprises of the interplay between the logic of the non-narrative information presented in *American Idle* and coherence of the narratives in *American Idle*.

Later in the text, Collins recognized constraints to everyday exercise and mentions “As a writer and college professor, I have tremendous control over my schedule and yet “lack of time” remains a major obstacle even for me when it comes to getting the activity I want in my day” (Collins, 2009, p. 72). Mary Collins continued to give examples of everyday lifestyle things, such as lack of money, childcare restraints, and unsafe outdoor space that promote sedentary behavior (Collins, 2009). These everyday experiences discussed in *American Idle* should resonate with the average reader in the United States.

The constraints Mary Collins mentioned often lead individuals to consume television for lack of better entertainment options (Evans et al., 2011). Not only do individuals engage in sedentary behavior while watching television, but they are the “targets of intensive commercial marketing campaigns promoting soda, fast foods, and high-calorie snacks, along with passive leisure-time activities, including TV, movies, and video games” (Kumanyika & Brownson, 2007, p. 222). Many individuals have access to hundreds of shows, and television may seem like an appealing option after a long day of work. Cultural influences on sedentary behavior offer a competing discourse to the discourse of a healthy lifestyle. These examples demonstrate how social norms promote sedentary behavior.

Bitzer’s rhetorical situation described the way *American Idle* was written as a rhetorical act; Collins wrote *American Idle* to incite action and provided many examples of obstacles to engaging in physical activity, and offered some practical solutions to overcome these obstacles (Campbell & Huxman, 2003). *American Idle* provides a response to the current health crisis in the United States; as a situation

becomes rhetorical when it creates space to include potentially reality changing discourse, and that discourse continues to function as an appropriate response to the situation (Bitzer, 1968).

American Idle and the Narrative Paradigm. Fisher developed the narrative paradigm on the premise that “humans as rhetorical beings are as much valuing as reasoning animals” (Walter R. Fisher, 1987, p. 57). Fisher wrote,

“When I use the term ‘narration,’ I do not mean a fictive composition whose propositions may be true or false and have no necessary relationship to the message of that composition. By ‘narration’ I mean symbolic actions—words, and/or deeds—that have sequence and meaning for those who live, create, and interpret them” (Walter R. Fisher, 1987, p. 58).

Kenneth Burke reinforces Fisher and recognizes the medium humans use to communicate these verbal representations of reality, but notes how people often fail to acknowledge the full effect of the power of symbols present in the language people use in everyday life (Burke, 1963). Reasoning cannot be constrained to pure argumentative prose; words as symbols cannot contain the process of reasoning in of themselves (Fisher, 1984). Ideas need a vehicle in order to be effectively communicated to others. Humans communicate through words which include descriptions that match things that are present in the physical sense; for instance, when the word “tree” is spoken, most people have a picture in their minds of the physical representation of the word, and can relate the spoken word to that physical representation. However, words can describe beyond what is physically experienced by the five senses, such as spiritual things or philosophical ideas.

The process of sharing a story, or narrative, can be referred to as “a theory of symbolic actions—words and/or deeds—that have sequence and meaning or those who live, create, or interpret them” (Fisher, p. 1984, p. 2). Fisher’s perspective of narrative permits one to include physical things as well as imaginative things in their story. Narratives can describe the ways in which people share their ideas and reasoning processes with others.

Humans communicate through narratives. Words paint pictures in the minds of the sender and receiver and are a medium for conveying information. Metaphors create meaning and communicate that meaning in terms of one thing to another (Hauser, 2002). Metaphors are often used in narratives and enhance narrative because metaphors create pictures others may understand. For instance, Collins reflected on the exchange of ideas during a conference and wrote, “I leave the room once again feeling that a lot of ideas are getting swirled around like the beer foam in the glass I’m drinking out of at a bar at the end of the evening” (Collins, 2009, p. 87). The audience can physically picture beer foam swirling, which will permit them to understand something abstract, such as ideas swirling. Metaphor is how humans can describe things that are hard to explain, such as love, or abstract ideas.

Narratives contain what is known as “a master metaphor” that is able to set “the plot of human experience and the others the subplots. When any of the other metaphors is asserted as the master metaphor, narration is figure: a type of human interaction—and activity, an art, a genre, or a mode of expression” (Fisher, 1987, p. 62). In essence, narrative consists of themes most humans can relate to and understand. The importance of narrative transcends culture. All cultures use

narratives in some form, whether words or deeds (Fisher, 1984). Native American peoples used narratives and dances to transfer traditional, ceremonial, survival and descriptive information throughout the generations (“Circle of Stories . Many Voices | PBS,” n.d.) This description affirms narrative as a medium for sharing meaning, and this method is important in every generation and culture. In ancient historical times, many narratives were passed down through spoken stories, while others were left written in a picture or a language; no matter the form, narratives are an important way of communicating information, cultural traditions and personal stories.

The narrative paradigm takes a philosophical approach to the study of communication (Fisher, 1985). People can use the narrative paradigm to compare a story they hear with their own experiences. They can also reflect on their own story and the personal meaning it holds for them. Fisher developed the narrative paradigm to offer additional freedom to former views of reason. Fisher noted that conventional reasoning, “does not serve well for understanding fictive discourse or even much realistic discourse” (Fisher, 1987, p. 57). Fisher contended that previous forms of reason failed to successfully encapsulate good descriptions of narrative, and he developed “a conception of rationality based on narration” (Walter R. Fisher, 1987, p. 58). By narration Fisher included “symbolic actions—words and/or deeds—that have sequence and meaning for those who live, create, or interpret them” (Walter R. Fisher, 1987, p. 58). For Fisher, these “symbolic actions” served as a medium for constructing and interpreting stories.

Rhetoric is vehicle for expressing truth and understanding (Fisher, 1985). In this, the narrative paradigm provides a method for a way to interpret and critique

communication in order to determine if it is a consistent and reliable rhetorical contribution (Fisher, 1985). The narrative paradigm offers a perspective shift as, “the rational-world model holds that only experts are capable of presenting or discerning sound arguments, the narrative paradigm maintains that, armed with a bit of common sense, almost any of us can see the point of a good story and judge its merits as the basis for belief and action” (Griffin, 2009, p. 302). Therefore, the narrative paradigm takes a bit more liberal approach by accounting for rhetorical situations beyond the rational-world model.

Narratives allow a group to have a shared story or vision and stories may constitute the very “fabric of social reality for those who compose them (Fisher, 1984, p. 7). A consistent story will be well-respected, with persuasive values transmitted through the narrative process. For example, a family’s oral tradition might be filled with stories of many instances of overcoming obstacles. These stories may provide some guidance as to how a family member should act in situations of struggle. Additionally, stories can offer some guidelines of appropriate family behavior and expectations.

Fisher’s assumptions of the narrative paradigm state, “(1) humans are essentially storytellers;” humans feel naturally inclined to share events in the form of a story instead of just plain facts (Fisher, 1984, p. 8). The perspective may change depending on the situation as “(2) the paradigmatic mode of human decision-making and communication is 'good reasons' which vary in form among communication situations, genres, and media” (Fisher, 1984, p. 8). Narratives show the ways “(3) the production and practice of good reasons is ruled by matters of history, biography,

culture, and character”(Fisher, 1984, p. 8). What is considered logical and reasonable can change. People value stories that challenge them, and they often think about their purpose in the world. People communicate everyday information and deep philosophical perceptions of their place in the world by using symbols, which represent deeper meaning. These symbols, or words, may be used to express how people interact with the world around them, and words help people articulate their process of reasoning.

There are some narratives from extremists that are not rational to the listener, therefore it is important to consider the source of the narrative and “(4) rationality is determined by the nature of persons as narrative beings—their inherent awareness of narrative probability, what constitutes a coherent story, and their constant habit of testing narrative fidelity, whether the stories they experience ring true with the stories they know to be true in their lives” (Fisher, 1984, p. 8). A rational narrative can be influenced by the credibility of the speaker and confirmed through the lived experiences of the listeners. People would be right to question any narrative that seems outside of the logical realm of possible experiences. The speaker can enhance the narrative by providing logical proof to help solidify the lived experiences as legitimate.

Finally, certain narratives are chosen depending on the goal of the recipient. Fisher explains that (5) "the world is a set of stories which must be chosen among to live the good life in a process of continual recreation." He clarifies that "good reasons are the stuff of stories, the means by which humans realize their nature as reason-valuing animals." In Fisher's view, "the philosophical ground of the narrative

paradigm is ontology. The materials of the narrative paradigm are symbols, signs of consubstantiation, and good reasons, the communicative expressions of social reality." (1984, p. 8). Words, language, and symbolic action are products of the narrative paradigm.

It is beneficial for rhetorical narratives to have satisfying amounts of narrative fidelity because then the audience is more likely to connect and embrace the narrative. One can draw from Fisher's logic of good reasons to consider if the facts presented in the narrative are actually reliable (Walter R. Fisher, 1987). There are five primary components in the logic of reasons. First, one should consider if the facts present in the message are indeed reliable. Second, one should attempt to decipher between relevant facts and misconstrued facts. Third, one uses "mainly standards from informal logic" to recognize and judge various "patterns of reasoning." Fourth, one should determine how relevant the arguments are towards supporting the points considered in the main case. And fifth, "one makes a judgement as to whether or not the message directly addresses the 'real' issues in the case" (Walter R. Fisher, 1987, ps. 108-109). These components in the logic of reasons can guide the critic through the process of judgment about the message in order to determine the coherence of narratives present throughout the piece of rhetoric.

Although stories are a centerpiece of Mary Collin's book, she does not rely solely on narratives in *American Idle*. She cites many sources of information and conducts several interviews in the process of composing this book. That noted, narrative material dominates the book. Collins presents three types of narratives in *American Idle*: primary narratives, consisting of her own personal stories of her lived

experience; secondary narratives, stories from someone else's lived experience; and reflective narratives, where she reflects on what she learned as she composed *American Idle*. These types of narratives echo Fisher's concept of good reasons which leads to narrative coherence.

Primary Narratives. Mary Collins' journey began with her personal narrative about her bicycle accident, "I have no memory of the bicycle accident that inspired this book or the helicopter ride that swooped me to the Washington Hospital Trauma Center in the nation's capital" (Collins, 2009, xv). She went on to say, "With one ill-fated slip of my bicycle wheel, I became more like the average American. I began to count myself lucky if I engaged in moderate exercise three times a week" (Collins, 2009, p. xv). Fisher mentions, "some stories are better than others, more coherent, more 'true' to the way people and the world are—in perceived fact and value" (Walter R. Fisher, 1987, p. 68). Collins set her experiences up in such a way that people can relate, using words like "average" and shared her relatable struggle with attaining enough exercise. These passages indicate narrative rationality because they are set up in a way that is relatable to an American audience. The material in Collins' primary narratives remain coherent, as material coherence is defined as "a type of coherence referring to the congruence between one story and other related stories" (West & Turner, 2007, p. 381). All of Collins' stories of discovery lead back to how her bicycle accident influences her in every aspect of her physical activity. Collins mentions, "I stare at a planet just above the rising morning light and realize that after six years of rehabilitating my broken body, I am finally able to sit for five hours in an airplane seat without extreme pain and make it to California" (Collins, 2009, p. 79).

This passage expresses how the bicycle accident is sewn into all of Collins' primary narratives.

Mary Collins reflected on how her personal experiences playing basketball games in the Hartford area of Connecticut as a white girl with black men taught her lessons she would have never learned playing alone in her driveway; or the ways they challenged her, and grew to respect her over time (2009). She mentioned,

“Today I work for myself, in part, because of what I learned on those city courts. Mastering the nuances of the social interplay, mastering the way the ball is supposed to roll around in your hand when you dribble, took discipline, focus, and a clear sense of myself. I knew where I wanted to bring my body and I took myself there. I know where I want to be as a writer and I'm taking myself there with this very line. Public spaces and free play gave me these things, something my daughter will probably never know” (Collins, 2009, p. 37).

Collins' experience reflects on the social and interpersonal factors of the social ecologic paradigm. Additionally, Collins' story demonstrates how the “fabric of social reality” was during her teenage years, and through this description of her social reality tells a story that others might relate to, and embrace as coherent (Fisher, 1984).

Many people who have overcome an injury can relate to stories of others that share a similar experience. Collins shared how she used to wade in a freezing cold tidal pool as a child, and how the composition of *American Idle* led her to rediscover the sensation (2009). She wrote,

“I admit I am here for my book so I can relive the memory of the extreme cold on the soles of my feet, but I am also here to celebrate the full feeling in my legs. The month following my accident I began to lose sensation and strength in my left leg and no one, not even the surgeon, knew if I could regain it. I press my toes into the sandy bottom, close my eyes, and feel the motion of the tide against my thighs. I experience a sense of vertigo, which I find appealing because it makes me think of the earth rotating on its axis. I am moving way outside of myself into the landscape, which embraces me because I let it. I know it will all soothe me—the pungent salty air, the rush of noise pulsating from the waves on the other side, the biting coolness against my skin” (Collins, 2009, p. 143).

Mary Collins’ description of the sensations she was able to feel after her recovery highlights Fisher’s concept of narration, “a theory of symbolic actions—words and/or deeds—that have sequence and meaning for those who live, create or interpret them” (1984, p. 2). Collins’ physical experience is relatable and can be included in Fisher’s description of the “master metaphor” described as “the plot of human experience” (1984, p. 6). This “master metaphor” discusses sensations people can identify with, and carries the audience to the specific experience.

Secondary Narratives. Mary Collins interviewed many people along her journey of discovery and writing. When she stopped in Kanorado, Kansas to learn about how the first people moved across the landscape, she met a geologist, Rolfe Mandel and archeologist, Steve Holen (Collins, 2009). Rolfe Mandel supervised the Kanorado dig, and believed artifacts in the dig dated back at least 14,000 years

(Collins, 2009). The Kanorado dig revealed how “nearly all the stone tools they have found came from somewhere else: Smokey Hill jasper from Nebraska, Hartville chert from Wyoming, and Alibates from the panhandle of Texas” (Collins, 2009, p. 2). Rolfe Mandel and his colleagues noted this meant “hunger-gatherers carried them here on foot while trekking as much as 250 miles (400 km) twice a year in pursuit of water and game” (Collins, 2009, p. 2). Rolfe Mandel mentioned, “We haven’t found a single locally made lithic here. There’s too much of it to claim it was just trade. People carried it here” (Collins, 2009, p. 2). This narrative reflects how Rolfe Mandel’s expertise in geology provided answers to the physical capabilities of humans, reinforcing the storytelling aspect of Fisher’s narrative paradigm.

Collins met the archeologist Steve Holen, who told Collins a story only bones could tell. Steve Holen grew up in Nebraska, and ancient artifacts were all around his family’s farm (Collins, 2009). Holen spent his doctoral research studying prehistoric tools in various locations across the Great Plains (Collins, 2009). Holen discovered the markings on ancient mammoth bones had a story to tell; he “believes he’s found a spiral pattern that only humans could make as they cracked them open to get at the marrow” (Collins, 2009, p. 3). Mary Collins remarked, “If he’s right, then the fossils he’s found show that people may have traveled around the Great Plains as long as 18,000 years ago and moved distances every season that would make your car weary” (Collins, 2009, p. 3). Steve Holen’s doctoral research focused on “signs of consubstantiation” (Fisher, 1984, p. 8); essentially, Holen’s research told a story is reinforced in archeological proof. This narrative and others Collins shared in *American Idle* are purposeful acts of persuasion. This archeological proof persuades

readers to recognize what humans are capable of, enhancing the exigence portion of Bitzer's rhetorical situation; further, this proof should incite action in the readers of *American Idle*, as a call to put away sedentary behavior.

Collins went on to mention how Steve Holen invited Alan Alda to the dig site to film "a PBS special about changing ideas on how and when prehistoric settlers came to the North American continent" (Collins, 2009, p. 3). In this documentary, Alda managed to fracture a beef thighbone by hammering it between two rocks (Collins, 2009). Collins recorded Steve Holen's reaction and added her own thoughts: Holen mentioned,

'you've made a spiral fracture that's unique. Only humans can make this spiral fracture,' "which means the mammoth bones with the tell-tale spiral fractures that he keeps finding in Nebraska, Wyoming, and now Kanorado, Kansas, were cracked open by people. Not lions, or hyenas, or the now extinct sort-faced bear, but by tool-bearing hunter-gatherers who wanted to get at the marrow" (Collins, 2009, p. 4).

This passage aligns historical evidence duplicated by other archaeologists with Steve Holen's dissertation work, adding rhetorical coherence and fidelity to the narrative through the fantasy theme. Fisher described Bormann's concept of fantasy themes as an agreed constructed group social reality and stated how these 'rhetorical visions' exist (Fisher, 1984). Furthermore, Fisher stated these rhetorical visions are a "demonstration as partial evidence for the validity of the narrative paradigm" (Fisher, 1984, p. 7). The act of previous archaeologists contributing to a shared reality of discovery leading to an enhanced understanding of ancient human ability and

demonstrate narrative fidelity and coherence. Narrative fidelity in this case is how Collins' argument that humans have only evolved to be more sedentary and the archeologists' discovery supports her argument as a coherent story (Fisher, 1984).

Additionally, the archeologists' shared reality of discovery provides a type of characterological coherence, defined as "a type of coherence referring to the believability of the characters in the story" (West & Turner, 2007, p. 381). The characters in this case are the archeologists and geologists working on the Kanorado dig. The archeologists' story about human movement is believable because of the evidence discovered at the dig site further supported the archeologists' beliefs about the physical capabilities of humans.

Reflective Narratives. Collins spent some time reflecting on her experiences during the composition of *American Idle*. She began her story of discovery with a visit to a small Kansas town called Kanorado (Collins, 2009). This small town held the smallest prehistoric campground on the Great Plains, and was the site of an archaeological dig (Collins, 2009). Collins wanted to begin at this small town and stated, "I don't want to emulate the hunter-gatherer lifestyle, which was so physically demanding that few people lived past age forty-five, but I do want to trace the remarkable story of how they used their bodies" (Collins, 2009, p. 1). Fisher notes, "the production and practice of 'good reasons' is ruled by matters of history, biography, culture, and character" (Fisher, 1984, p. 7). Collins' "good reasons" for conducting this study are catapulted by personal experience and an understanding of the ways culture has impacted Americans in the past and will in the future.

Collins met with Rolfe Mandel, who was a geologist from the University of Kansas who supervised the Kanorado archeological dig (Collins, 2009). Interestingly, the archeological dig posed some challenges to previous thought about movement patterns of these hunter/gatherers. Archeologists found nearly all of the tools these ancient people used came from a different part of the country, “Smokey Hill jasper from Nebraska, Hartville chert from Wyoming, and Alibates from the panhandle of Texas” (Collins, 2009, p. 2). Collins notes how this discovery inspired the archeologist Steve Holen, Rolfe’s colleague, to assume these tools could be carried by the hunter-gatherers “on foot while trekking as much as 250 miles (400 km) twice a year in pursuit of water and game. That breaks down to something like eight to ten miles a day, which is a tall order even for seasoned soldiers, never mind a band of fifty or so people that might have included children and the elderly” (Collins, 2009, p. 2). This passage assumes humans have always been able to physically move great distances if necessary, and how modern humans have been conditioned to be sedentary, further supporting the coherence of the cultural narrative of sedentary behavior.

After Mary Collins saw the Kanorado dig site, Rolfe Mandel mentioned there were three more sites within a half mile of the Kanorado dig site; Mary Collins wanted to walk there, Rolfe Mandel insisted they drive due to the sharp bushes covering the landscape (Collins, 2009). At the next dig site, Mary Collins walked around for a bit, and came upon a hole, which Rolfe Mandel mentioned it was likely a snake (Collins, 2009). Collins reflected,

“I can have all the idealistic ideas I want about moving through the landscape like my hunter-gatherer ancestors, but in reality, I probably couldn’t make six kilometers out here on a June day without cutting up my calves on some prickly plant or putting my ignorant face in line with a poisonous snake’s front door. I have no idea how to walk this land” (Collins, 2009, p. 6)

Collins’ reflection encapsulates narrative rationality, which is “descriptive; it offers an account, an understanding, of any instance of human choice and action” (Fisher, 1984, p. 67). Collins’ experience of the untamed land offers a sharp account of how out of touch modern humans are with their physical environment compared to previous generations.

Collins also mentioned how easy it is to stop expending energy as adults. She shared, “As a teenager, I used to summer in Cape Cod, Massachusetts, where I’d bike five miles at midday to an outdoor basketball court, play for a few hours, and then bike home. I could never pull off such a feat of endurance today, but at the time I gave it little thought. My body had adapted to a rigorous physical life in the heat” (Collins, 2009, p. 14).

In this passage, Collins reflects on her personal experience, and creates a picture others can understand. Collins’ audience can relate to her experience through engaging in a shared reality, or fantasy chain, consisting of typical childhood experiences in the United States (Fisher, 1984).

Another example of a picture many can relate to is when Collins sought to understand how American manufacturing impacts the health of manufacturing employees. While assembly-line manufacturing helps companies churn out products

within a relatively short time, they can take a physical toll on the employee. In the late 1800's a man named Frederick Taylor decided to take it upon himself to use his previous work experience as a pattern maker at a foundry to observe every element of human production (Derksen, 2014). Frederick Taylor used his observations and came up with the best possible way to achieve a task (Collins, 2009). Taylor accomplished this by using four elements to manage a typical workshop: "a strict separation of the planning and the execution of work; the exact timing of the constituent parts, the elementary units, of a job; and finally his differential piece rate" (Derksen, 2014, p. 3). Taylor insisted the average worker was not capable of understanding something as complicated as the science behind their movements, and left the employee to work in a management environment that dictated their every move (Derksen, 2014). Taylor even measured routine movements such as shoveling coal into a boiler, and improved efficiency by removing what he considered wasteful and unnecessary movements (Derksen, 2014). Taylors' studies continue to affect many manufacturing decisions today.

Mary Collins decided to see how modern assembly lines affect the human body. She visited the Utz chip factory and was given a full tour by Kris Shakely, an occupational nurse at the factory (Collins, 2009). Collins mentioned,

"At our first stop overlooking the machines, women in blue aprons pick burnt potato chips off a conveyor belt. More than three thousand pounds of chips rumble by every hour. In my perch behind a glass panel about six feet above their heads, I can feel an intense vibration rising through my feet as though the building has a cold and is shivering. 'We move the chips with vibrations so

they won't break,' Kris says. I say nothing for almost a minute and just let the movement of the machines fill me. There's so much controlled energy in this place from the potato chip slicer to the conveyor belt rolling bags at a methodical but relentless clip" (Collins, 2009, p. 39)

Collins' reflection noted that aspects of Taylorism is still very much in use in today's production. She goes on to mention, "A potato chip may weigh less than an ounce, but try scanning, leaning, and snatching for even thirty minutes and suddenly weight is no longer the problem. Even minute movements become unbearable if you have to repeat them enough" (Collins, 2009, p. 40). Employees need job autonomy and skill variety; without these things, employees lose morale, lack motivation, and are not as productive (Parker, 2003). Companies engaging in lean production methods, specifically assembly lines, tend to have employees experience limited commitment to their jobs and workplace depression (Parker, 2003). Companies should have employees working assembly lines regularly rotate their positions often so their bodies receive a break from physical and psychological stressors caused by routine movement. Collins mentions, "Utz tries to get around the repetitive motion injuries by shifting the blue-apron women to a new station every thirty minutes" (Collins, 2009, p. 40).

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Collins mentions, “Utz tries to get around the repetitive motion injuries by shifting the blue-apron women to a new station every thirty minutes” (Collins, 2009, p. 40). Collins wondered if this was enough. Kris Shakely told Collins when the trucks arrived at noon to be loaded up the process was organized like a ballet (Collins, 2009). But Collins wondered if this process could be so seamless and remarked, “when truck drivers sit for hours every day and perform repetitive lifting that hurts their knees and backs, it’s not a proper dance. The whole factory makes me feel how much we’ve violated the contract we have with our bodies in most workplaces and I just want to leave” (Collins, 2009, p. 45). Collins written reflection of her experience is a rhetorical act to the audience (Campbell & Huxman, 2003).

Mary Collins wrote *American Idle* with the purpose to persuade Americans to engage in healthy amounts of exercise. *American Idle* is a rhetorical act, which is defined as “an intentional, created, polished attempt to overcome with obstacles in a given situation with a specific audience on a given issue to achieve a particular end” (Campbell & Huxman, 2003, p. 7). Mary Collins compiled narrative and her own research in a purposeful manner in order to incite action. Fisher’s narrative paradigm added value to the narratives in *American Idle* because the paradigm highlighted the coherence and fidelity of the narratives, which offered further support for *American Idle* as a rhetorical act. *American Idle* fulfilled core elements of the narrative paradigm as *American Idle* had many narratives, and humans are storytellers (Fisher, 1984); the perspectives from each narrator is different depending on the situation,

(Fisher, 1984); history and culture were used together to demonstrate good reasons (Fisher, 1984); and many issues covered in *American Idle* discuss how physical activity is important.

***American Idle* and the Ecological Model of Physical Activity.** When applied to *American Idle*, rhetorical situation concepts highlight the audiences for the book as well as the constraints it must overcome. The Narrative Paradigm analysis features the different types of stories Collins employs to influence her readers.

The Ecological Model of Physical Activity (hereafter referred to as the Model), although not a part of the rhetorical theory and criticism literature, offers insights into how the built environment is very influential in people's lives. The model observes the amount of "influence on behavior, from individual and social factors to institutional, community, built environment, and policy factors (Sallis, Floyd, Rodríguez, & Saelens, 2012, p. 729). Essentially, this model seeks to explain how many factors weave together with planned behavior to support or discourage people from engaging in physical activity. Consequently, the model can be used to examine how Collins discusses physical activity.

Some variables that encourage the individual to regularly participate in physical activity comprise of "individual characteristics such as perceived functional ability, socioeconomic status, and motivational variables" (Fleury & Lee, 2006, p. 131). Unsurprisingly, "Socioeconomic status has been shown to have a significant impact on the initiation and maintenance of health promoting behaviors, including participation in regular physical activity" (Fleury & Lee, 2006, p. 131). Unfortunately, people who have less socioeconomic resources tend to be less active,

especially women (Fleury & Lee, 2006). However, “women who perceived support for their activity behaviors and who had social role models were more likely to participate in physical activity at recommended levels” (Fleury & Lee, 2006, p. 135). This reinforces how social support in a community may largely impact physical activity participation.

The ecological paradigm shows a portion about the ways environment impacts participation in exercise. For instance, “Among community and environmental factors, concerns for safety were a primary barrier to physical activity among African American women. The presence of convenient facilities for physical activity, as well as environmental resources such as sidewalks in the neighborhood were found to be consistent indicators of physical activity” (Fleury & Lee, 2006, p. 135). This passage indicates the importance of feeling safe and having access to resources. It is apparent how beliefs about the ability to engage in physical activity combined with access to safe places to exercise and encouraging social support positively impact individual health. For instance, “the higher the percentage of people engaging in physical activity in a county, the higher people’s general perception toward health” (Sato, Du, & Inoue, 2016, p. 645). These results should encourage policy makers to use the ecological model of physical activity as a tool to develop interventions that improve health in the community.

Health and wellness is a huge issue in the United States. The Center for Disease Control records rapid rates of increasing American waistlines and insists at least one third of adult North Americans are classified as obese (“Adult Obesity Facts | Overweight & Obesity | CDC,” n.d.). These numbers continue to rise despite public

health efforts. Additionally, obese individuals cost more to care for and employ. Obese individuals can cost their employers among \$175-\$2027 per year between missing work due to their medical condition and additional medical expenditures (Finkelstein, Fiebelkorn, & Wang, 2005). These numbers do not reflect overweight employees not classified as obese. The narratives in Mary Collins' *American Idle* capture many influencing factors that encourage adults to remain sedentary, and sedentary behavior makes it difficult to live a healthy active lifestyle.

Mary Collins composed *American Idle* because she was driven by implicit cultural factors, such as dependence on the automobile for short distances, reliance on fast food, and lack of safe spaces to exercise and how they contribute to expanding waistlines and detracting life spans (Collins, 2009). Additionally, Collins laments on the growing divide between everyday people and professional athletes (2009). She notes, "The spontaneous physical flow that characterized life for our hunter-gather ancestors on the Great Plains has been lost. Even the ultimate sports director of the ultimate sports team believes this is a devastating shift that impacts not only the physical, but also the spiritual center of our society" (Collins, 2009, p. xx). This claim reflects how the issue of limiting the practice of fitness to something only permitted in special confined portions of life is problematic. Collins' work persuades others to think about the impact of the physical environment and how it impacts overall health, wellness, and fitness.

Access to safe facilities and resources is representative of the ecological model's environmental setting influence, and how lack of access to these safe facilities pose as barriers for some. When Mary Collins interviewed Matilde Palmer,

who manages a nonprofit organization that helps Latina women and children adjust to life in the U.S., Collins shared her observations from the meeting some of the women and her interview with Matilde and stated, “It’s clear that none of these women has the money or time to take anything like an exercise class, and while they certainly have physically demanding jobs, all of them are overweight (Collins, 2009, p. 59). While this seems a bit counterinitiative because the women work physically demanding jobs, Matilde emphasizes,

“In my country and their countries, you did not have the privilege of going to a restaurant. But then people come here and they see McDonalds and are so excited that they can take their family to a restaurant. But it’s not a real restaurant, you know what I mean, and it’s bad for them, but they don’t know that. All they know is that they can afford it” (Collins, 2009, p. 59).

These passages above further support issues discussed in the ecological model of physical activity adding to Collins’ narrative coherence because they highlight issues of experiences that people know to be true in their lives (Fisher, 1984). These passages also reinforce some barriers to fitness and healthy lifestyle due to lack of safe spaces and financial resources.

Collins mentioned many times in *American Idle* the importance of access to good food and safe, green outdoor spaces (2009). Collins interviewed Rachel Winch about the ease of living a healthy lifestyle. Rachel disclosed to Mary Collins during the interview how challenging it is to find healthy food and said “even those of us for whom all of this is central to our lives, who care deeply about physical activity and nutrition, the conditions are stacked against us” (Collins, 2009, p. 61). Mary Collins

interviewed Rachel Winch in Washington D.C., and Rachel impressed upon Collins how much easier it had been for her to live a healthier lifestyle in California where she could find fresh produce and safe bicycle lanes (Collins, 2009). This interview provided a great example of collective narrative coherence because many people in the United States experience some sort of barrier to healthy lifestyle choices.

For instance, well-kept parks containing playgrounds, basketball courts, and other structures are generally associated with a greater amount of energy expenditure (Sallis et al., 2012). Of course, public spaces are only one element of a built environment. Mary Collins mentions how 50% of children biked to school when she was a child, but nowadays she believes less than one percent bike to school on a regular basis (2009). The built environment can either support or detract from active transportation, such as bicycling to the office, and active transportation has declined the past few decades (Sallis et al., 2012). Collins reiterated this issue in *American Idle*:

“Families will agree to carpool but not bike-pool because the local roads lack safe bicycle lanes. On several key stretches of the three-mile journey between my house and my daughter’s former middle school, there are no sidewalks. I’m so passionate about getting Americans moving again that I spent three years writing this book, but I *still* had to drive my child to middle school. The local landscape and culture make it very difficult to choose any other option. When we slash physical movement out of our daily commutes, we interact less with the general community. We see the people we choose to see and

who look the most like us. When my daughter rides in my car to school, she sees the back of my head and the front lawns of her well-to-do neighbors” (Collins, M., 2009, p. 92).

Collins’ book captured many factors present in social ecological model, specifically focusing on the ecological model of four domains of active living. Zoning codes, transportation investment and regulations as well as public recreation and park policies are captured within the policy environment portion of the model (Sallis et al., 2006). Collins discussed how there were a lack of safe spaces to bike safely, which is a direct result of resource direction within the city. The actual walkability or availability of community facilities such as trails and parks, as well as programs such as walk/bike to school capture the behavior settings: access and characteristics portion of the model (Sallis et al., 2006). The perception of how safe it is to walk or bike in the space, or if the space is accessible and crime free falls into the perceived environment domain (Sallis et al., 2006). These different environments may influence the intrapersonal.

Collins has successfully discussed the role of the built environment and the impact it had on her personal morning commute. She described how something as subtle as no safe sidewalks impacted potential communicative events between neighbors and community members. The lack of sidewalks in neighborhood may act as an example to reinforce how a physical structure may impact someone on an intrapersonal level. For instance, the lack of sidewalks may encourage people to drive in places they would otherwise walk because driving is safer. Driving then becomes the regular form of transportation for otherwise walkable commutes, and people do

not interact with each other during their morning routine, which impacts the social climate, and influences social norms (Sallis et al., 2006). These examples demonstrate how the Ecological Model of Four Domains of Active Living show a layered picture and does not point toward a singular cause of sedentary behavior; this model helps to reinforce the fidelity of the narratives presented in *American Idle* because public health practitioners recognize interventions need to take this ecological approach in order to be successful (Kumanyika & Brownson, 2007).

These narratives are further reinforced through research conducted by Brownson, et al., (2001). Research shows that men and women report different levels of access; for instance, “men again tended to report higher levels of availability of places and equipment for leisure-time physical activity for each category except shopping malls” (Brownson, Baker, Housemann, Brennan, & Bacak, 2001, p. 3). It is noteworthy to observe the ways socioeconomic status influences physical activity differently between men and women. For instance, “among women, those with higher incomes generally reported greater access than those with lower incomes to areas or equipment such as walking or jogging trails, parks, and treadmills. In contrast, among men, those with lower incomes generally reported higher rates of access than those with higher incomes” (Brownson et al., 2001, p. 3). Perhaps this is due to women often feeling more vulnerable engaging in physical activity in a community they do not perceive to be completely safe.

For instance, some parks and public spaces are not safe. In Hartford, a park originally created by the bicycle manufacturer Albert Pope to permits his employees

to have a safe and enjoyable space to participate in physical activity is no longer open for some forms of unstructured play. Collins notes,

“like so many public spaces in America, Pope Park has become a place where unstructured play and casual outings are no longer possible. One of the great under-told stories in the physical-fitness saga is the role of the declining use of public parks for casual play. Near my home most of the fields require a permit before a group can use the field. If my young daughter brought some friends to a local field for a pick-up game of kickball, city officials would chase them away” (2009, p. 36).

This passage reinforces some key elements in the ecological model; specifically the way society is influenced through policy, such as public recreation and park policies (Sallis et al., 2012). A policy that requires additional efforts to attain access may prevent individuals from using the facility. Further, policies that regulate free play place an unnecessary hardship on youth who engage in active pastimes, and people who may not have sufficient funds to pay for organized sports.

Many of the narratives and stories in *American Idle* contained elements found in the ecological model. Elements such as the policy environment, built environment, and social/cultural environment all impact the individual (Sallis, et al., 2006). It is necessary to review *American Idle* with these elements in mind as these factors impact personal exercise behavior.

Conclusion

This thesis examines *American Idle* as a rhetorical act through the primary lenses of Bitzer’s Rhetorical Situation, Fisher’s Narrative Paradigm and the Social

Ecological Model. These lenses illuminate ways in which Mary Collins' *American Idle* advocates physical activity rather than sedentary behavior. The book-satisfies the three things that create a rhetorical situation: exigence, audience, and the various constraints that inspire the rhetor (Bitzer, 1968). *American Idle* was written in a time where at least 80% of adults do not meet the recommended amounts of physical activity ("Facts & Statistics - President's Council on Fitness, Sports & Nutrition," n.d.). Previous research found approximately 46% of full time employed men and 28% of full time employed women were overweight and 23% of full time men as well as 23% of full time employed women were obese (Finkelstein et al., 2005). Previous research found some workplaces spend between \$176-\$2485 per overweight or obese employee each year due to increased medical expenditures and absenteeism (Finkelstein et al., 2005). Researchers project if obesity continues at its current rate, medical costs in the United States for treatment may rise from \$48 billion a year to \$66 billion a year by 2030 ("Economic Costs," 2012). This immense financial burden provided context for *American Idle*, further reinforcing how the narratives satisfy Bitzer's elements of a rhetorical situation.

Mary Collins' text encapsulates assumptions of Fisher's narrative paradigm. One assumption is "humans are essentially storytellers" (Fisher, 1984, p. 8). *American Idle* includes stories told by people from many different walks of life, such as archeologists, geologists, zoologists, nonprofit agents, factory employees, and individuals who work in underprivileged communities (Collins, 2009). *American Idle* captures these individual experiences and constructs them into a larger, shared story.

Collins' "good reasons" or "paradigmatic mode of human decision-making and communication" (Fisher, 1984, p. 8), include cultural and contextual factors that drove her to compose *American Idle*. Fisher's "good reasons" can include factors of Bitzer's rhetorical situation because the rhetorical situation and context drove her to create this piece in the first place. Collins desired to inform people about how challenging it can be to maintain a healthy lifestyle, and wrote *American Idle* to include different examples of factors that acted as barriers to engaging in leisure-time physical activity.

Fisher mentioned "the production and practice of good reasons is ruled by matters of history, biography, culture, and character (1984, p. 8). Mary Collins conducted interviews and researched how the practice of physical activity has changed over time (2009). Collins researched archeological evidence to note the difference in physical activity in the United States in ancient times compared to modern life (2009). Mary Collins reflected on how elements in the United States' culture impacted her personal levels of physical activity (2009). Collins noted factors, such as lack of sidewalks and bicycle lanes, workplace constraints, and unsafe neighborhoods, as factors contributing to sedentary behavior (2009). These factors are merely physical representations of United States' cultural norms; i.e., it is normal to commute long distances via automobile to work.

Finally, Fisher mentioned narrative rationality is influenced by the nature of the narrator (1984). Essentially, did the narrator tell a story that resonated with what the audience knew as true in their personal lives? If so, then the narrative would seem to create a consist story and have high amounts of narrative fidelity (Fisher, 1984).

Mary Collins' second hand experiences and reflections on her journey placed *American Idle* in a context many audience members could understand; if they grew up in the United States, perhaps they had similar experiences.

This thesis needed all three critical perspectives in order to successfully describe *American Idle* as a piece of rhetoric. Bitzer's rhetorical situation provided a satisfactory description of *American Idle* as a rhetorical act because the ill effects of a sedentary lifestyle are concerning for public health practitioners; something must be done to address the health issues of Americans that are stemmed from too much sedentary behavior.

Fisher's narrative paradigm was a helpful method in understanding elements of rhetorical coherence and fidelity and highlighted the ways Mary Collins' narratives were persuasive because they captured multiple experiences and placed them into a larger, collective narrative that so many people can relate to and embrace. The stories Collins shared throughout *American Idle* captured the reader and took the reader along on the journey as Collins methodologically laid out some of the reasons she believed the United States is such a sedentary culture.

The social ecological model as a lens was helpful because it is a multidisciplinary approach that captures many elements Collins shared in her narratives. The various ecological models discussed in this thesis added to the credibility of *American Idle* as a piece of rhetoric because the models lay out all of the factors Collins discusses as contributing factors to obesity and sedentary living. Mary Collins spends a good deal of time setting up the events she believes led to a decline in physical activity, and recognizes there is no one direct cause to a sedentary

lifestyle. Health practitioners use ecological models in order to determine all of the potential causes of sedentary behavior because, like Collins, they recognize health issues in the United States are complicated problems without easy solutions.

Future Research

My analysis consisted of portions of the text that I felt were most interesting. Many sections of *American Idle* that caught my attention and I applied multiple theoretical concepts to the passages. The primary theories and perspectives I applied to my study were Bitzer's Rhetorical situation, Fisher's Narrative Paradigm, and the social ecological model. I placed *American Idle* in a context influenced by my perceptions of the effects of culture, policy, built environment and family on individual exercise and fitness behaviors. My strategy in this study was to weave these factors together to create a bigger picture for the reader so the reader may be empowered to observe many influences that promote engaging in a sedentary lifestyle. I feel this study could be continued in a different project. My rhetorical analysis has revealed how so many things impact a healthy lifestyle and we do not get anywhere by merely placing blame. It is necessary to take into account all of the factors listed in the ecological models as we seek solutions.

This study argues *American Idle* is indeed a piece of rhetoric because it serves as a warning and a call for action in a critical time in the United States where individuals by the majority adhere to sedentary lifestyles. Future research could build upon this study's rhetorical base, and use the issues presented in *American Idle* to create a mix of surveys and interviews about the factors that influence sedentary

behavior. Future research could observe the policies currently employed for combating sedentary behavior and determine why they are not effective overall.

The ecologic model of four domains of sedentary behavior demonstrates many limiting constraints at the policy level should be re-negotiated and practical solutions for access to leisure-time physical activity facilities should be constructed (Owen et al., 2011). For instance, if parks require a permit for unorganized sports games, this permit should be available for free, and accessible at the park on the day of desired play. Communities should join forces with city planners to brainstorm ways to clean up unattractive parts of the community, discover ways to effectively maintain the facilities, and ensure community roads contain bicycle lanes and sidewalks. When the weather permits, children who live within a mile of school should have a designated area to meet where they can walk or bicycle with other children and adults to school. Schools should measure children's academic progress after a long recess or vigorous physical education session to determine if the academic progress is greater directly after physical activity. Classrooms should include tools that incorporate exercise into the daily schedule. Every thirty minutes, children should pause for three to five minutes for a brief fitness break. Researchers can conduct further testing after these interventions to decide if they are improving test scores but also the overall wellness of the student.

Employers should value the overall wellness of their employees. Collins mentioned, "Studies show that *required, paid movement* breaks at work have the highest success rate as measured by steady participation and overall improved health and work performance" (Collins, 2009, p. 161). Because these breaks will benefit the

employees' health and job performance, each employer should have fitness breaks for their employees to encourage less sedentary behavior during the workday. Employees should be rewarded for participation in fitness breaks and for engaging in active behaviors during their leisure time. Employers should offer options such as treadmill desks, bicycle desks and exercise balls, and hand weights for office employees. If companies have the available space, they should install a small on-site fitness center, complete with showering facilities. Small meetings should be walking meetings whenever possible, and dress codes should permit comfortable and practical footwear.

Collins called for action and stated, "Why not require towns to incorporate bicycle lanes and pedestrian-friendly changes on every major thoroughfare as part of their resurfacing plan" (Collins, 2009, p. 159)? I think this is a piece of rhetoric because it encourages city planners and policy makers to facilitate community workshops designed to discover practical solutions. During these workshops citizens would be able to provide valuable feedback about the barriers they perceive prevents them from engaging in regular physical activity. Policy makers and city planners should ensure their cities and connecting highways have bicycle paths for commuters who desire to walk or bike to work and school. People should seek practical solutions that consider all of the different barriers to physical activity and help each other overcome those barriers. Perhaps then we will see a cultural shift towards healthy exercise behaviors and have a healthier population!

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Appendix

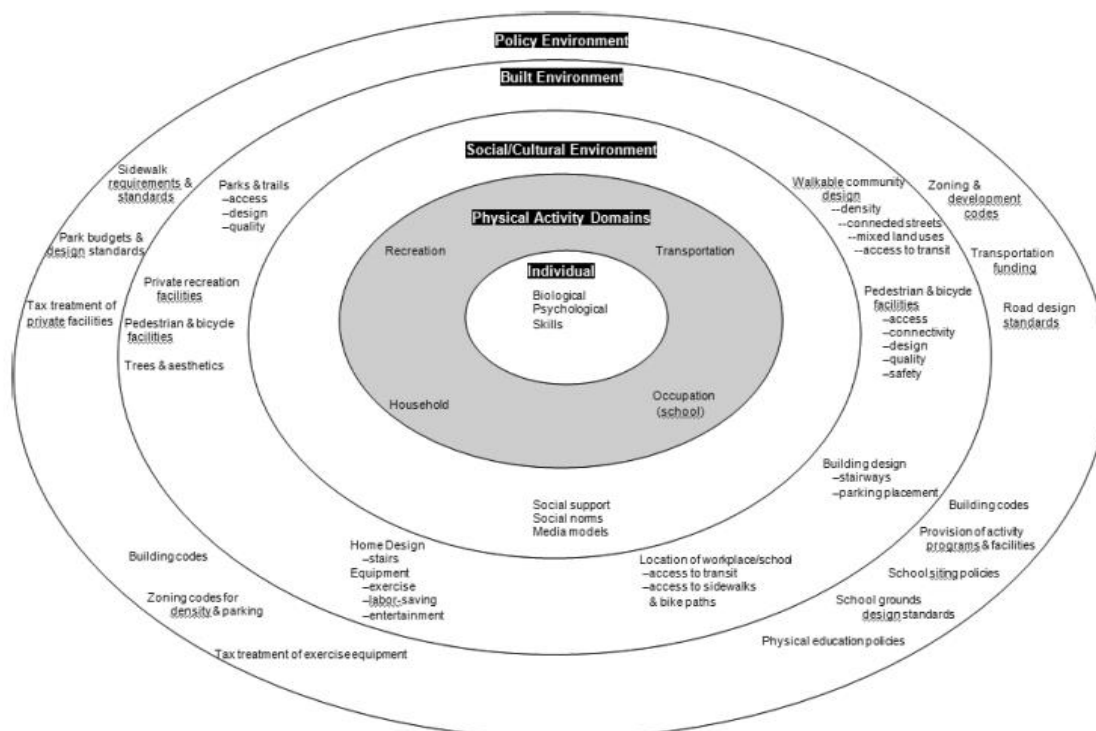


Figure 1. An ecological model of 4 domains of physical activity. Adapted from Sallis et al¹⁴ with permission of the publisher. Copyright © Annual Reviews, 2006.