

Women and Exercise

The Body, Health and
Consumerism

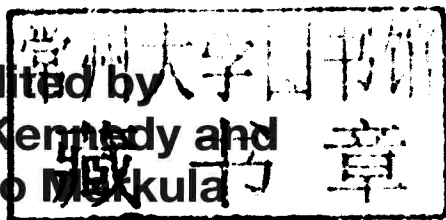
Edited by
Eileen Kennedy and
Pirkko Markula



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Introduction

Beyond Binaries: Contemporary Approaches to Women and Exercise

Pirkko Markula and Eileen Kennedy

There has been mounting advocacy for physical activity and exercise promotion at a global level and national governments and transnational bodies such as the World Health Organization have begun to incorporate exercise participation into their agendas (Waxman 2004). As Shilton observes, “physical activity has a very diverse (and numerous) constituency of professional allies” (2008, 767). Within academia, such disciplines as exercise physiology and exercise psychology have considered exercise as their core area. Through mainly quantitative examinations, these researchers have focused on the health benefits of exercise. Yet, international studies still report a stubborn gender difference in participation levels—women exercise less than men (TNS Opinion and Social 2010). For many years, feminist research (e.g., Hargreaves 1994) has highlighted women’s complex relationship with embodiment and physical activity. This relationship, rooted in culture, is difficult for quantitative scientific approaches to explore. Yet, qualitative social science analysis has been less prominent in the field of exercise and feminist research even less so. However, the recent fascination of the (feminine) body as a social construction has resulted in a corresponding interest in fitness and exercise from a variety of critical social perspectives. Our book intends to contribute to this growing body of literature that examines the socio-cultural aspects of women’s exercise. In addition, all the authors take a specifically feminist perspective into their analyses of the fit, feminine body. In this introduction, we aim to locate these examinations within the existing socio-cultural literature of women’s fitness which, in general, has focused on two broad topical areas: the media representations of the fit body and the lived experiences of the exercisers. These foci have also resulted in a series of binaries that, rightly or wrongly, tend to characterize feminist research in fitness. To highlight some of these tensions, we first detail the major findings by the fitness media research and then recount feminist research that concentrates on women’s lived experiences within multiple forms of fitness.

THE MEDIA AND THE IDEAL FIT BODY

Already in the 1980s, feminist researchers demonstrated that the fit body was reproduced within the ideological domain of media representation as a body “feminized” according to masculine, patriarchal representational logic. It was a body represented as thin, toned and sexually attractive for heterosexual relationships. From the perspective of these critical feminists, women’s fitness, through representation of the ideal body, reproduced heteronormativity by “feminizing” women’s physical activity (Kagan and Morse 1988; Lenskyj 1986; Theberge 1987, see also MacNeill 1998). This body is considered to contribute to women’s oppression because of its singularity: if only thin, toned and young women are considered attractive in a society where women come in a variety of different shapes, then most women are considered unattractive but nevertheless work continually to obtain the desired but unattainable body shape. At the same time, feminist researchers provided seminal Foucauldian readings of the oppressive nature of the media image of the ideal, thin, toned and youthful body (e.g., Bartky 1988; Bordo 1993; Spitzack 1990). Spitzack (1990) argued further that the cultural demand for attractiveness defined in these terms extends throughout women’s lifespan and an appreciation of older women is increasingly connected to physical attractiveness and “aesthetics” of a healthy looking body. Concurrently, fitness has become an increasingly important tool for shaping the body into the narrowly defined, singular feminine ideal. Adopting a Foucauldian perspective, Lloyd observed an articulation between the textual production of aerobics and the feminine body in the U.K. to conclude that aerobics is promoted as producing “a svelte, toned and ‘feminine’ (or feminized) body” which is in “consonant with, and supportive of, the dominant feminine (white) aesthetic” (1996, 95). Duncan’s (1994) analysis of the *Shape* magazine provided similar results from the U.S. More recently, Jette (2006) examined how promoting “feminine bodily norms” in Canada is combined with individual risk management to promote a neoliberal emphasis on personal responsibility for healthy pregnancy in the fitness magazine *Oxygen*.

Feminist fitness research has also explicated the power mechanisms underlying this widespread promotion of the oppressive feminine body ideal. The critical feminist researchers indicated that the feminine ideal was supported by the ideology of masculinity—it constructs femininity as the polar opposite and thus, inferior, to masculinity—in patriarchal society and implied that powerful groups (e.g., male media producers) purposefully provided such images to maintain women’s oppression. Foucauldian feminists further point to the roles assigned to women in the reproduction of the oppressive ideal.

Duncan (1994) located her reading of “Success Stories” columns in the *Shape* magazine within Foucault’s Panoptic power arrangement. These columns, she argued, are based on a personal initiative to lose weight:

successful women first confess their excess weight, usually through sudden revelation of how large they have grown, they then engage in a detailed exercise program that provides the desired better looking body (illustrated through vital before and after statistics) which also makes the women feel good. However, all this can be achieved only through publicly revealing bodily deficiencies and confessing shameful, out-of-control eating behavior. Through public confession, women control themselves as they continue to strive for the perfect body. Duncan concluded that these magazine columns work as a part of modern-day Panopticon where an invisible power continually controls individuals' behavior. In a later work, Eskes et al. (1998) extended their critique of *Shape* to incorporate Marcuse's (1964) analysis of advanced capitalism.

In the popular media texts, looking good (the ideal body) and feeling good (health) become closely intertwined. The thin and toned body is also celebrated as the healthy body. In this equation, the responsibility of the healthy looking body is assigned to individual women. In her analysis, Markula (2001) demonstrated how fitness magazines' advice on body image distortion (BID) creates a complex situation: these articles admit that their images of the unattainable ideal body cause BID which can lead to eating disorders. They further suggest, however, that the individual women's minds are out of order: they misperceive the media images and consequently, their minds have lost a sense of reality. The solution is that the women take responsibility to control their minds better and ignore the perfect images on the magazine pages. From a Foucauldian perspective, she analyzed how individual women are persuaded to look for individual solutions to an illness (BID) through medical discourse where health problems tend to be seen as individual choice: such problems are conceptualized as biological and physical manifestations of the individual body, not as social, political or environmental circumstances. Departing from the critical feminist perspective, however, it is neither the individual magazine editors (who continue to publish the images) nor the individual medical practitioners (who provide medical treatment for eating disorders) who are to blame *per se*. Both draw from the medical discourse without necessarily questioning its 'truth value' or being aware of its ill effects. Alongside the readers, they are "links in a set of power relations . . . that construct the media discourse on women's bodies. At the moment, they advance women's oppression by normalizing a certain body shape and encouraging certain attitudes toward health and the body" (Markula 2001, 174). Similar to Duncan (1994), Markula observed that avoiding or recovering from BID requires public confession of body dissatisfaction through which women learn to "adjust their behavior into the parameters of healthy femininity" (2001, 175). With the focus on individual behavior, women leave the societal construction of oppressive femininity unchallenged. Other Foucauldian feminists (Cole 1998; King 2003, 2006) also locate the representations of the fit body within the broader

neoliberal rhetoric of personal responsibility for one's health through exercise. Dworkin and Wachs' (2009) recent work brings together the main themes of the fitness media research: construction of the ideal, feminine healthy looking body, and the individual's responsibility in attaining such a body.

Dworkin and Wachs (2009) located the ideal, fit, gendered body within the current consumer culture. They examined how popular fitness texts such as the *Self* magazine, *Men's Fitness*, *Men's Health*, *Shape Fit Pregnancy*, and *Ms Fitness* reproduced gender difference. While "men's objectified status still offers powerful forms of subjecthood, which were not included inside the frame of women's fitness magazines," women's magazines continued to focus on building the thin and toned feminine body by focusing on "lower body 'moves', toning, and light weights" (Dworkin and Wachs 2009, 162). They continued to promote white, heterosexual, middle-class notions of "'emphasized femininity' shaped in relation to hegemonic masculinity" (Dworkin and Wachs 2009, 162). The fitness magazines also reinforced neoliberal notions of individual responsibility for health: it is "through individualized solutions employed in the project of the self that one displays personal commitments of healthism" (Dworkin and Wachs 2009, 165). According to Dworkin and Wachs, fitness is sold by modifying feminist ideas of liberation and resistance into so-called commodity feminism:

Over time, individual involvement becomes self-improvement and the neoliberal marketplace becomes an imperative part of the construction of the healthy self. At the same time, blame for the negative aspects of consumer culture or social injustices found within social structures is systematically displaced.

(2009, 172–73)

Similar to Duncan (1994) and Markula (2001), they concluded that the magazines sold a body that looks and enacts gendered 'health' through sufficiently gendered signifiers (Dworkin and Wachs 2009, 174). Smith Maguire (2007) asserted further that such ideas about the exercising body provide seeds for an entire fitness lifestyle through which continued consumption of the fitness industry becomes possible.

In sum, feminist research, from various theoretical perspectives, indicates that media images of the fit body align closely with the singular ideal, thin, toned and youthful looking feminine body, which is tightly intertwined with health in this popular discourse. Women's health, this research uniformly confirms, is culturally expressed in aesthetic terms as a thin, healthy looking body. These researchers also agree that this image is unobtainable for the majority of women who, nevertheless, are persuaded to continually work toward it. Consequently, this dominant, singular image is deemed to be oppressing women.

Several authors in this book demonstrate how the formation of the fit body around aesthetics and health is constituted by discourses defining the field of fitness. As previous media research on fitness has shown, discourses circulate through different types of fitness texts such as popular fitness magazines, fitness videos, popular fitness books, exercise science text books, scholarly books and articles from where the discourses then percolate to the fitness practice through the expert advice from the fitness leaders and instructors. Eileen Kennedy and Evodokia Pappa in Chapter 1; Jaana Parviainen in Chapter 2; and Kerry McGannon, Christina Johnson and John Spence in Chapter 5, all analytically engage with discourses of exercise in a variety of media texts including magazines, newspapers and websites. While feminist research has been primarily concerned with how popular fitness texts circulate the discourse of the aesthetics of the ideal, healthy looking body, some scholars have analyzed how the discursive construction of health in such fitness media texts as exercise science text books shapes women's fitness.

Smith Maguire (2007) observed that exercise manuals, while providing more information about the specifics of doing exercise, tend to approach fitness as a motivational problem. From a Foucauldian perspective she demonstrated that these manuals are able to "individualize the question of physical fitness" (Smith Maguire 2007, 125) and present themselves as motivational experts. She further identified these manuals as governmental technologies that knit together "self-work" and "broader political, economic, and social agendas and goals" (Smith Maguire 2007, 126). To entice individuals to participate in the required self-work, these manuals highlight the associated health benefits of exercise: reduced risk of illness and increased confidence from improved appearance. The exercise practice itself is presented as a disciplinary activity that, if one is to persist with it, requires self-discipline, clear timetabling and continual body measurement. Through these techniques, the fitness manuals create a similar confessional environment to fitness magazines: the readers are to continually reflect upon their behavior, honestly confess any shortcomings and then engage in proper activity. Markula and Pringle (2006) continued this analysis by linking exercise practice with the discursive construction of health-related fitness.

From a Foucauldian perspective, a large part of fitness knowledge is based on medical, psychological and physiological research that unquestionably dominates the field of fitness (Markula 2001, Markula and Pringle 2006). In this literature, the most widely accepted justification for promoting fitness is its predicted health benefits as this research provides strong evidence to connect improved physical fitness to the prevention of coronary heart disease and related hypertension, diabetes, some types of cancer, osteoporosis, diabetes and anxiety. In general, then, scientific research postulates that the better one's physical fitness, the better one's predicted health. The theoretical position connected to this understanding

of the fit body is characterized by the term 'health-related physical fitness' which includes four components: cardiovascular fitness, muscle strength and endurance, flexibility and body composition. An exercise prescription then comprises detailed instructions on how to improve each of these four components (for further details see Markula and Pringle 2006). It is important to observe that 'health' singularly denotes an absence of illness and such terms as 'health benefits,' 'health behavior' or 'healthy lifestyle' are presented as reducing the risk of illness. The World Health Organization's definition of health, nevertheless, is much broader encompassing physical, psychological and social well-being. From a Foucauldian perspective, when health is defined narrowly as an absence of illness, health-related fitness does not offer an alternative for the aesthetics of the healthy looking body, but rather further restricts women's exercise practices. These two discourses, the aesthetics of the healthy looking body and health as an absence of illness, also intertwine to promote thinness as 'healthy' and fatness/obesity as singularly unhealthy.

While feminist scholars have convincingly detected the dominant discursive formation of women's fitness knowledge in mediated texts, there has been limited research regarding the readers' meanings of these images. This is an area that obviously requires more attention from feminist researchers. In this book, McGannon and her co-authors go on to explore how women make sense of media discourses, and this is also a theme underlying the contributions by Louise Mansfield in Chapter 4; Emma Rich, John Evans and Laura De Pian in Chapter 7 and Jessica Chin in Chapter 11.

Some fitness researchers further argue that with the increased attention given to media images, limited attention has been paid to exercisers' lived experiences within the actual exercise setting. The magazines' glossy image world, they argue, has little to do with embodied ways of 'working out.' For example, while not from a feminist perspective, Crossley noted that "[r]elatively little empirical work has been done on and in gyms" to "focus upon more mundane, everyday forms of working out" (2006, 24). From a feminist perspective, Malin similarly observed that feminist critiques of the slender body have "ushered in the sometimes dangerous illusion that healthful exercise is unfeminist" (2010, 3). Consequently, many feminists 'hide' or 'segregate' their possible exercise lives from their critical work. Crossley (2004) further criticized 'grand theoretical' accounts that, often rooted in Foucauldian analysis, 'overgeneralize' as they gloss over the details of the actual workouts and rather than dealing with material collected from the gyms, base their conclusion on textual reading. These investigations, he added,

portray the body as "docile" in relation to body maintenance . . . ignoring the active role of embodied agents in the practices and

eliding the difference between texts which prescribe ways of acting and the more messy and complex reality of those ways of acting.
(Crossley 2004, 41)

This critique leads to the second strand of feminist fitness research that focuses on women's lived experiences of fitness.

EXERCISERS' EXPERIENCES (WITH THE IDEAL BODY)

A body of literature that addresses Crossley's (2004, 2006) call for investigations of lived exercise experiences already exists. Many of these researchers openly engage in exercise practices as part of their inquiries using such methods as participant observation and ethnography. Similar to the media research on fitness, the accounts of women's exercise experiences draw from several theoretical perspectives. We begin this section by detailing interpretive accounts of women's embodied exercise experiences.

The interpretations of lived exercise experiences draw from several theoretical perspectives to understand gym experiences. They do not necessarily distinguish these experiences as gendered. In her ethnography, Sassatelli (1999) analyzed the micro-culture of an Italian gym. Employing Goffman's theoretical perspective, she argued that while the body culture within fitness gyms partly centers on building a perfect body, the gym also provides a place where a vast array of meanings and identities are negotiated. She provided a detailed description of the space and the 'expressive behavior' during exercise, to illustrate how each exerciser is exposed to the gaze of the others, yet uses irony as a strategy to gain distance from the toned, tight and slim body which exercise is deemed to produce. She concluded that although exercise practices are linked to the wider cultural body ideal, the definitions of the body are continuously and actively negotiated locally. The clients, however, are quite willing to assume a responsibility for creating a better-looking body.

As a part of larger social analysis of women's body practices, Gimlin (2002) observed aerobics classes in the U.S. Unlike the feminist research on the fitness media, she concluded that aerobics can serve as cultural resource for alternative constructions of female beauty. This was possible because,

Participation in aerobics allows women to construct accounts of their bodies that, first, release notions of selfhood from the physical and, second, provide a lens thorough which they can negotiate ideals of beauty. Aerobics provides women with alternative conceptions of beauty and the social context to support those ideals.

(Gimlin 2002, 51)

Aerobicizers attended classes to shape their bodies, but aerobics also offered a space where good mental characteristics such as willpower and determination compensated for the flawed body. Consequently, 'working out' made women feel better even without visible change. The flawed body is not an indication of a flawed 'self.' While women were able to emphasize the "personality implications of body work" (Gimlin 2002, 65), they also felt that building a toned body was a personally liberating, strong and active choice. The physical challenge for creating such a body was liberating because it was possible to obtain: everyone can build muscle with determination and thus, the toned body was achievable. The women were, thus, willing to assume personal responsibility for changing their bodies: it is up to each individual exerciser's willingness to engage in such body work.

The results of these investigations of lived exercise experiences seem parallel to the main findings of the fitness media research: obtaining an ideal body shape dominates exercise practices and participants gain self-confidence when they look good. In addition, individual exercisers seem to accept that it is their personal responsibility to engage in such body shaping. These studies, however, reveal that the lived world of exercise offers places to negotiate understandings of the body that, while indeed dominated by the main discourses of the fitness field, are also increasingly nuanced and varied. In this book, several authors elaborate on these descriptions of gym life using a similar theoretical perspective. In Chapter 12, Magdalena Petersson McIntyre exposes contradictions surrounding the recent phenomenon of striptease aerobics in Sweden. In Chapter 9, Elizabeth Pike examines older women's experiences of exercise through the lens of Goffman's theoretical perspective. Louise Mansfield, in Chapter 4, provides an ethnographic examination of exercisers' understandings of fatness employing Goffman's concept of stigma, but complements her reading with Elias's perspective on power relations. These authors all show the complexities involved in women's lived experience of the fit body.

From a phenomenological perspective, Crossley called for interpretive research which will "in different ways, explore the dual nature of the embodied agent, as both subject and object of change" (2004, 41). From his perspective, investigations of embodiment require an understanding of body techniques as "forms of shared practical reason, pre-representational and pre-reflective forms of collective understanding which complement and interact with 'collective representations'" (Crossley 2004, 38). He, therefore, turned to an analysis of reflexive embodiment: how exercisers act upon their embodied existence, actively "generating a bodily 'me'" (Crossley 2004, 38). His own research, while not explicitly investigating gendered experiences, focused on circuit training through which he analyzed how variety of forms of interacting with others in the class and engagement with the actual body techniques of

this exercise form generated his own bodily 'him.' Lewis (2008) drew from Crossley's research to examine the meaning and motivation of yoga participation.

Through in-depth interviews and participant observation in a private yoga studio in the U.S., Lewis (2008) concluded that the participants found yoga often through a search for a lifestyle change to prevent or recover from illness or injury. Many had supportive family and friends who encouraged their healthy lifestyle and many also had a personal background in sport. In addition, yoga was understood to balance the work life stress and thus, providing a coping mechanism against the strains of everyday life. These participants understood yoga as very different from the 'gym' that individuals appear to frequent primarily to obtain a better body and compare their results with other gym goers. The yoga studio, instead, provides a protective, 'non-competitive' environment where the participants can obtain 'lean strength' without bulking up. Berman and de Souza (2005) confirmed that the recreational exercisers in her study were primarily motivated to attend the 'gym' to lose weight and improve their appearance.

In this book, Synne Groven, Kari Solbrække and Gunn Engelsrud in Chapter 6 and Paula Lökmán in Chapter 13 employ a phenomenological perspective to examine women's lived exercise experiences. Groven and her co-authors focus particularly on understanding large women's exercise experiences while Lökmán traces how female beginners learn to practice Aikido.

From the interpretive perspective, researchers demonstrate that women can actively build a self through exercise—a self that, while influenced by the aesthetics of the feminine body, is not entirely suppressed by it. Critical feminist research expands on this theme to interrogate whether women's exercise is 'oppressive' or 'resistant.' Similar to the critical feminist research of the fitness media, these researchers see exercise as a feminizing activity that supports the oppressive ideology of masculinity which assigns women as polar opposite and thus, inferior to men. From this theoretical perspective, several studies demonstrate that women, indeed, generally exercise because they want to change their bodies toward the desired ideal (e.g., Dworkin 2003; Markula, 1995; Spielvogel 2002, 2003). Aerobics, particularly, has been deemed a disempowering technique of bodily discipline that mainly reinforces the oppressive physical ideal (e.g., Loland 2000; Maguire and Mansfield 1998; McDermott 2000; Prickett 1997). Prickett, for example, observed that "the desire to look better—clothed or unclothed—is a prime motivating factor behind the expanding aerobics phenomenon" (1997, 198). Hargreaves continued that "aerobics has been successfully packaged to persuade women, specifically, to participate in order to lose weight and improve their sex-appeal" (1994, 161). Fitness professionals tend to also promote the body beautiful through their instruction. Fitness instructors strongly