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## **BODY LESSONS:** **Fitness Publishing and the Cultural Production of the Fitness Consumer<sup>1</sup>**

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### **Abstract**

Since the 1970s, fitness has developed as a cultural field—a network of producers, consumers, products and practices that focuses on the exercising body. This article considers the textual aspect of the U.S. fitness field, drawing from a content analysis of several U.S. exercise manuals from the late 1970s to late 1990s. The content of exercise manuals sheds light on the broader tastes and attitudes of fitness consumers, who are chiefly middle and new middle class men and women. In particular, the article addresses three recurrent themes or ‘lessons’ regarding the fitness consumer and his or her attitude towards the body: as an object of consumption, as a source of calculable rewards, and as a motivational problem.

### **Key words**

Bodies, Consumption, Cultural Field, Fitness, Lifestyles

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Our bodies are sources of concern. The proclamations of health experts and our experiences of exertion, aging and illness raise worries about how well—and for how long—our bodies function. At the same time, daily interactions with each other and with media images remind us that we are judged on the basis of our bodily appearances and performances. Over the past thirty years, these two bodily dilemmas—of health and appearance—have become *idées fixes* in consumer culture, and for the middle classes in particular (Baudrillard, 1998; Bourdieu, 1984; Crawford, 1984; Featherstone, 1987, 1991; Laberge & Sankoff, 1988; Shilling, 1993; Wynne, 1998). This article considers the contemporary boom in physical fitness activities and commodities, which has arisen at the intersection of these dual concerns for health and appearance. Part of the post 1960s expansion of middle class leisure and ‘lifestyle’ consumption, fitness is a quintessential leisure field. Whether the concern is with the inner or outer body (or, more likely, both), fitness is represented as providing the answer: exercise makes you feel good *and* look good.

This research draws on the work of Pierre Bourdieu (1984, 1993) to analyze fitness as a *cultural field*—a complex web of sites, products and practices, producers and consumers focused on the exercising body (cf. Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992: 97-98; Ferguson, 1998: 601-02; Jarvie & Maguire, 1994: 193-94; Jenkins, 1992: 84-87; Laberge & Kay, 2002: 253-55). The development of the fitness field has involved the institutionalization of specific social settings (particularly, the health club), a cadre of professional producers (such as personal trainers and aerobics instructors), a market of affluent and informed consumers who generate and regulate the production and consumption of fitness, and a discourse that represents and constitutes fitness as an

esteemed mode of caring for the body. In an overwhelmingly commercialized leisure field, this discourse is strategically packaged and sold in exercise magazines and manuals in order to maximize consumers' tastes for, and expenditures on, fitness. However, the need to sell fitness texts does not simply determine the content of the discourse; producers must speak *to and through* the preferences of consumers. The fitness discourse articulates a congruous relationship between the character of fitness activities and the tastes and values of participants. This article uses a discourse analysis of exercise texts to illuminate this reciprocity—what Bourdieu terms 'elective affinities' (1984: 241)—between the logic of fitness production and the logic of taste that shapes fitness consumption.

Central to the cultural production of a field are networks of accreditation, authority and prestige. Such networks institutionalize a field's discourse, resources, body of knowledge and hierarchy of positions. However, constructing such networks requires that field participants—both producers and consumers—share stable channels through which they exchange views, debate practices, and confirm common assumptions. In short, a field requires a 'second-order' product of field-specific texts (Ferguson, 1998: 600). Through the mass dissemination of popular and professional writings, forms of expertise, qualification and distinction are standardized and regulated (Ferguson, 1998: 611). Participation in the field can thus take the form of either immediate performance or textual appreciation—doing it, or reading about it. Ideally, participation takes both forms, as the latter provides a reflexive and evaluative consciousness of the former.

As mechanisms of consumer education, fitness texts such as exercise manuals and magazines broadcast the fitness field's practices and values to an audience that is defined by readership rather than exercise, presenting the opportunity for both vicarious, spectator fitness and the development of popular expertise in nutrition, physiology, and biomechanics. Fitness texts transcend the short-lived experience of working out, transforming fitness from an immediate activity into a gradual course of instruction, and an intellectual, critical and aesthetic issue (Ferguson, 1998: 610). Such lessons are central to the formation of critically-minded, informed consumers who self-consciously participate in fitness and carry out socially-visible activities of fitness consumption.

The article proceeds with an overview of the growth of fitness publishing in the U.S. over the past thirty years before turning to the findings of a discourse analysis of exercise texts. I examined a selection of health-education-oriented and consumer-oriented U.S. exercise manuals from the late 1970s to late 1990s, comparing successive editions of the same manual and different manuals from both perspectives.<sup>2</sup> In part, I was interested in the differences (or the lack thereof) between texts that are more oriented towards health education (such as the manuals of the American Heart Association, AHA, and the American College of Sports Medicine, ACSM) and those which are more commercial (including the manuals published by lifestyle magazines, such as *Self* and *Men's Health*). Overall, the commonalities far outweighed the differences. In particular, the discussion focuses on three themes or 'lessons' that express the affinities between fitness producers and consumers. These lessons recur over the years across different exercise texts regarding the promotion of particular attitudes towards the body: as a consumer project, as a source of calculable rewards, and as a motivational problem.

## The Boom in Fitness Publishing

Since the 1968 publication of Dr. Kenneth Cooper's *Aerobics*, fitness texts have become consumer products in their own right. *Aerobics* spent 28 weeks on *The New York Times* bestseller list (Justice, 1998) and Cooper followed it with several other bestsellers, including *Aerobics for Women* and *The New Aerobics*, which went through 30 printings during the 1970s. While not the first manual on exercise and its benefits, Cooper's 1968 book marked the start of a wave of fitness publishing (Barbato, 1988: 20) that has continued since (Dahlin, 2001). In an introduction to a later book, Cooper reflected:

When I introduced aerobics as a new concept of exercise, my chief aim was to counteract the problems of lethargy and inactivity which are so widely prevalent in our American population. Therefore, my first book was mainly a motivational book, but also it was an attempt to encourage people to examine more closely the benefits to be gained from regular exercise. (Cooper, 1970: 5)

The service role of fitness texts is thus made clear: in addition to information about the exercises themselves, the consumer requires education in the benefits of exercise, and in the motivational strategies for adopting fitness as a regular lifestyle activity.

The production of advice about exercise and fitness has increased since the late 1970s. By 1979, when *Self* was launched as the first fitness magazine for women, fashion and women's serials such as *Mademoiselle*, *Vogue* and *McCall's* already had regular fitness and exercise columns. *Shape* joined *Self* in the women's fitness magazine category in 1981, the same year that Jane Fonda published her *Workout Book*, the ultimate exercise bestseller (Justice, 1998: 343). Fonda's later books and exercise videos also sold in the millions—23% of the 15 million exercise videos sold by 1987 were by Fonda (Kagan & Morse, 1988: 165). Other bestsellers in the late 1970s and early 80s included the running books of James Fixx and Dr. George Sheehan, men's workout books by Charles Hix, and Arnold Schwarzenegger's biography (Justice, 1998). Popular magazines also targeted men, with *Men's Fitness* and *Men's Health* both launched in 1988.

The rising discretionary incomes and niche marketing of the 1990s created the conditions for the further intensification of the production of lifestyle publishing and periodicals. According to the Magazine Publishers of America, between 1988 and 2000 the number of magazine titles more than doubled, while the number of health and fitness magazines nearly tripled.<sup>3</sup> The four best-selling fitness magazines—*Men's Health*, *Shape*, *Self*, and *Fitness*—each have paid circulations of more than a million readers.<sup>4</sup> Hundreds of health and fitness titles enter the publishing market each year. In an article in the publishing trade journal, *Publishers Weekly*, the marketing opportunities of fitness are spelled out for authors and editors:

Consumers have a ferocious appetite for advice telling them what to do, how to act, what to eat and what to shun in order to feel good, spruce up their health and shed uncomely pounds. In fact, that hunger is so great that publishers scramble to sate it with books promising, if not the moon, at least a celestial body and mind. (Dahlin, 2001: 24)

Overall, the amount of press coverage devoted to physical fitness has increased more than six-fold in the U.S. since the mid 1980s.<sup>5</sup>

Understanding the boom in fitness publishing entails identifying the primary fitness consumers. Not surprisingly, consumers of exercise texts—and fitness goods more broadly—are overwhelmingly middle class, with a relatively high proportion of professional and managerial workers. Of the two leading fitness magazines in 2002, approximately 27% of *Shape* and 28% of *Men's Health* readers were professionals or managers, with average household incomes between approximately \$57,500 (for *Shape* readers) and \$67,500 (for *Men's Health*).<sup>6</sup> As well, 65% of U.S. health club members have household incomes of \$50,000 or more. Health club industry research shows that members work more overtime than average (Epaminondas, 2002: 1), suggesting a high proportion of professionals and managers, as these occupations are most likely to work longer work weeks (Jacobs & Gerson, 1998). Furthermore, women outnumber men (nearly two to one in 1988) as the consumers of exercise, health and diet books (Wood, 1988: 25). Although health club membership is relatively even with respect to gender (with women composing 52% of all members), the rate of growth of women's memberships surpasses that of men's.<sup>7</sup>

Reflecting particular occupational requirements, attitudes, and control over economic, cultural, and social forms of capital, different social groups expect different capacities from the body and, consequently, demand different rewards and benefits from the fields in which they operate (Bourdieu, 1984). The growth of the fitness field—and fitness publishing—is inextricable from the tastes and preferences of the groups driving consumption. In particular, there are four areas of 'elective affinity' (Bourdieu, 1984: 241) between the fitness field and its consumers—middle- and new-middle-class men and (especially) women.

First, fitness and fitness education are geared towards the middle class who are predisposed to regarding the body as a project, to be managed and improved through education and self-improvement as an integral aspect of self-identity and social mobility (Bourdieu, 1984; Crawford, 1984; Featherstone, 1982, 1987; Wynne, 1998). This enterprising, investment-oriented attitude towards the body is especially marked for those whose work and social position explicitly depend on bodily appearance and presentation. Since the late 1960s, changes in the labor market have created a new middle class—a large group of people whose work requires performative and appearance management skills. These 'new' professional, managerial, technical, clerical and sales occupations occur within the service-producing sector, and include such individuals as financial brokers, real estate agents, public relations and advertising associates, tourism and recreational directors, and other personal and professional service workers (Bourdieu, 1984: 359; Wynne, 1998). The more one's livelihood depends on appearance and personality—on one's 'body-for-others'—the more the individual has at stake in cultivating the body as an enterprise (cf. Bourdieu, 1984: 213; Featherstone, 1987: 64-65).

Second, the changing social, political and athletic roles of women created a market of consumers for whom physical development was part of a new, empowered lifestyle. In general, women occupy a special position in the post 1960s consumer market in that their large-scale entrance into the labor market—and its higher echelons—marked their emergence as a new breed of consumers. White, middle-class women in particular were consuming not as the family provisioners, but as self-directed consumers, investing in themselves because they had the means to do so, and often without competing family

obligations given the postponement of marriage and childbirth. When they did have families, women were often still in the labor market: the percentage of dual-income families has risen steadily over the past thirty years (Jacobs & Gerson, 1998). Since the late 1970s, magazines such as *Self* and *Working Woman* have offered women advice on what to do with their newfound financial, social and political independence. One avenue of personal improvement was physical; buoyed by the feminist discourse of empowerment and legislation such as Title IX, magazines and manuals promoted physical exercise as a way to realize, literally, the goal of empowerment (without necessarily taking on board the complex identity of political activism).

Third, the genre of fitness publishing dovetailed with trends in health care and health promotion at both ends of the spectrum of political power. At the grassroots level, advocates of demedicalization criticized medical professionals' expanding authority and intervention in everyday life (Fox, 1997; Goldstein, 1992), and called for increasing 'medical self-competence' (Crawford, 1980: 374). In much the same way that the symbolic association between muscles and political empowerment has been marketed to women, fitness has been promoted as a wide-spread mode of empowerment, through which people—men and women, young and (especially) old—can take control of their bodies and health. The interest of individuals in (re)claiming control over their health care has also been reinforced at the level of health economics, which have been characterized since the 1970s by a discourse of personal responsibility for risk reduction and the 'duty to be well' (Greco, 1993; see also Crawford, 1979; Ingham, 1985; Petersen, 1997). Exercise texts are part of an expanding range of therapeutic and educative devices such as talk shows and self-help books that inundate us with advice on how best to care for and improve ourselves.

Finally, the increasing production of fitness advice is linked to the expansion in choices of consumer products and services, which have rapidly multiplied since the early 1970s. For example, in 1972 when Nike began selling sneakers, consumers had few choices for exercise equipment and apparel. In contrast, today's consumer chooses from hundreds of new sneaker models each year, creating a \$13.1 billion athletic shoe market in the U.S. (Euromonitor, 2001). As the fitness consumer faces an increasing number of choices within a single product category, he or she increasingly relies on consumer guides, such as product reviews in *Shape* or *Consumer Reports* or the preferences of style leaders such as sports stars and celebrities. The increasing range of consumer choices, then, is accompanied by the production of an array of mutually referential educative and advisory texts that repeatedly remind consumers of their options to purchase.

In summary, two broad social currents coincided to create the necessary conditions for fitness as a lifestyle and leisure industry focused upon the care and improvement of the body. Taken together, these currents—the interest of the new middle class and women in self-improvement, empowerment, and health education, and the expanding consumer choices available to them—give rise to a range of elective affinities between consumers and fitness goods and services. With these affinities in mind, let us now turn to the content of exercise manuals.

## Consuming Bodies

The clearest affinity between the fitness field and the middle and new middle classes is the way in which fitness has been constructed as a consumer lifestyle (Bourdieu, 1984; Featherstone, 1987), a mode of self-creation that takes place primarily within one's leisure time. A central element in this lifestyle discourse is the body-as-enterprise, a project and resource to be managed and developed through self-work and market choices.

The equation of fitness with an ongoing and all-encompassing lifestyle is common across a range of fitness texts, from the educational guide of the AHA to those explicitly linked to the commercial industry. For example, the AHA offers a 'lifestyle approach' to fitness: 'How? By adding short segments of physical activity to your everyday routine' (American Heart Association, 1997: xv-xvi). The manual *Stronger Faster*, by the publishers of *Men's Health* magazine, offers a similar viewpoint:

We need to stop thinking of fitness in terms of whether we got to the gym three times last week. *Rather, think of fitness as a lifestyle that touches on everything we do.* Just as our work life helps define who we are, so does our fitness life.

...Fitness is a lifestyle, not three visits to the gym a week. (Kaufman & Kirchheimer, 1997: vi, emphasis added)

Like the AHA, the authors of *Stronger Faster* are promoting fitness as an integral aspect of life rather than an activity limited to a thirty minute visit to the health club. From the point of view of the AHA, however, a lifestyle approach to fitness is an attempt to broaden the avenues of participation, and circumvent the obstacles (such as the cost of health club membership or exercise equipment) limiting access to fitness. For the authors of *Stronger Faster* (and the commercial industry more broadly), a lifestyle approach to fitness is a way to broaden the opportunities for consumption, and circumvent the obstacles (such as shrinking leisure time, boredom, or dislike of certain kinds of workouts) limiting the adoption of fitness. Both ends of the spectrum of manuals, for a variety of reasons, want to ensure that participation in fitness is not short-lived. While this comparison exaggerates the complicity of manuals such as *Stronger Faster* (and the detachment of those by the AHA and ACSM), the point is that a range of fitness texts with varying degrees of interest in readers' consumption patterns are all articulating the same message: fitness is a way to live.

The notion that exercise and fitness define a total way of life is not new. In the 1930s, Charles Atlas began selling his mail-order exercise manual, which espoused an integrated regime of exercise, diet, posture, sleep, and hygiene (Gaines, 1982). What distinguishes a contemporary fitness manual such as *Fitness for Dummies* (Schlosberg & Neporent, 1996) from Charles Atlas is the way in which fitness has become so thoroughly enmeshed in a web of commodity and corporate affiliations. Atlas's advertising boasted that the reader required no 'weights, springs or pulleys. Only 15 minutes a day of pleasant practice—in the privacy of your room' (Gaines, 1982: 71). Today's fitness industry, in comparison, is a network of corporate synergies involving products, texts and spaces (in which privacy is largely displaced by display), as well as weights, springs and pulleys. The back cover of the ACSM manual, for example, includes the following endorsement:

"At last! An excellent, step-by-step physical fitness workout according to the latest guidelines from the leading authorities in exercise science! ... You'll soon

be moving with ACSM and improving to a healthier, more vital way of life!”  
Barbara S. Harris, *Editor in Chief Shape magazine* (American College of Sports  
Medicine, 1992: back cover)

Such promotional synergies thus affiliate the serious respectability of the ACSM with the popularity of *Shape* magazine, pointing readers of one in the direction of the other. Fitness magazines include excerpts from new exercise manuals (sometimes written by their columnists), and profile ‘celebrity’ personal trainers. Illustrations for exercise articles include ‘shot on location’ references, thereby promoting both the particular health club setting, and clubs in general as the sites of fitness. Exercise manuals acknowledge the donation of props and space by sporting goods manufacturers and health clubs, akin to the strategies of product placement in Hollywood films. For example, the acknowledgements page of *Self’s Better Body Book* (by the publishers of *Self* magazine) reads much like a shopping list:

Special thanks to: Crunch [health club chain]... Weights and Weightbench from the Gym Source, 800-GYM-SOURCE. ...All the athletic footwear and apparel ... provided courtesy of LADY FOOT LOCKER. ...[T]o find the Lady Foot Locker store nearest you, call 1-800-877-5239. All cosmetics and skincare courtesy of ALMAY. Recommended products: ...Lipcolor: Stay Smooth Anti-Chap Lipcolor with SPF 25 in Healthy. (Billings, 1998: 112)

This example of the marketing function of such publishing highlights—in extreme fashion—the ways in which advice about fitness includes the mapping of an entire universe of consumer choices, from ‘Healthy’ lipbalm to the necessity of the appropriate club and apparel.

Even the AHA, which reassures its readers that fitness doesn’t require a ‘personal trainer, fancy gym, or strict diet’ (1997: 135), acknowledges the role of consumption: We’ll say it again: All you need to fit in fitness is a comfortable pair of walking shoes. So why spend money on fitness equipment? In a word, *variety*. Variety is not only the spice of life, it’s what keeps physical activity *fun*. Boredom, on the other hand, is one of the most common reasons people give for quitting regular exercise. (American Heart Association, 1997: 96)

The field of fitness is situated within a culture of expectations for fun, immediacy, novelty and variety. Fitness educators, producers, and promoters are thus constrained not only by the tastes of consumers, but also by the larger culture of instant gratification.

The expanding genre of fitness publishing not only publicizes the techniques of exercise, but also and more fundamentally promotes lifestyle as a legitimate basis for social identity and mobility (Bourdieu, 1984: 365), and leisure as the sphere of freedom and choice. The body—as physical capital to be honed and augmented—is central to this leisure lifestyle; indeed, leisure has increasingly become focused on improving, decorating and displaying our bodies (Rojek, 1995: 61).

### Calculating Bodies

If the body is a site of consumer investment, then managing the body-as-enterprise requires rendering the body accountable, predictable, and calculable. At its most mundane, this involves instructing readers in how to measure their Body Mass Index (BMI), resting and target heart rates, and caloric expenditure for their rates of physical

activity. These mundane measurements not only furnish consumers with a knowledge of their body once reserved for medical and sport professionals, but also encourage in consumers an attitude of self-monitoring and calculation. For example, a 110-pound person can burn 300 to 500 calories over an hour of fencing (Franks & Howley, 1989: 122-23), while a 130-pound person can expect to lose 6 pounds over the course of year from playing with children (while standing) for 20 minutes each day (American Heart Association, 1997: 134).

Such a literal accounting of the body is coupled with lessons in the social and health benefits of exercise, ‘empowering’ individuals to minimize their health risks. In the men’s workout manual, *Stronger Faster*, for example, health is not only a benefit of exercise, but a quantifiable, predictable profit:

Unlike shortcuts that trim mere seconds or minutes from our crazed schedules, regular exercise...actually *adds* quality and years to your life. How much? If a 30-year-old, two-packs-a-day smoker with high cholesterol kicked the smoking habit, changed his diet, and started exercising regularly, he’d add 8 to 10 years to his life... (Kaufman & Kirchheimer, 1997: 24)

The temptation is to ignore such claims as those of hyperbolic advertising, rather than medical opinion; *Stronger Faster* is, after all, affiliated with the lifestyle magazine *Men’s Health*. However, the manual of the AHA takes a markedly similar position:

Whether you’re twenty or sixty, physical activity is at least as important to your health as not smoking cigarettes and eating low-fat foods. In fact, some studies have shown that physically inactive people have the same risk of heart disease as people who smoke *two packs of cigarettes a day*. (American Heart Association, 1997: 5)

The point is not to discount the (real) benefits of exercise—for which there is compelling scientific evidence—but to highlight how the fitness discourse equates exercise with control over health. This poses a potential affinity not only to those explicitly interested in health self-education and self-care, but to anyone located in a seemingly uncontrollable social world and out-of-control environment, for whom the body represents a vestigial realm of individual control and competence (Crawford, 1984). Such lessons in risk reduction, however, are not a guarantee that individuals will actually adopt healthy behaviors. Instead, individuals may employ their ‘risk’ knowledge for creative bookkeeping, through which vices are balanced by virtues. Fitness can thus be understood as a technique of ‘calculating hedonism’ (Featherstone, 1987: 59), allowing the individual to rationalize unhealthy or irrational behavior—in short, to have their cake and eat it too.

Beyond minimizing health risks, the benefits of the fitness lifestyle are also articulated in terms of self-confidence—a reward that makes sense to the bodily habitus of its primary consumers. The new middle class embodies its tenuous, intermediary social position—lacking the economic or cultural capital of the wealthy or intellectual classes—in a particularly alienated predisposition towards the body (Bourdieu, 1984: 207). Accordingly, the benefits of fitness are formulated in terms of assuaging the anxieties of the body, as in the 1978 Gold’s Gym manual to weight training:

Confidence in your body and a positive body-image are important elements in the make-up of your personality. It’s hard to feel happy about yourself if you don’t like your body. Weight training helps give you the feeling that you *are* your

body, not just *in* it. ...Your body is no longer something you drag along or something that holds you back. (Dobbins & Sprague, [1978] 1981: 7-8)  
Note how the emphasis is placed on the link between the shape of the body, the personality of the individual, and the prospect of success (if not happiness). The writers go on to observe:

How you look doesn't just affect the way you feel, it also affects how other people treat you. Like it or not, people judge in large part on the basis of appearances. How you look is a basic part of your social identity and as you change and improve the look of your body you will see a change in the attitude of people you come into contact with. (Dobbins & Sprague, [1978] 1981: 8)

Here, control is represented not as the management of health risks but as mastery of one's social presence—as confidence *in* and *as* a body. While the appeal of such benefits cuts across class lines, the authors address the reader as a member (or aspiring member) of the middle class: self-confidence, and its consequences of social mobility and esteem, are desired by the reader, yet cannot be taken for granted.

The benefit of confidence has particular resonance given broader cultural discourses of self-esteem for women and the poor (Cruikshank, 1993). Exercise manuals cast the benefits of strength training in the appropriate language of self-actualization, as in the following excerpt from a women's manual for Nautilus weightlifting machines:

Expect to see physiological changes in three areas: strength, flexibility, and cardiovascular endurance. Don't be surprised if these change your entire life, though, because they add up to just one thing: improved self-image. Call it personal power, or self-worth, or self-actualization, or anything you want; you're going to feel an inner strength you haven't felt before. (Wolf, 1983: 5)

Improved appearance and confidence are rewards that matter, particularly for those whose chances for success—in the labor and mating markets—depend on their ability to cultivate an appropriate persona. The benefits of the fitness lifestyle are not confined to the realm of leisure, but impact upon one's productive capacities in a service economy.

In addition to increased confidence, exercise manuals promise experiential benefits to the fitness consumer. Exercise is promoted as an opportunity to *feel the body*, an experience of embodied authenticity made less common by the sedentary nature of working and commuting. These experiential benefits of exercise are formulated differently, depending on the exercise in question. For example, bodybuilding offers the 'weight trainer's bonus':

When you work your muscles strenuously with weights, you can actually feel the extra blood rushing into them and swelling them up. This feeling is called a "pump" and it's one of the extra rewards of weight training. It's a strong feeling of well-being in the right use of the body. It's the "high" of weight training. (Dobbins & Sprague, [1978] 1981: 7)

Most memorably captured in Arnold Schwarzenegger's description of the pump as 'better than coming,' such an experience is not confined to weightlifting, but can also be had through aerobics:

From this point on, I will often mention the "burn" and exhort you to "go for the burn." This burn is a unique sensation that you get when you have used a muscle very strenuously. ...When I first did the buttocks exercise...my muscles burned so much I had to stop three or four times during the exercise. Now the burn

comes later and I don't have to stop. *I've even come to look forward to it.* It lets me know that I'm really working hard. (Fonda, 1981: 68; emphasis added) Like the 'runner's high,' these lived experiences of the body afforded by exercise are represented as an opportunity for authenticity, and should not be underestimated as one of the real, as well as manipulated, pleasures of fitness.

Given these benefits, it seems a paradox that so few people are, indeed, fit. However, the evidence on physical activity suggests that despite the work of the fitness industry and its proxy magazines and manuals, fitness remains largely a spectator sport. In 1996, for example, the Surgeon General released a report stating that 60% of U.S. citizens do not get enough physical activity to achieve any health benefits, and 25% are not physically active at all (Roan, 1996). The problem is viewed by the fitness industry as one of *motivation*. Exercise texts use a variety of motivational strategies and techniques in the attempt to bridge the gap between the symbolic production of fitness as a lifestyle and the actual, material work of including physical activity in one's daily routine.

### Motivating Bodies

Much of the content of exercise magazines and manuals addresses the difficult transition, for many participants, from reading about to 'doing' fitness. Managing the body and achieving its calculated rewards faces three basic obstacles. First, the physiological inertia of the body means that change is slow and must be kept up. The body is not only slow to change, but also prone to lose ground through aging, injury and inactivity. Second, the decline of physical education and increase in sedentary forms of work means that exercise is an increasingly *uncommon* everyday habit; becoming fit requires overcoming the resilience of behavioral patterns of inactivity. Third, exercise involves a lot of work if the participant is to see results, which poses a challenge to an industry that sells fitness as *leisure*. Exercise thus competes with other (less strenuous and sweaty) leisure activities.

Exercise manuals commonly highlight motivation and persistence as obstacles for fitness consumers. For example, the ACSM warns:

So now you're motivated to begin a fitness program to improve your fitness, be healthier and live longer. What's the ultimate secret of success? In a word, persistence! ...Unfortunately, when it comes to lifestyle changes such as exercise, too many people think that it's an all-or-none phenomenon. (American College of Sports Medicine, 1998: 13)

A similar warning sets the tone in popular, commercial manuals. For example:

We don't want you to become a fitness statistic. The fact is, among people who start an exercise program, half quit within eight weeks. *Fitness for Dummies* will give you the knowledge to make sure that *you* stick with fitness for the rest of your life. (Schlosberg & Neporent, 1996: 2)

Indeed, the attrition rate is often mobilized as a tool of motivation, challenging consumers to not repeat the failures of others.

Consumer fitness education is not simply a question of lessons in exercise, but—more fundamentally—constitutes an education in the production of habits through

discipline. Several elements are common across a range of manuals regarding how best to habituate the fitness lifestyle.

One motivational strategy involves the role of education, which complements the middle class' educational outlook on life. In particular, the 'new petit bourgeois...adopts a learning mode to life; he is consciously educating himself in the field of taste, style, lifestyle' (Featherstone, 1987: 65). Instructions to consumers on how to motivate themselves to stick with fitness thus often include self-education, highlighting the associated production of competence and expertise. The following example from the ACSM is typical:

Learn all you can about the whys and hows of exercise. If you thoroughly understand the benefits...you'll be more likely to stick with it. Good instruction provided by qualified exercise leaders, such as those certified by the American College of Sports Medicine, will give you the knowledge... (American College of Sports Medicine, 1998:14)

Consumers require not only instruction but the right *instructors* in developing their bodies and minds. The problem of motivation is framed for the reader as a lack of knowledge and expertise, and is thus remediable through self-education. At the same time, the reader's expertise is made contingent on the expert advice of the fitness text and the helping hand of the certified instructor, providing an endorsement for fitness producers such as personal trainers.

In addition to the promotion of self-education, manuals suggest disciplining the self through routine and record-keeping. For example, exercising at the same time each day, using an exercise log, and charting one's progress are ways to 'turn mere behavior into a good habit' (American College of Sports Medicine, 1998:17). In *Gym Psych*, a manual geared towards men, readers are encouraged to use the time-management skills they already have to insert exercise into their lives:

In the beginning, you may want to schedule your workouts at the same time each day. ...Making specific appointments and keeping them is something you're used to in life. If you can do it for the dentist, you can do it for your sense of well-being. (Levy & Shafran, 1986: 19-20)

In the attempt to habituate exercise, the new behavior is thus affiliated with preexisting, pre-established habits, such as making and keeping appointments. Not only do these disciplinary techniques of routine and record-keeping help readers to exercise, but the 'discipline 'makes' individuals' (Foucault, 1977: 170), producing a habitual order of behaviors, such as time management and self-scrutiny (and, ideally, physical exercise).

Self-reflection and confession are also endorsed as motivational strategies. For example, the authors of *Fitness Facts*, an education-oriented manual, suggest that the chances of fitness success—or failure—depend on the individual's self-critique:

It is impossible to progress with exercise or other health behaviors until you acknowledge the real reasons for your current behaviors. *Being completely honest with yourself* and the fitness leader is an important step in increasing healthy behaviors. (Franks & Howley, 1989: 83; emphasis added)

Note that the emphasis placed on self-reflection suggests that honesty cannot be assumed; a legacy, arguably, of the instrumental presentation of self advocated for success in service occupations, and society in general. In addition, the fitness instructor is, once

again, endorsed as the necessary complement to the reader's self-education and self-scrutiny.

The lessons of consumer fitness education echo the work of Foucault on the role of confession, fear, stigma, and role models in the prescriptive texts of the ancient Greeks and Greco-Romans (1985, 1988), as well as the effects of routine and scheduling on the production of capacities (1977). In addition to these parallels, a revealing comparison can be made between contemporary fitness texts and the archetypal modern behavior modification guide: Benjamin Franklin's 1788 autobiography. Franklin prescribed constant learning, routine, record-keeping and self-reflection in the habituation of moral virtues such as industry, chastity, temperance and cleanliness. Franklin himself kept a daily log, in which his transgressions against each of the virtues could be recorded and, at the end of the day, reflected upon. In this way, believing in the logic of progress, Franklin set out on a 'bold and arduous Project of arriving at moral Perfection' (cited in Ewen, 2001: 128).

What Franklin did not prescribe, and what has become the *sine qua non* of habituation and motivation in contemporary consumer culture, is material self-reward.<sup>8</sup> Consider the following advice, offered in *Fitness for Dummies*:

Be nice to yourself... Attach an appropriate reward to each of your long-term, short-term and immediate goals. If you lose the 15 pounds over 6 months, buy yourself that watch you've been wanting. ...Sure, it's bribery, but it works. (Schlosberg & Neporent, 1996: 28)

Advice of this kind tends to emphasize that the intrinsic health rewards of fitness are not always sufficient. Extrinsic rewards such as looking better and being admired (and the chance to shop for a new body) are promoted to women and men. The authors of *Stronger Faster* also recommend reward-shopping as a motivational technique:

It makes...sense to wear clothes that reveal some of your progress. That will serve as a visible reminder that your hard work is paying off. ...[P]romise to buy yourself a new Armani suit when the shoulders and chest on this one get too small. (Kaufman & Kirchheimer, 1997: 32-33)

If bribery is a way to motivate fitness behavior, it is significant that the bribe is shopping, linking the field of fitness to the reproduction of consumption more broadly. Bodily discipline in one sphere (exercise) is the alibi for indulgence in another (shopping). Consumer culture's ethos of instant gratification is thus reconciled with the long-term self-discipline of fitness. This reward aspect of fitness motivation—and habituation more generally—provides us with an important insight into the ways in which the Protestant Ethic of self-denial coexists with the hedonistic impulses of the Romantic Ethic (Campbell, 1987). Self-discipline and self-gratification are not irreconcilable, but are configured as temporally and spatially separate aspects of the same lifestyle: do two more sit-ups now, buy the wristwatch later.

Despite the idealized lessons of self-reward and motivation, however, the tension between the self-discipline of fitness and the ethos of consumer gratification is more difficult to negotiate in practice, as is suggested by the high rate of attrition among fitness beginners. The discourse of consumer *lifestyles* is one in which the emphasis falls more on *style*—the coherence between the various aspects of life, from clothing to sport, eating and vacations—and less on *life*—that is, on the life-long process of work on the body.

## Conclusion

Central to the development and institutionalization of the fitness field has been the cultural production of consumers equipped with an informed awareness of their fitness choices and resources. Fitness texts may thus be viewed as a genre of sensibility manuals and manner guides, which educate individuals in the problems and solutions of social status and consumer lifestyle. The body—its health and appearance—is presented as an enterprise, and lifestyle endorsed as the pattern of investment. Undertaken through vigilant monitoring and continual body work, the success of self-improvement and self-care falls upon the shoulders of the individual.

However, as individuals increasingly bear the responsibility of minimizing their health risks, the quality of population health is deteriorating in significant ways. The seeming paradox in the U.S. of a booming fitness industry and soaring rates of inactivity and obesity is partly resolved when we consider that, by and large, fitness texts provide an education in how to make *lifestyle* decisions more so than *health* decisions. Moreover, these texts represent health and exercise as rational outcomes, presuming that individuals, if provided with sufficient knowledge, will choose to exercise more. However, inactivity and obesity are less the outcomes of rational or irrational actions, than they are the ‘normal’ responses to living in an environment of suburbs and commuting, desk jobs, fast food and television remote controls (cf. Crister, 2001; Farley & Cohen, 2001). Increasing medical self-awareness does little to address the structural conditions that favor inactivity for a significant portion of the population.

Exercise texts supply specific information on physical activity, but also claim to provide the objective, rational solutions to the problems of everyday life: how to choose between the multiplying options of the market; how to optimize your chances of success and happiness, and reduce the risks of failure and disease; how to shape a lifestyle that both conforms and stands out, earning both acceptance and distinction (cf. Rose, 1996: 156-57). Through the fitness field, our bodies are reflected back to us through the lens of products and services, and consumption is promoted as the primary arena in which we make and remake our bodies. Through consumption we are ‘free’ to choose, to create and control ourselves—rewards that may be lacking in the world of work. The fitness field, in offering solutions to the concerns of health, empowerment, appearance management and self-improvement, produces the sphere of leisure as a realm of freedom to make the most of oneself, a lesson that is, in many ways, a costly one.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> An earlier discussion of this material was presented at the 2002 conference of the British Sociological Association.

<sup>2</sup> I examined five exercise manuals from the health-education-orientation (the American College of Sports Medicine's *ACSM Fitness Book* (1992 and 1998 editions), American Heart Association's *Fitting in Fitness* (1997), and *Fitness Facts* (1989) and its 1999 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition, *The Health Fitness Handbook*); and eight from the more commercially-oriented perspective (*The Gold's Gym Weight Training Book* (1978), *Jane Fonda's Workout Book* (1981), *Nautilus Fitness for Women* (1983), *Gym Psych* (1986), *Fitness for Dummies* (1996 and 2000 editions), *Stronger Faster* (from the publishers of *Men's Health* magazine, 1997), and *Self* magazine's 1998 *Self's Better Body Book*).

<sup>3</sup> From the Magazine Publishers of America website: <http://www.magazine.org>.

<sup>4</sup> The magazine industry research group, Mediemark Research Inc. (MRI) provides the 2002 circulation data for *Men's Health* (1.69 million), *Shape* (1.68 million), *Self* (1.55 million), and *Fitness* (1.18 million). MRI research information is available on their web site at <http://www.mriplus.com>.

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<sup>5</sup> The increase in the amount of press coverage is based on a subject search for ‘physical fitness’ in ProQuest, a content database of magazines and newspapers from the early 1970s. Although imperfect as a measure of press content—particularly given the addition of titles in 1986—there is a consistent increase in the number of physical fitness ‘features.’ The number of features rose from 25 in 1980 to 63 (1985), 114 (1986), 331 (1990), 403 (1995), and 717 (2000), a six-fold increase between 1986 and 2000.

<sup>6</sup> Readership data from a personal interview with a *Shape* advertising associate, January 2002, and from the *Men’s Health* press kit, 2002.

<sup>7</sup> Health club industry statistics regarding membership demographics (including income and gender) may be found on the website of the International Health Racquet and Sportsclub Association, IHRSA, at <http://www.ihrsa.com>.

<sup>8</sup> Indeed, Franklin explicitly attributes the material signs of his worldly success—a change from pewter to silver spoons, pottery to fine china—to his wife’s decisions (cited in Ewen, 2001: 127), recalling Veblen’s (1959) analysis of the role of women in conspicuous consumption.