

FRAMING FITNESS: GENDER, EXPERTS, POPULAR  
MAGAZINES, AND HEALTHISM

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## ABSTRACT

I examined the extent to which Bourdieu's field theory applied to the fitness industry through analysis of magazine content and interviews with a variety of field participants. I found that the processes through which people come to understand and define fitness in different ways, and, at times, develop contradictory positions on the importance and benefits of fitness are in concert with Bourdieu's theory. I argue that in addition to the historical macro forces identified by other scholars as shaping the fitness industry, endogenous field dynamics propel the field in new directions.

Four broad conceptions of fitness emerged: (1) fitness as health; (2) fitness as functionality; (3) fitness as obligation; and (4) fitness as appearance. Key findings include that fitness magazines' and experts' constructions of fitness relied on gendered biological understandings of the body that promote healthism. Fitness magazines' and experts' discourse equated fitness with gendered versions of personal responsibility, discipline, and moral character and often characterized fitness as a panacea. Magazines (re)produced gendered body ideals and perpetuated the gender binary. Women's magazines' incorporation of feminist empowerment discourse promoted individual-level empowerment while simultaneously perpetuating gender inequality. I identified a few alternative perspectives on fitness that critiqued the mainstream focus on fitness as a weight loss strategy and drew attention to social inequalities that result from idealizing particular body forms.

I identified competition within the fitness field among various actors striving to establish legitimacy and secure resources such as social and economic capital.

Competition occurred at three levels: the macro (field) level in which the fitness field competed with and against other fields, the mezzo (organizations) level in which institutions competed with each other, and the micro level in which individual experts and practitioners contended for recognition.

Magazines and respondents identified various types of “fitness experts” whom I classified into five categories: producing, disseminating, practicing, alternative, and exemplary. I identified seven strategies used by fitness experts to claim expertise and establish legitimacy within the fitness field. These included: (1) social capital; (2) credentialing; (3) name-dropping; (4) using science and referring to scientific research studies; (5) referencing commercial success; (6) referencing personal fitness goal success; and (7) discrediting others. These strategies represent the logic of the fitness field and the struggle to establish associated forms of capital, such as social capital and bodily capital. I observed that because fitness is a commercial field—the industry generates billions of dollars in economic activity annually—many of these forms of capital can be converted into economic capital. Thus, an appreciation of the economics of fitness provides an important perspective on the competition within the field.

I found differences in the fitness habitus among the variety of players and agendas in the fitness field. In other words, people came to fitness with different assumptions about what was “natural” and “desirable”—and indeed, even different definitions of fitness itself. Respondents in the study held different beliefs about how bodies work, the extent to which they can change, the desirability of certain physical forms, whether or not the pursuit of fitness is a morally superior activity, and whether that pursuit is obligatory work or enjoyable leisure. I compared how various experiences and social factors

produced differing definitions of fitness and hypothesized that variations in habitus are associated with different desired changes to the fitness industry.

As the fitness industry continues to grow, and as public programs increasingly turn to exercise as part of the solution to the “obesity epidemic,” more research is needed to understand what messages are available to the public about fitness and which are most important in shaping public perception and debate. Continued attention to how fitness is influenced by and contributes to gendered body ideals is warranted. This project highlights the socially constructed nature of fitness and identifies what factors influence how fitness is understood.

Dedicated to the two-legged and four-legged family and friends  
who have been true companions on this road.  
I love you all.

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

Fitness is big business. In the past 40 years, “fitness” has become a major commercial enterprise (Smith Maguire 2001). According to the 2007 Economic Census, revenue generated that year by fitness and recreational sports centers exceeded \$21 billion (U.S. Census Bureau). References to fitness are pervasive in all kinds of media. It is used to promote products from food to gadgets. Fitness is the subject of news articles, magazine covers, advertisements, and doctor-patient conversations. The medical and health field, consumer culture, and government and public programs promote fitness in the United States. Increasingly, worksite health and wellness programs are encouraging employees to pursue fitness as a means to control rising health care costs and improve health (Conrad 1988). Individual actors and institutions within the growing fitness industry have a stake in promoting public engagement in exercise, especially that which involves purchasing exercise equipment and media, gym membership, and instruction services.

It is difficult to read a newspaper or watch the news without encountering some references to the “obesity epidemic.” The attention to the growing incidence of obesity resembles a “moral panic” or “a condition, episode, person or group of persons [that] emerges to become defined as a threat to societal values and interests; its nature is presented in a stylized and stereotypical fashion by the mass media” (Cohen 1980:9). As a result of the publicity, people take for granted that obesity is an epidemic; they do not question the meaning or existence of such an epidemic when it is mentioned in the media.

The current “obesity epidemic” has heightened concern about fitness and the American population’s lack of exercise. First Lady Michelle Obama, for example, introduced the “Let’s Move” campaign that promotes improvements in nutrition and exercise in response to the “epidemic of childhood obesity” (White House Task Force on Childhood Obesity 2013). At the launch of “Let’s Move” on February 9, 2010, the First Lady said, “The physical and emotional health of an entire generation and the economic health and security of our nation is at stake” (White House Task Force on Childhood Obesity 2013).

Fitness is made to seem more attainable than ever thanks to the promises of gym membership brochures, commercials for exercise equipment, exercise and diet programs, and television shows like “The Biggest Loser” in which respondents compete to lose weight by changing their diet and exercise habits. Gold’s Gym promises “the best-in-the-business personal trainers” to deliver “an unmatched fitness experience” (Gold’s Gym 2015) while the LA Fitness website reads “Exercise Your Options®. Being fit has never been more flexible” (Fitness International, LLC 2013). Information and advice about fitness are readily available in the form of websites, exercise manuals, workout DVDs, fitness magazines, television exercise channels, and personal training services.

References to “fitness” are so widespread that the concept of fitness may seem well-understood. But in fact, the concept carries multiple and complex meanings for different people. The concept of “fitness” depends on historical and cultural contexts and continues to evolve. Thus, it is a rich topic for sociological inquiry. Contextualizing our current understanding of fitness provides insight into why it has become such an

important buzz word in the U.S. today and illustrates how social fields emerge and interact.

The popularization and commercialization of fitness activities, the development of academic areas of study focusing on exercise, the physical activity guidelines put forth by government agencies, and exercise instructor certification programs all indicate the development of fitness as a field (Black 2013; McKenzie 2013). These factors also indicate that the fitness field is composed of a multitude of competing interests.

### Research Questions

In this dissertation I apply Bourdieu's theory of fields to explore the logic of the fitness field and the promotion of exercise and body ideals within it. I pay particular attention to how the implicit and explicit messages of fitness magazines and fitness "experts" draw upon social constructs—shared understandings of socially created concepts—such as gender, health, and body ideals.

My research was guided by five research questions:

- *What is fitness according to popular media and field experts?*
- *What discourses frame the dissemination of fitness information?*
- *To what extent do these discourses reinforce or challenge hegemonic concepts of gender, health, and ideal bodies?*
- *Who are the knowledge producers and disseminators in the field of fitness?*
- *How do these opinion leaders support their arguments and stake claims for authority?*

In the following section, I present an overview of key factors that have influenced the meaning of "fitness."

## Forces That Have Shaped the Fitness Industry

In this section, I provide a brief history of four of the major trends that have shaped the fitness industry as context for understanding the current manifestation of the field and the ongoing sociological issues and debates about its meaning and boundaries. I review four major and interlinked trends that are relevant to understanding the current state of affairs: (1) the ascendancy of modern medicine and health promotion; (2) changes in labor and the economy; (3) changing gender expectations; and (4) the evolution of media.

### *The Ascendancy of Modern Medicine and Health Promotion*

Changes in the understanding of illness and infectious diseases have led to the heightened importance of medicine, interest in health, and individual responsibility for wellness. Medicalization and healthism, in particular, are two processes that contributed to the rise of the fitness industry. Conrad (1992) defined medicalization as “a process by which nonmedical problems become defined and treated as medical problems, usually in terms of illnesses or disorders” (p. 209). Similarly, Zola (1983) defined medicalization as a “process whereby more and more of everyday life has come under medical dominion, influence and supervision” (p. 295). According to Conrad (1992), sociologists have identified secularization (Turner 1984; Zola 1972) and the changing status of the medical profession (Freidson 1988) as the two key contexts of medicalization.

Crawford (1980) introduced the term “healthism” to describe the increased emphasis on individual responsibility for health. Conrad (1992) argued that while health promotion may create a “new health morality” (Becker 1986), medicalization and healthism—or healthicization—are distinct processes. He explained:

With medicalization, medical definitions and treatments are offered for previous social problems or natural events; with healthicization, behavioral and social definitions are advanced for previously biomedically defined events (e.g. heart disease). Medicalization proposes biomedical causes and interventions; healthicization proposes lifestyle and behavioral causes and interventions. One turns the moral into the medical, the other turns health into the moral (Conrad 1987). (1992:223)

In the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, improvements in sanitation and a more developed understanding of diseases improved population health and increased longevity (Green 1986). Green (1986) argued that longer life expectancies also coincided with less fatalism so that Puritan beliefs in predestination were replaced by the idea that individuals could improve themselves and prolong life through lifestyle changes (what Crawford would describe as “healthism”). Green proposed that the belief in individual control of self-improvement provided a rationalization for intentional exercise.

The recognition that individuals’ actions *could* influence their state of health quickly morphed into the notion that individual *should* take steps to improve their health—that they had a moral and societal obligation to do so. In the context of healthism, risk management is privatized and the individual is held accountable for the management, or mismanagement, of her relationship to risk (Petersen 1996). “Right” behavior includes staying fit and healthy. Featherstone, Hepworth, and Turner (1990) argue that a fit appearance has also been fused with morality since the Victorian era. A movement called “Muscular Christianity” originated in England and became popular in the U.S. promoted the idea that “morality was a function of muscularity as well as of piety, and that the best sort of Christians were physically fit” (Green 1986:183). Historians suggest that “Muscular Christianity” was one of the more successful exercise campaigns, advocating the cultivation of the body via gymnastics, calisthenics, and

eventually sports (Berryman and Park 1992; Green 1986; Whorton 2008). Developing out of this tradition, the Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA) and the Young Women's Christian Association (YWCA) emphasized both the physical and spiritual development of youth (Smith Maguire 2008). "Muscular Christianity" and other exercise promotion programs exemplify the shift to "healthism" (Crawford 1980), or individual responsibility for health. According to Crawford (1980), health was elevated to a "super value" status.

Purposeful exercise has not always been evaluated positively, however. During the beginning of the nineteenth century, some American physicians thought exercise in excess was dangerous, especially for women (Berryman and Park 1992; Verbrugge 2002). Even in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century medical experts were concerned that over-exercise would lead to injury and overexertion of the organs, especially the heart and lungs. Medical professionals of the time believed that the heart muscle would be weakened and premature death would result from strenuous exercise. They even defined "athlete's heart" as the pathological enlargement of the heart due to overuse (Whorton 1982, 2008).

By 1910, certain doctors were questioning the interpretation of the "athlete's heart," arguing that the heart was actually strengthened by exercise rather than weakened (Berryman and Park 1992). Scientists identified poor diet and lack of exercise as major health risk factors. Green (1986) argued that "the idea of encouraging physical development dovetailed with increasing cultural worries about mentally overtaxing both the young and the mature in an increasingly urban, bureaucratic, and sedentary society" (p. 182). Experts such as Dr. Ken H. Cooper, the "Father of the Modern Fitness

Movement,” are credited with shifting scientific concern from disease treatment to disease prevention through aerobic exercise and diet (Smith Maguire 2008). The historical changes in the perception of the danger or value of exercise illustrate the social, and hence mutable, construction of the concept of fitness.

Over the past 150 years, the main causes of morbidity and mortality in the United States have shifted from infectious diseases towards degenerative and chronic diseases such as cardiovascular disease, cancer, stroke, and diabetes—so-called “lifestyle diseases” (Jones, Podolsky, and Greene 2012; Whorton 1982). This change has been accompanied by increased attention to preventative medicine and the importance of lifestyle. Biomedical science is often credited for improvements in health and longevity (Jones et al. 2012), although some contest the degree to which scientific medicine has contributed to mortality decline (Condran 2008; McKeown 1979). Nevertheless, the social capital enjoyed by scientists remains relatively high (Gieryn 1999).

The historical association between fitness and health, and the generally high credence given to medical experts, raises a number of questions relevant to the current perception and construction of the concept of fitness, such as: What role do medical professionals continue to play in the fitness field? How do their beliefs about fitness influence the public perception of fitness? Does healthism remain an important factor in the promotion of fitness? What is its impact on how fitness is portrayed? Is there still a link between fitness and morality?

#### *Changes in Labor and the Economy*

Changes in the economy and associated shifts in the type of labor required by jobs also influenced the emergence of fitness promotion. According to historians Berryman

and Park (1992) and Whorton (1982), purposive exercise was not of great concern for most of history because physical activity was an integral part of life: most kinds of work and the activities of daily living demanded significant physical exertion. However, increasing mechanization and specialization, particularly in industrialized urban areas, began to require more mental labor and less physical labor. Exercise became something to pursue intentionally rather than a requirement for earning a living.

Toward the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, the U.S. economy shifted to one based increasingly on consumer service industries rather than in manufacturing. This led to the heightened importance of appearance; aesthetic labor became a demand in the service industry (Witz, Warhurst, and Nickson 2003; Wolkowitz 2006). Witz et al. (2003) defined “aesthetic labor” as “the mobilization, development and commodification of embodied . . . capacities and attributes” (p. 37), or dispositions (Bourdieu 1984). They argued that the concept of aesthetic labor is useful because it illustrates “how, through the embodied performance of interactive service work, the physical capital of employees is valorized and converted into economic capital by and for organizations” (Witz et al. 2003:40–41). According to Bourdieu (1984), members of the middle class are particularly likely to invest in the “body-for-others” (p. 213) and to be concerned with improving the body via consumer goods in order to signify social status and attain economic gains. Shilling (1993) referred to the cultivation of appearance, especially for occupational success, as “body projects.”

Appearance became not only increasingly important at work, but also as a component of individual self-improvement projects achieved through consumerism. Sociologists have theorized that individualization and the production of identity is

intimately linked with consumption (see review by Zukin and Smith Maguire 2004). For example, Bourdieu (1984) demonstrated how individuals consume particular goods to display their “taste” and establish distinction. Smith Maguire (2002, 2008) argued that the development of the commercial fitness industry and changes in the practice of individualism have promoted the idea that physical fitness is key to, as well as evidence of, social success.

The economic growth in the United States, especially after the World Wars, was accompanied by increases in consumer spending and new forms of leisure. The early “crusaders for fitness” had set the stage for the later mass consumption of fitness products, advice, and programs (Whorton 1982). Exercise and “fitness” evolved into a leisure activity dynamically related to capitalist consumption (Smith Maguire 2008). Early contributors to the development of the fitness industry include Bernarr Mcfadden, Charles Atlas, and Jack LaLanne, among others (Berryman and Park 1992; Black 2013; Green 1986; McKenzie 2013; Whorton 2008). Bernarr Macfadden called his 1899 program of gymnastic exercises and weightlifting “Physical Culture” and published a magazine of the same name instructed the public on exercise and health (Whorton 1982:297). Smith Maguire (2008) argued that Macfadden’s attentiveness to appearance and sexuality indicates a cultural shift of focus from social to individual improvement, as well as from character to appearance. Similarly, Angelo Siciliano, under the pseudonym “Charles Atlas,” Bob Hoffman, and brothers Joe and Ben Wieder were responsible for the significant rise of bodybuilding through marketing equipment and competitions from the 1930s onward (Whorton 2008). Fitness boomed in the late 1970s with the

commercialization of fitness and accompanying popular participation, as documented by Smith Maguire (2008), McKenzie (2013), and Black (2013).

While attention to appearance has historically been considered feminine, men are increasingly encouraged to pay attention to their appearance (Alexander 2003; Bordo 1999; Buchbinder 2013). This “crossing the gender line” is presumably linked to the commercial need to expand the markets for body care and appearance products—including fitness. To find new consumers for their products and services, companies are directing more and more of their marketing and advertisements to men (Alexander 2003; Rohlinger 2002).

The co-evolution of changes in work, the rise in consumerism, the importance of appearance, and growth of fitness as an industry raise questions such as: To what extent does consumerism, commercialization, and accompanying market competition influence current portrayal of fitness? Is fitness perceived as a health issue, an appearance issue, or both? How do such perceptions influence who participates in fitness programs?

### *Changing Gender Expectations*

Feminist movements and changing gender roles have had profound impacts on how people think about women’s bodies and abilities. According to Wolf (2002) and Bordo (2003), women’s mass entry into the workplace in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century resulted in the increased importance of their appearance. Not only were there expectations for women to pursue careers, but there were also pressures for women to look good while doing so. In addition to cosmetics and clothes, exercise was peddled to women as one way to attend to their appearance.

Another key influence has been the changes in attitudes towards women's participation in sports and exercise. Scholars have noted that historically women's participation in physical activities has been problematic: playing sports presented a challenge to Victorian standards for feminine behavior (Cahn 1995). The rise of feminism, which asserted women's right to participate in athletics, among other things, threatened the gender order. Science and biological "facts" were used in an attempt to justify inequalities between men and women and bar women's participation in physical activities (Hargreaves 1994). For example, medical professionals claimed that the female body was weakened by puberty, menstruation, childbirth, and lactation and therefore women should avoid activities that would cause "constitutional overstrain" (Berryman and Park 1992, Hargreaves 1994). These warnings notwithstanding, women continued to participate in athletics and exercise, even as "scientific" evidence was employed in an effort to maintain the gender order and defend gender differences. This topic continues to be of interest to researchers: for example, Choi (2000) has examined the use of sex testing to defend the gender order in sport and Cahn (1995) explored perceived threats to society based on the intersectionality of race and sexuality.

With the passing of Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972, women's opportunities to participate in sports have increased (Washington and Karen 2001). Heywood and Dworkin (2003) argue that the 1990s promoted women's athleticism and a new body ideal for women. Girls were encouraged to use sports to take control of their bodies and develop pride in their physical strength.

The continuing evolution of gender roles and expectations raise questions about how these impact the contemporary conception of fitness, such as: To what extent do

gender expectations continue to influence fitness? What role, if any, does feminism play in the fitness industry? Does gender influence the way in which fitness is defined and promoted?

### *Evolution of Media*

Concomitant with the large-scale changes in health, labor, and gender discussed above, profound changes have occurred in the media industry. These also have influenced the fitness industry and public perception of exercise. Photography, movies, television, inexpensive color printing, and especially the Internet have made visual images an increasingly available and increasing important means of communication. Featherstone (1991b) theorized that greater public exposure to media and the increasing utilization of visual images have profoundly shaped public experience. He argued that “the perception of the body within consumer culture is dominated by the existence of a vast array of visual images” (1991b:178). The proliferation of idealized images in advertising and the visual media shape how individuals perceive their appearance. Featherstone (1991b) wrote that these idealized images “invite comparisons: they are constant reminders of what we are and might with effort yet become” (p. 178). Therefore, media images are not merely entertainment but must be evaluated seriously, even though they are presented in a “form which makes their realization dubious” (Featherstone 1991b:193). He argued that these images are important because they are designed to “stimulate needs and desires” that are based in “genuine bodily needs and desires” (1991b:192–193).

These arguments have important implications for understanding how media and marketing—especially the use of images—affects public perception of exercise and the

fit body. Media coverage of fitness proliferated alongside commercialization of the fitness industry. Figures such as Jack LaLanne, Jane Fonda, and Richard Simmons popularized fitness on television. The Wieder brothers influenced the growth of fitness print media by establishing a major publishing company in 1940. Their legacy, Weider Publications, LLC, is now a subsidiary of American Media, Inc., and continues to promote health and a fit appearance in popular fitness magazines such as *Muscle & Fitness*, *Men's Fitness*, and *Shape*. Fitness magazines are big business, generating millions of dollars annually in sales and advertising revenue. Smith Maguire (2008) found that between 1988 and 2000, “the number of health, fitness and lifestyle magazines nearly tripled” (p. 112).

As the number of fitness publications increased, so did competition among them. The competition is mainly for readership, since the size and demographics of readership are the main determinants of advertising fees, and revenue from advertisements is a main source of income for such publications (Gamson et al. 1992; Garvey 1996). The need to attract and maintain readers is likely to influence a publication's choices of content, images, and so forth.

The growth of the fitness publishing industry and the increasing importance of imagery raise questions such as: What images and messages about fitness are disseminated by media today? To what extent do these reinforce or challenge hegemonic stereotypes? How does competition affect the choice of content and the way in which publications position themselves within the field?

In this section I have briefly reviewed four historical trends that have influenced the development of the fitness industry. While these are by no means the only forces that

have shaped fitness, they have been substantially important. My research explored the extent to which these trends are still evident in the fitness industry today, but focused on contemporaneous internal forces that shape the perception and portrayal of fitness and exercise.

### Theoretical Perspective

I apply Bourdieu's field theory to examine the characteristics and boundaries of the fitness industry, the types of influential agents within the industry, and the factors that shape contemporary meanings of fitness. According to Bourdieu (1993), fields are bounded social spaces consisting of positions occupied by people or institutions. A social field is organized around a particular game (like football) or social object (like fine art). Field-specific rules and conditions govern its boundaries and what is done within the field. Similar to sports, a social field is competitive: agents within the field utilize various strategies to maintain or improve their position and accumulate capital (Bourdieu 1978, 1984).

Specific to each field is its doxa or practical logic (Bourdieu 1977). Doxa is shared by members of the field who do not question, and are often unaware of, the arbitrariness of the logic governing the field. The doxa determines the "sense of limits" or "sense of reality" of those in the field (Bourdieu 1977:164). In other words, doxa is a "set of fundamental beliefs" which are widely shared, but rarely articulated (Bourdieu 2000:16).

Each agent within the field develops a habitus (disposition) through a process by which s/he aligns to a greater or lesser degree with the doxa of the field. Structures (fields) and dispositions (habitus) are mutually constituted: structures shape dispositions

and dispositions tend to reproduce structures (Bourdieu 1977). Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992) described the relation between habitus and field:

On one side it is a relation of *conditioning*: the field structures the habitus . . . On the other side, it is a relation of knowledge or *cognitive construction*. Habitus contributes to constituting the field as a meaningful world. (P. 127)

Habitus is not merely habit, it is the learned principles that organize disposition (Grenfell 2012; Shilling 1991). Bourdieu (1977) described habitus as a durable disposition and a “*way of being, a habitual state* (especially of the body) and, in particular, a *predisposition, tendency, propensity or inclination*” (p. 214).

Habitus is also embodied (Bourdieu 1984: 190). Bodily aspects of habitus are symbolic and, like other aspects of habitus, cause “an individual agent’s practices, without either explicit reason or signifying intent, to be . . . ‘sensible’ and ‘reasonable’ to members of the same society” (Bourdieu 1977: 79). Today, sociologists recognize that social forces mediate and give meaning to the body; it is more than a pre-social or physical entity (Shilling 1993). Foucauldian studies examine how the body is socially disciplined and a site of control; other perspectives suggest that the body in post-industrial capitalism is also a site of pleasure, leisure, and consumption (Foucault 1990; Turner 1996).

According to Bourdieu, fields are dynamic and constantly under construction. Struggles for power within and across fields, as well as external constraints and forces, produce change (Albert and Kleinman 2011; Paradis 2012). One of the characteristics of fields is the emergence of persons recognized as having legitimate domination of the field (Bourdieu 1998:40–41; Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992:97). Agents within a field compete

for resources, one of which is expert status. They also compete, to a greater or lesser extent, with players from closely related fields. Fields influence one another and relationships across fields make them inter-dependent (Grenfell 2012). It is worth noting that Bourdieu (1978) situated sports within the larger “field of bodily practices”:

The *social definition of sport* is an object of struggles, that the field of sporting practices is the site of struggles in which what is at stake, *inter alia*, is the monopolistic capacity to impose the legitimate definition of sporting practice and of the legitimate function of sporting activity. . . . that this field is itself part of the larger field of struggles over the definition of the *legitimate body* and the *legitimate use of the body*, struggles which, in addition to the agents engaged in the struggle over the definition of sporting uses of the body, also involve moralists and especially the clergy, doctors (especially health specialists), educators in the broadest sense . . . . Since the relative autonomy of the field of bodily practices entails, by definition, a relative dependence, the development within the field of practices oriented towards one or the other pole, asceticism or hedonism, depends to a large extent on the state of the power relations within the field of struggles for monopolistic definitions of the legitimate body and, more broadly, in the field of struggles between fractions of the dominant class and between the social classes over morality. (P. 827)

In this study, I theorize that fitness falls within this field of bodily practices, and as such is also shaped by the struggle over the definition of the legitimate body and legitimate use of the body. Table 1 summarizes the aspects of Bourdieu’s theory exemplified by the fitness industry.

Following the argument that fields are dynamic, we could predict that changes in the field would shape the social constructions of fitness and body ideals, and vice versa. Shilling (1991) argued that a dialectical approach is needed in which bodies are viewed “as both constructed by social relationships and themselves entering into the construction of social relationships in an interrelationship constantly open to challenge and change” (p. 667). Therefore, I contend that in addition to the exogenous forces of changes in health, the economy, gender, and media, there are endogenous forces, such as intra-field competition, producing change in the fitness field and in the meaning of fitness. Figure 1 depicts this process.

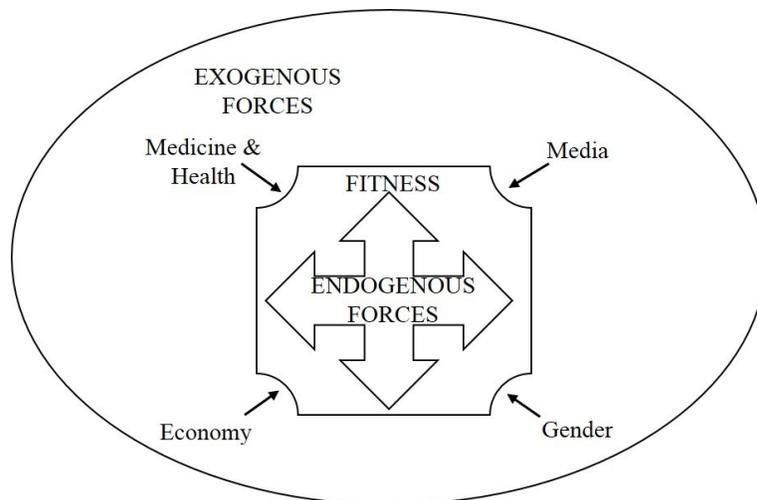


Figure 1. Exogenous Forces As Well As Endogenous Forces Shape The Fitness Field.

Table 1. Bourdieu's Theoretical Concepts Applied to the Fitness Field

Theoretical Aspects	Components of Fitness Field
Doxa/logic of the field	Fitness is taken for granted as desirable; Fitness is good, moral, healthy, and biological/scientific governed
Orthodoxy/Heterodoxy	Questioning "fit = good"; the idealization of fitness as questionable or socially constructed (this is the case for HAES® and fat activists)
Habitus	Examples include the competitive athlete; the trainer; the program director; the fat-and-fit exerciser; the aesthetically inclined weight-loser
Embodiment of habitus	Comfort and routine of exercise such that it seems natural, not requiring much mental effort to figure out how to move the body in fitness activities. Signified by the "fit" body; the fit look; the functional body
Hysteresis	Disconnect between habitus and doxa of field, namely: the aging trainer, the fat athlete
Social capital	Strategies such as credentialing, name-dropping
Cultural capital	Strategies such as get-fit success; fitness know-how, expertise, and experience
Economic capital	Strategies such as commercial success (publications, gym ownership, products)
Body capital	Strategies such as attaining the fit look

## Literature Review

### *Fitness Ideals and Gender*

Throughout the development of the fitness field, concepts of gender have influenced fitness promotion and its characterization. West and Zimmerman's (1987) concept of "doing gender"—that is, the idea that gender is interactive and performative—is useful in exploring if and how gender matters in relation to fitness behaviors and goals. This perspective suggests that gender is produced through fitness activities, narratives, and interactions. While gender norms are not static, they can be described in any particular moment in time. Thus, at present, it is likely that fitness promoters use particular fitness activities, body ideals, and fitness goals to accomplish gender. For example, lifting heavy weights and contact sports might be perceived as masculine while using an elliptical machine and doing yoga might be considered feminine.

Gendered meanings may be context-dependent. Bridges (2009) and Paradis (2012) applied Bourdieu's theory of fields to examine how gender influenced the particular forms of habitus and doxa in bodybuilding and boxing. Bridges argued that the value of the bodybuilder's body depends on the context in which it is evaluated, and therefore gendered bodily capital is field-specific. Paradis found that the gendered habitus of boxers and their gendered bodily practices shaped men's and women's experiences in the hyper-masculine boxing gym. She argued that boxing and boxers are experiencing a gender-related hysteresis as the increasing inclusion of women within boxing has changed the doxa of the field without having changed the habitus of all boxing participants.

Following Bridges (2009) and Paradis (2012), I conducted a gendered Bourdieusian analysis of fitness. Paying attention to the performativity of fitness provided insight into whether or not gender was an important component of the fitness habitus and revealed similarities and differences between what experts told men and women. As such, my research provides an update on how gender matters in general fitness pursuit and promotion.

Social institutions also are structured by gender (Acker 1990; Moss Kanter 1977). Acker (1990) proposed that in a gendered organization, “advantage and disadvantage, exploitation and control, action and emotion, meaning and identity, are patterned through and in terms of a distinction between male and female, masculine and feminine” (p. 146). This may be achieved through the production of symbols and images which suggest men and women are naturally different or are interested in divergent activities and behaviors. Gendered organizations encourage gendered behaviors as the physical separation of men from women (for example, into different areas of the gym), thereby reinforcing the idea that men and women are different.

Fitness magazines are gendered social institutions: there are separate publications for men and women. Popular media both “reflect and shape prevailing understandings” about the body and gender (Gamson et al. 1992; Westbrook and Schilt 2014:38). The popular media frame appearance in gendered ways that help to socialize individuals to adopt gendered perspectives on their bodies (Calogero and Tylka 2010). For example, Dworkin and Wachs (2009) found that a majority of media messages emphasize size reduction—getting thinner—as the goal of exercise for women and size enhancement—gaining muscle mass—as the goal for men. From a fairly early age, boys learn that

muscularity is the ideal for men and that masculinity can be accomplished through the pursuit of muscularity and strength. These gendered body ideals are simultaneously treated as “natural differences” even as advice is given on how to construct difference through exercise (Dworkin and Wachs 2009; Shilling 1991:667). The cultural importance of physical appearance influences children’s attitudes toward physical activity (Shilling 1993).

It is a useful to investigate media messages in studies of social constructs like fitness because media both reflect and shape cultural consciousness (Gamson et al. 1992). My research contributes to the understanding of how the fitness field both reproduces gender and challenges the current gender norms.

*Experts: Who Are They and How Do We Know?*

Development of a field is characterized by the emergence of professionalism. A profession is an “occupation which is based upon specialized intellectual study and training, the purpose of which is to supply skilled service or advice to others for a definite fee or salary” (Carr-Saunders and Wilson 1933:3–31). In the process of institutionalization, areas of expertise develop and coalesce into professional organizations “in order to establish control over both the definition of their particular problem and the production and certification of legitimate experts” (Stampnitzky 2013:6) (See also Abbott 1988; Gieryn 1983, 1999; Larson 1977). The professionalization process includes: developing a code of ethics, engaging in formalized recruitment patterns, establishing formal intuitions to transmit the knowledge of the occupation, developing social organizations to insure the perpetuation of the profession, and claiming

a license to carry out certain actions and a mandate to define proper conduct (Carr-Saunders and Wilson 1933; Smith Maguire 2008).

Professions also establish formal mechanisms by which they can retain control over their work and prevent other occupations or professions from encroaching on their territory. For example, in medicine there is a “highly structured training and certification processes, collective ethical self-regulation, and monopolistic control over who may practice, backed by the power of the state” (Starr 1982:6). Such control measures are ostensibly intended to protect the public, but they also to limit competition by raising the barriers to entry, one of the five key competitive forces defined by Porter (1985).

The emergence of various certifying bodies and training programs for personal trainers in the U.S.—such as the America Council on Exercise personal trainer certification program and examination introduced in 1990 (Myers 2010)—illustrates an effort to professionalize this aspect of the fitness field. The lack of standardized certifications and universal regulations in other segments of the fitness field, however, suggest that the field is still relatively early in the process of professionalizing (George 2013).

In the evolution of a field, increasing numbers of sub-fields and specialties emerge. In part, this is driven by an effort to avoid direct competition by claiming expertise in a specific area. The creation of smaller categories allows for more experts to claim legitimacy.

Bourdieu recognized that there is also competition for the right to define the cultural object of the field. He explained, “specialists are able to make use of the specific authority conferred by their status to put forward a perception and appreciation defined as

the only legitimate ones” (Bourdieu 1978:835). In other words, in any field related to the body there are “struggles over the power to develop, define, and appropriate bodily forms which are of most value to society at a given time” (Shilling 1993:126). Applied to the fitness field, the theory suggests that agents compete for recognition as authorities and furthermore, that the very meaning of the cultural object of the field (fitness) and the purpose of the field (promoting fitness) are contested.

Various actors strive to legitimize their claims by accumulating various types of capital. An example is competition for symbolic capital, or “the authority inherent in recognition, consecration, and prestige” (Bourdieu 1993:7). Within health fields, especially, there is competition for scientific credibility, which is “the believability of claims and claims-makers” and the “capacity of claims-makers to enroll supporters behind their arguments, legitimate those arguments as authoritative knowledge, and present themselves as the sort of people who can voice the truth” (Epstein 1996:3).

Strategies and practices are aimed at maximizing capital, whether symbolic or physical (Bourdieu 1993). In the fitness field, because it includes a large commercial segment, various forms of capital can be leveraged to produce economic capital. Capital can also be utilized to shape public policy and opinion. In their research, both Epstein (1996) and Saguy (2013) drew upon Bourdieu’s notion of the cultural field to examine knowledge production and claims-making—what Epstein referred to as “credibility struggles.” Epstein (1996) examined how various actors “sought to assert and assess credible knowledge about AIDS” (p. 2). Saguy (2013) deployed the concepts of the field and credibility struggles in her analysis of the framing of fat.

In his study of AIDS controversies, Epstein identified competition among biomedical researchers and health care professionals, activists and advocacy groups, government agencies, and mainstream and alternative media, among others. Saguy (2013) grouped actors based on six problem frames, which she defines as “the different ways in which fat is framed as a problem or as *not* a problem” (p. 28). How actors framed fatness depended on their assumptions about bodies, health, and beauty. These frames shaped their proposed solutions, the types of knowledge they considered credible, and the knowledge and arguments they produced.

The context in which the struggles for expertise occur determines who is recognized as an authority (Saguy and Riley 2005). For example, Saguy and Riley (2005) argued that medical expertise and authority would be critical for credibility in debates within a medical context, as opposed to debates occurring in a political context where these criteria may be less important in producing credibility. Epstein’s (1996) work revealed that the AIDS crisis produced a context in which nonscientist activists were able to weigh in on the value of scientific research studies and medical trials and to challenge scientific authority. Similarly, Saguy (2013) observed that in debates around fatness, lay people have been able to establish some degree of authority and credibility. Alternative groups, for example, Fat Studies activists and researchers, have been able to some influence by drawing on alternative symbolic framing devices. She noted, however, that the amount of capital held by different players, measured by symbolic authority and economic power, varies substantially. Certain players are unable to establish sufficient capital within the field because their agenda presents too much of a challenge to the

underlying logic of the field: they are too far outside of the field's doxa to gain legitimacy.

This research also builds upon Hutson's (2013) research on personal trainers' claims to legitimacy in the fitness field. Hutson (2013) found that trainers drew upon their embodied cultural capital—what he refers to as “bodily capital” or “corporeal credibility”—in order to establish themselves as experts and authority figures. Such embodied capital is of particular value in those fields, like fitness, that emphasize bodily production, not just knowledge production.

In this study, I extend Epstein's (1996) and Saguy's (2013) work and the concept of credibility struggles understand how expertise is achieved within the context of the fitness industry. I examine the multiple forms of capital in the field and the ways in which different actors strive to accrue and use them, for example, the use of bodily capital by personal trainers and magazines. I also attempt to identify: (1) what type of logic (doxa) operates in the fitness field, (2) strategies for claiming expertise and what they indicate about the field, and (3) the types of capital that are valued in this context.

#### Methods & Data

The goal of this analysis was to gain insight into factors, institutions, and actors that shape the current concept of “fitness” in the United States and the extent to which these reinforce or challenge hegemonic gender and body ideals. I selected a qualitative grounded theory approach as the most appropriate research design (Glaser and Strauss 1967; Strauss 1987) since I was interested in exploring the discourses shaping how fitness is given meaning and the processes through which fitness knowledge is

constructed. Rather than testing hypotheses formulated at the outset of the research, I allowed for themes and patterns to emerge during data analysis.

My research design was influenced by Bourdieu's recommendations for field analysis (Bourdieu 2004; Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992). In the epistemological tradition Bourdieu followed, it is crucial to conduct research reflexively and to attempt to reveal how one's own social positioning and vision of the world influences knowledge production. Bourdieu (2000) wrote:

How can we claim to engage in the scientific investigations of presuppositions if we do not work to gain knowledge [science] of own presuppositions? We can do so principally by striving to make reflexive use of the findings of social science to control the effects of the survey itself and to engage in the process of questioning with a command of the inevitable effects of that process . . . the crucial difference is not between a science that effects a construction and one that does not, but between a science that does this without knowing it and one that, being aware of work of construction, strives to discover and master as completely as possible the nature of its inevitable acts of construction and the equally inevitable effects those acts produce. (P. 608)

Therefore, in my interrogation of the definitions of fitness, I sought to identify the variation in "realities" of fitness for multiple agents rather than a single, "true" and universal definition. My goal was to "expose the social origins of all 'objective' accounts of the social" within the fitness field (Grenfell 2012:31). Therefore, I interrogated the concept of fitness by using the themes that emerged from data analysis. This goal was complicated by my own participation in, and previous knowledge of, the fitness field, so I attempted to identify biases I brought to this research.

#### *Data Collection and Analysis*

Bourdieu recommended that small-scale field analysis occur at three analytical levels (summarized in Grenfell (2012:243–244); see also Bourdieu and Wacquant

(1992:104–107)). This approach provides insight into both the external and the internal dynamics that produce the field. At the micro level, researchers should compare the variability in habitus of a range of individual field respondents. At the mezzo level, researchers should examine the interconnections between agents and the field's organizations and institutions. At the macro level, researchers should study the field in relation to other fields and identify how the economic, cultural, and political contexts shape the field in question.

My research design addresses these three levels of the fitness field by focusing on the “cultural intermediaries” of fitness information (Bourdieu 1984). To address the research question “*Who are the knowledge producers and disseminators in the fitness field?*” I first identified who popular fitness media presented to the public as experts. I then examined both the production and dissemination of fitness knowledge by conducting a content analysis of fitness media as a cultural object (Griswold 2012) and by interviewing people who are in key positions to transmit knowledge from producers (researchers) to consumers (the public, clients, subscribers). I selected fitness magazines as the best media to analyze given their national circulation, accessibility to the public, regular and frequent publishing schedule, and use of both textual and visual content. I conducted a detailed content analysis of a year's worth of issues of five fitness magazines to address the research questions “*What is fitness according to popular media and field experts?*” and “*What discourses frame the dissemination of fitness information? To what extent do these discourses reinforce or challenge hegemonic concepts of gender, health, and ideal bodies?*” Based on the emergent themes, I identified types of experts to interview, developed an interview guide, and conducted 24 in-depth interviews from

September 2012 to July 2013. I completed coding the interview transcriptions while simultaneously returning to the magazine articles to code them in more detail based on themes from interviews.

Through the combination of interviews and content analysis, I was able to identify the types of experts and variations of habitus of fitness field respondents. This approach helped me address the research question “*How do these opinion leaders support their arguments and stake claims for authority?*” I identified strategies that magazines and respondents used to claim expertise and establish credibility, how particular positions within the field corresponded to different understandings and assumptions about fitness, and how the fitness field both influences and is influenced by other fields. Although this study is not exhaustive, it addresses all three of the analytical levels recommended by Bourdieu for field analysis studies.

#### *Magazine Content Analysis*

The first step involved identifying the most popular fitness magazines that had national (U.S.) circulation. I selected publications that contained articles about exercise generally rather than a specific sport or activity. I used readership rates to determine popularity and selected men’s and women’s magazines that had a readership of at least 500,000 based on circulation from June 30, 2011 from the Audit Bureau of Circulations (Table 2).

Table 2. Circulation as of June 2011 of the Magazines Selected for Analysis

Magazine	Avg. Total Paid & Verified Circulation 6/30/11
<i>Prevention</i>	2,903,417
<i>Men's Health</i>	1,892,760
<i>Shape</i>	1,656,678
<i>Fitness</i>	1,501,244
<i>Men's Fitness</i>	600,215

Source: Audit Bureau of Circulations

None of the most popular magazines were directed at both men and women. Therefore, I analyzed the three most popular women's magazines *Shape*, *Fitness*, and *Prevention* and the two most popular men's magazines *Men's Health* and *Men's Fitness*. Although *Prevention* and *Men's Health* are classified as "health" magazines rather than as "fitness" magazines, I selected these two based on their popularity and because they frequently addressed exercise and fitness topics.

*Shape* and *Men's Fitness* are published by Weider Publications, LLC, a subsidiary of American Media, Inc. *Men's Health* and *Prevention* are published by Rodale. *Fitness* is published by Meredith Corporation. In total, I analyzed 54 issues published between March 2011 to February 2012 (*Fitness*, *Men's Fitness*, and *Men's Health* are published 10 times per year and *Prevention* and *Shape* are published 12 times per year).

I purchased back issues of the magazines online, primarily through eBay. Staff at *Prevention*, *Men's Health*, and *Men's Fitness* generously mailed me back issues in response to letters I sent explaining my research project. To expedite the coding process, I downloaded the magazine article text when it was available online from the database SPORTDiscus.

I coded in depth every article that pertained to exercise, fitness, or physical activity. I coded only the primary topic of articles not pertaining to exercise, fitness, or physical activity (beauty, finances, products, etc.). The analysis focused on the text of the articles. Although I took note of the images accompanying articles, I did not systematically analyze images or advertisements. I used NVivo 10, a qualitative data analysis software program, to more efficiently organize the data. Within NVivo, I coded each article utilizing an open-coding method in which I created new categories as I read through each article. As themes emerged, I revised my codes and continued to do so throughout the data analysis and interview stages (see Appendices A and C).

My interpretation of the content was shaped by the literature review I conducted. For example, I was sensitized to the possibility that gendered body ideals and consumerism might be important themes (Dworkin and Wachs 2009; Sassatelli 2010; Smith Maguire 2008). My personal involvement in fitness activities and consumption of fitness media should also be acknowledged as forming my positionality vis-à-vis this study. I cannot say how other readers make sense of the messages in magazines nor do I assume that there is only one way to interpret the content. The codes developed in this research were not designed to test prior hypotheses.

I conducted interviews with various respondents in the fitness field, encouraging them to discuss how they understand cultural messages about fitness and how they attempt to influence other people's notions of fitness. I applied the coding method used for magazine articles to the interview transcripts. I also looked for themes that had emerged in the magazine analysis. I have included verbatim quotes from these interviews throughout to allow respondents to "speak for themselves."

### *Defining “Experts”*

The second step of the data collection was to identify the experts who had contributed to the magazine articles, classify them by type, and conduct interviews with people in similar roles.

The meaning of “expert” is socially constructed. What passes for “expertise” depends on many factors, including the specific field, and evolves over time. Recognized expertise has numerous tangible and intangible benefits. Recognition as an expert is external validation of “self-efficacy”—the sense of achievement and satisfaction that comes from being good at what one does. In a commercial field like fitness, there are also tangible rewards, such as being paid for endorsements and articles, as well as the ability to attract higher-paying and more numerous clientele. Experts are also in the unique position of shaping public discourse and promoting particular viewpoints: previous research by Hutson (2013) referred to fitness experts as “moral entrepreneurs” (Becker 1963).

I coded as an expert any person who was specifically named by the magazine as the source of advice in relation to exercise or fitness, who was used as a source to demonstrate proper exercise technique, who provided instruction, or who was defined by the article as a source of high-quality information. These included board members, editors and writers, guest contributors, research publications and institutions, research study authors, personal trainers and coaches, celebrities, readers, etc. I identified five general types of experts: “producing,” “disseminating,” “practicing,” “alternative,” and “exemplary” experts.

“Producing” experts include researchers and research institutions. Magazines and respondents refer to these “producing” experts as a source of knowledge, especially scientific or quasi-scientific knowledge.

“Disseminating” experts are the people and media that communicate the information generated by the primary producers to the public. These individuals and institutions are cultural intermediaries in explaining and spreading information to a wider audience. While they do not claim to produce the knowledge, their expertise is to be found in their ability to access and interpret research studies and to communicate the findings in such a way as to be easily understood and acted upon. Their importance lies in the ability to influence target audiences and link producing experts’ work to the public.

“Practicing” experts act in many ways like disseminators since they, too, communicate the knowledge largely produced by others to a public audience. The difference is that practicing experts put into practice the knowledge in ways that directly influence consumers. Practicing experts—by the nature of their frequent interaction and face-to-face involvement with clients—are more likely to shape how knowledge is understood and acted upon by consumers than either producing or disseminating experts. Practicing experts include personal trainers, fitness instructors, fitness program directors, medical professionals, and others who are in a position to interpret the research and provide personalized instruction on how individuals should or should not exercise. They are also in the unique position of providing feedback to clients through on-going interaction.

“Alternative practitioner” experts rely on their own experiences as a source of truth and know-how, as opposed to mainstream researchers and research institutions as

the ultimate source of knowledge. Alternative practitioners are more likely to be critical of the current paradigms espoused by research institutions and are less likely to take scientific study findings at face value. Health at Every Size® advocates are examples of alternative practitioner experts. HAES® is a community that focuses on promoting health and well-being, rather than weight loss.

“Exemplary” experts are individuals who have mastered or achieved fitness ideals. They may have little formal training in exercise science. They seldom produce new fitness knowledge themselves, but they are held up as experts based on their personal achievement and as role models of how to go about attaining fitness. Exemplary experts include fitness models, celebrities such as actors and sports figures, and some personal trainers.

I did not include in this category the individuals who are used as exemplars in the “success story” articles in fitness magazines. Although these “model readers” have succeeded in adopting the fitness field habitus, they are not acknowledged as experts: they were not called upon to advise other readers or viewed as sources of specialized fitness knowledge, although they often shared tips that had been given to them.

Admittedly, the distinction among the types of experts used in this study is somewhat artificial and imprecise. There is overlap between categories and a given expert could potentially be classified into more than one category. Nevertheless, these distinctions proved useful for understanding the nature of experts and expert competition in the fitness field.

## *Interviews*

The content analysis informed my selection of interview respondents. I interviewed the following types of experts: exercise researchers and academicians, fitness instructors and personal trainers, program directors, and magazine editors. I chose to interview intermediaries who disseminate information rather than readers of magazines or exercisers at gyms, following the argument made by Smith Maguire and Matthews (2010) that “cultural intermediaries” (Bourdieu 1984) are an important entry point for the study of media and cultural production.

I recruited respondents to this study using a non-random, snowball sampling technique. In addition to asking respondents to recommend people they thought would be interested in participating in the study, I relied on my own social networks as well as websites to identify contact information of potential research respondents who fit my search criteria. I purposefully conducted some interviews with experts who identified themselves as opposing mainstream perspectives on fitness in order to explore these viewpoints in depth. Although the sample is limited (especially along certain axes of identity such as race) and therefore findings are not generalizable, the interviews provide variety and depth to complement the magazine content analysis.

Semi-structured in-depth interviews with fitness experts allowed me to examine the meaning-making process behind fitness promotion. I used an interview guide (see Appendix B) to prompt interviewees, but respondents were free to discuss topics of importance to them. During the interviews, I asked respondents about their definition of fitness, the guidelines they use, where they get their information about fitness, how they disseminate information, and their positions on various debates surrounding fitness. I

was interested in how they frame the central issues, their motivations, and how they see their role.

All interviews were audio recorded by permission of the interviewees and ranged from 30 minutes to 135 minutes in length. The median length was 77 minutes. I wrote field notes after each interview and transcribed the recordings. In total, I conducted interviews with 24 people, 14 of whom were women and 10 of whom were men. Although respondents can be identified by multiple roles, I have categorized each person by the role about which s/he spoke most within interviews. Appendix D is a summary of the characteristics of respondents. Respondents included group instructors (2 female, 1 male), personal trainers (3 female, 4 male), physical therapists (1 female, 1 male), research professors (1 female, 1 male), program directors (5 female, 3 male), and writers/editors (2 female). Four of the women identified as Health At Every Size® (HAES) practitioners and one is a Fat Studies researcher. Slightly under half of the respondents (11) were under 40 years old and slightly more than half (13) were over 40.

After transcribing the interviews I analyzed them using NVivo, paying particular attention to the themes that had emerged in the magazine content analysis such as health, gender, appearance, consumerism, and morality. I also continued to revise codes used for the magazine content analysis based on themes that emerged during the interviews.

Interviews were supplemented by observation. I attended a respondent's public exercise program session, a Health At Every Size® conference, a Fat Studies conference, and a public fitness fair. I documented each experience with field notes and collected each organization's pamphlets, flyers, and informational handouts.

## Limitations & Methodological Issues

I chose to provide an in-depth view of the current constructions of fitness, rather than try to provide a broader but less detailed account of changes in fitness over time. As such, my research design captures only variation that may have occurred over the span of one year and thus I am unable to trace changes over time from my own observations and primary sources. I rely on previous research on the emergence of the fitness industry and the changes in fitness over time to provide a longitudinal perspective. My findings were complemented by respondents' discussion of their own experience of changes over time, and occasionally by discussion in magazine articles.

I drew upon feminist methodology in order to think critically about my own position in relation to my research and to think reflexively throughout the research process. I acknowledge that my interpretation of the content and meanings provided by media was informed by my positionality as well as by my role as a researcher. My personal social location (gender, age, body size, level of education/position as researcher, exerciser, race, sexuality) undoubtedly influenced the interviews and my interactions with respondents as well as my coding of magazine articles and interpretation of the qualitative data. Although I endeavored to maintain a neutral stance, interviewees often assumed I subscribed to particular frames or paradigms: for example, many took for granted that I agreed with them about the amount of exercise the public needed, the "obesity epidemic," and their beliefs about health, fat, gendered bodily practices, and nutrition. Interviewees also seemed to make assumptions about why I was conducting the research.

When asked, I revealed my identity as someone who engages frequently in exercise. Kvale (1996) suggested that this knowledge of the interview topic is helpful in understanding the meanings constructed by respondents during the research process. However, this “insider status” may also have led some respondents to assume I knew particular jargon or knowledge and therefore they may not have elaborated or explained in as much detail important background information. Given these concerns, I positioned myself as someone who was familiar with, but without extensive knowledge of, exercise and fitness practices and the particular job requirements respondents held. This enabled me to engage in a line of questioning which drew out detailed explanations that interviewees may not otherwise have felt necessary, but also to build rapport over shared experiences and outlook.

I am limited to speculating about how readers might interpret and make sense of magazine content and expert advice. While I am able to inquire how cultural intermediaries and disseminators think about media fitness messages, I can only report on my own experiences as a consumer of the magazine content.

### Research Contribution

As the brief history in the introduction has shown, the concept of fitness has been shaped by political, economic, and cultural developments including advances in medical knowledge and the ascendancy of science, and changes in leisure, work, and the construction of gender. As the cultural context continues to evolve, accompanying changes will occur in the fitness field. My research documents the current state of the field and connects its characteristics with today’s social institutions and belief systems in the United States.

This study breaks new ground in its application of sociological methods and Bourdieu's field theory to the study of fitness and, in particular, the interaction of current concepts of fitness and expert habitus. There have been some historical accounts of the rise of fitness from journalists and others and a few studies of fitness in sports studies, which tend to focus on personal training or specific sporting practices. Smith Maguire's (2008) study is unique in that it examines the fitness field using Bourdieu's theory. Although a number of studies have suggested a variety of definitions of fitness, none have systematically examined the connection between a person's position within the field and their corresponding conceptualization of fitness. Furthermore, no study has utilized field theory to map the struggles over the definition of fitness or the competition for expertise, recognition, and resources within the fitness industry. I contribute insight into how, as a semi-autonomous field, the internal dynamics of the fitness industry generate their own momentum and, for example, produce definitions of fitness.

I expand upon previous work on the fitness field in three key directions: (1) by exploring the competition within the field over resources, legitimacy, and the definition of fitness; (2) by interviewing people who participate in the field in a variety of roles beyond personal training in order to provide a broader view and capture divergent perspectives; and (3) by connecting the position of respondents more directly to their conceptualization of fitness, thereby illustrating habitus at work.

As such, I contribute to the intersecting fields of body studies, gender, culture, and knowledge construction. More broadly, this research contributes to our understanding of how knowledge is disseminated, how particular ways of experiencing and thinking about the body are promoted, and how certain claims to legitimacy gain

prominence over others in credibility struggles (Epstein 1996). I argue that examining the types of actors involved, the strategies by which knowledge claims and legitimacy struggles are made, and the socio-structural factors framing the particular manifestations of fitness are as important as, if not more important than, measuring fitness's effects or promoting fitness. Thinking about fitness using a sociological perspective will help us remain critical of both "common sense" and "expert knowledge" claims and will remind us to be cognizant of social justice issues in the promotion of fitness.

## Overview of Chapters

### *Chapter 2*

#### *Competition in the Fitness Field*

In this chapter, I describe three levels of competition in the fitness field, the goals and strategies of the various contestants, and how perceived expertise was important at each level. My research findings support Bourdieu's (1990) theory that agents of various social positions within a field compete with one another in pursuit of resources (namely economic capital). In his definition of a field, Bourdieu implied that struggles are inevitable and that competitors need to find a source of competitive advantage and to differentiate themselves. The competitors in the fitness field included magazines, purveyors of fitness equipment and training, and various "experts."

I identified competition at the macro (field) level in which the fitness field competed with and against other fields, the mezzo (organizations) level in which institutions and enterprises competed with each other, and the micro level in which individual experts and practitioners contended for recognition.

### *Chapter 3*

#### *Logic of Fitness: Struggles over Exercise Expertise in the Fitness Field*

This chapter examines the various types of “fitness experts” identified by fitness magazines and respondents. I classified experts into five categories: (1) “producing” experts such as researchers and research institutions; (2) “disseminating” experts such as media and magazines; (3) “practicing” experts such as fitness trainers, health professionals, and program directors; (4) “alternative practitioner” experts such as Health At Every Size® practitioners and Fat Studies researchers; and (5) “exemplary” experts such as celebrities and models. I examine how the fitness industry competed with and against other fields to convince the public of the importance of fitness as well as how experts from other fields such as psychology attempted to sell their services within the fitness industry. I also examine how “experts” judged the quality of fitness information.

I identified six strategies used by fitness experts to claim credible expertise and establish legitimacy within the field. These strategies included: (1) credentialing; (2) name-dropping; (3) referencing personal fitness goal success; (4) referencing commercial success; (5) using science and referring to scientific research studies; and (6) discrediting others. While these strategies are not unique to the fitness field, their usage supports the theory that fitness is a field (as defined by Bourdieu) in which actors compete to establish expertise and secure resources, much like the process of medicalization that occurred within the health field.

## *Chapters 4-7*

### *Fitness Defined as Functionality, Health, Obligation, and Form*

In these four chapters I address my research questions about how fitness is defined and framed. I found that fitness magazines and respondents defined fitness in four main ways: as the ability to function, as health, as a moral and/or social obligation, and as appearance and form.

In Chapter 4, I review ways in which magazines and respondents defined fitness as functionality and capability: being able to function physically and to move the body in the ways one desired. Some articles and respondents further defined fitness as measurable by physiological parameters. Another variation was to describe fitness as peak physical performance, such as the states competitive athletes attempted to achieve. While fitness was most often conceptualized as capacity or as a vehicle to a desired goal, some articles and respondents suggested fitness was embodied experience—joy in bodily movement itself.

Chapter 5 examines how fitness magazines and respondents often equated fitness to health. Fitness was presented as a means to improving physical and mental health in numerous ways, indicating a belief in a causal connection between fitness and physical as well as psychological well-being. I analyze the gender similarities and differences in fitness promotion.

Claimed physical health effects of fitness included: (1) preventing or reversing sickness and disease and (2) helping solve the “obesity epidemic.” Achieving the benefits of fitness through exercise was presented as an individual choice and

responsibility that required body surveillance and self-discipline. I discuss how this fitness discourse was indicative of the broader phenomenon of healthism.

I also identified the following claims for psychological health benefits: (1) stress reduction; (2) ability to manage depression and recover from grief or setback; (3) improved brain function; (4) increased self-confidence; and (5) social benefits.

In Chapter 6, I show how fitness was frequently framed as an obligation and how fitness has come to be equated with moral rectitude as an external manifestation of self-control and discipline.

Lastly, in Chapter 7, I illustrate how magazines and respondents frequently defined fitness as form by describing the “look” of the fit body as well as the benefits of achieving the “fit” appearance. Whereas respondents primarily defined fitness in terms of functionality and health, magazines were more likely to emphasize aesthetics. I review the characteristics of the fit look and how strongly gender was embedded in fit body ideals. I also explore the implications of objectifying the body as well as the social pressures to meet fit body ideals.

## *Chapter 8*

### *Desired Changes to Fitness*

In this final chapter, I bring the preceding themes together by exploring the changes desired by different kinds of participants in the fitness field and how these reflect variations in habitus. I show that fitness is still an evolving field as evidenced by the lack of agreement about what fitness means. Fitness had multiple connotations even for the same author or research respondent. The similarities and differences in definitions reflect a variety of stances or positions within the field, each of which was associated with a

particular habitus. For example, the experts' goals and position—their underlying beliefs about the purpose and definition of fitness—were revealed by the particular benefits they promised.

The meaning of fitness to interviewees was shaped by context (the respondent's position within the fitness field) and the respondent's habitus. Respondents frequently referenced relationships and experiences that have shaped their current perspective. I identified five key influences that respondents named as important to their orientation and understanding of fitness: (1) physical activity as a youth; (2) personal struggle with weight, body image, or health; (3) social interactions with parents, friends, coaches, and mentors; (4) education and training; and (5) job requirements.

The narratives suggest that respondents' position on fitness depended on these shaping mechanisms. They also provide support for Bourdieu's theory of habitus. Respondents who shared similar experiences also shared similar views; those with very different personal histories had different definitions of fitness and wanted to see different kinds of changes in the industry. Desired changes included: (1) fitness should not be about looks; (2) fitness should be a life-long endeavor; and (3) fitness should be accessible for people of all body sizes and backgrounds.

I conclude that continued critical attention to fitness as a social construction is warranted, especially because of the focus on individual "choice" and agency, which tends to ignore structural and cultural factors.

## CHAPTER 2

### COMPETITION IN THE FITNESS FIELD

In the United States, consumers spend billions of dollars annually on fitness-related goods and services. According to the International Health, Racquet & Sportsclub Association, fitness and recreation centers generate around \$25 billion annually in the United States (First Research 2015). It is not surprising that the potential for large profits is accompanied by competition with many different entities seeking to acquire a share of the resources available in the fitness field. In this chapter, I examine the nature of competition in the fitness field and address the first two of my research questions: “*Who are the knowledge producers and disseminators in the field?*” and “*How do these opinion leaders support their arguments and stake claims for authority?*”

In the following sections, I describe the types of competition that I observed in the fitness field, the goals and strategies of the various contestants, and how the pursuit of expert recognition contributed to competition. I paid particular attention to how magazine articles described themselves, their experts, and other magazines. I also focused on what they said about why readers should follow their advice. In interviews, I asked respondents to describe their work, how they evaluated the quality of fitness information, and what they thought of new trends in the fitness industry. I found that both magazines and respondents described the competition they faced and the ways in which they navigated this challenge.

I argue that endogenous forces continue shape and define the fitness field beyond the previously identified macro forces (changes in health, the economy, gender, and

media). Examining these dynamics provides a more complete understanding of the current state and future directions of the field that are not fully explicated by the exogenous forces alone.

#### Macro Level Competition: Fields as Competitors

The fitness field must compete to establish itself in relation to other fields. I refer to this as the “macro” level of competition. It involves defining the distinctions and connections of fitness to other fields as well as its relative importance. The three key challenges at the field level are: (1) to make fitness as important as other causes in order to gain public attention; (2) to convince the public to put time, energy, and money into physical activity and the fitness industry; and (3) to establish the legitimacy of the fitness field and the importance of fitness expertise.

Fitness, as a field, competes for attention with other fields and issues of concern to the public. Public awareness and perceived importance are important, since they have an impact on the availability of public and private resources. In general, the greater the perceived importance, the greater the investment of resources (Oshinsky 2005). Strategies used by fitness proponents to enhance its perceived importance included emphasizing healthism and individualism and connecting fitness to high-profile issues like the “obesity epidemic.” Fitness, in particular, was presented as part of the solution to the moral panic surrounding the perceived problem of obesity. Fitness promoters also seized the moral high-ground by implying that fit people are better than unfit people because they are more disciplined and healthier.

Bourdieu (1990) proposed that competition is one of the defining characteristics of a field; struggles are inevitable and competitors need to find sources of competitive

advantage in order to succeed. Bourdieu also recognized that multiple fields co-exist and compete. Fields are dynamic; as such they also entail struggles for the “transformation or preservation of the field” (Bourdieu 1998:40-41).

Thus, while agents within a field compete to legitimize themselves, they also compete for legitimacy and recognition of their particular field versus others. For example, competition occurs between the fitness field and overlapping fields such as nutrition and sports medicine. Boundaries between fields may be blurred due to similarities, connections, and perceived opportunity. Exchanges between fields may produce interdependency. Thus, the field of psychology claims a role in fitness because people need to be motivated to exercise while the fitness field claims a role in psychology because being fit improves people’s psychological wellness. Moreover, the boundaries of a field are subject to change as experts from one field try to gain entrance into another to expand their “territory.”

My research suggests that the fitness field exists in a state of “co-opetition” with related fields with which it simultaneously collaborates and competes, trying, on the one hand, to legitimize and protect its own domain while, at the same time, capitalizing on the legitimacy and recognition of a more established field. For example, the fitness industry competes both with and against the diet industry and the medical field. A weight loss solution in one of these fields—especially one like liposuction that does not require physical exertions—makes that field a competitor. Conversely, fields may partner and become interdependent as Bourdieu suggested, for example when the fitness industry combines with the diet industry to promote a “health solution” that combines a nutritious diet with exercise.

I identified evidence of boundary work between fitness and other fields. Two boundaries, in particular, are being contested: the boundary between medicine and fitness and the boundary between nutrition and fitness. Based on my interviews, it appears that the boundary between medicine and fitness is negotiated. While personal trainers, group fitness leaders, and program directors are not usually trained physiologists, kinesiologists, sports psychologists, or exercise scientists, all of these sciences influence their work. Trainers assume temporary roles as scientist, therapist, anatomist, motivational speaker, life coach, and nutritionist, among others. Hutson (2013) called this "professional maneuverability" (p. 67) by which practitioners can "claim a degree of credibility" in a related field. Despite the lack of educational degrees or legal authority, trainers are able to encroach to some extent into other fields—or straddle them (to use Hutson's term) to advise clients. This encroachment indicates the mutability of the boundaries and lack of rigidity of fields.

The boundary between the medical profession and the fitness industry has become blurred in discussions of health, as Hutson (2013) pointed out. While medical professionals often prescribe exercise (the fitness expert's specialty), the fitness professional simultaneously transgresses into the physician's specialty by describing the health benefits of exercise. The overlap between the two fields makes this shared territory inevitable, but trainers indicated an understanding of boundaries; the legal implications of practicing medicine made them careful not to appear to diagnose or prescribe. For example, Elizabeth emphasized the boundary between the role of personal trainer or fitness group instructor and the role of physical therapist or doctor:

I tell [instructors] always to refer [clients] to their physical therapist. . . . We always talk about scope practice and say if someone comes to you and says, “This hurts, what do I do?” “Go to your doctor.” That is always what we tell them.

Nevertheless, I found that exercise was often discussed in medical terms, particularly by magazine articles, as did Hutson (2013). Hutson noted that despite the use of medical discourse, a distinction was made by his respondents between personal training and medical practice. The same was true in my interviews, although I interpreted the use of medical language differently. While medical discourse was used to both align and distinguish between trainers and medical practitioners, I see the use of this discourse as an example of using medical terms and concepts to draw upon the social currency of science to help legitimize fitness and enhance the capital of fitness providers.

Hutson (2013) found that trainers and clients framed their work as diagnosis and treatment, although no official diagnosis or prescription other than exercise was discussed. While some trainers and program managers in my study did discuss the preventative and healing effects of exercise, they were more likely to use terminology and language that related the goal-oriented nature of exercise programs. Thus, if prevention or healing was the desired goal, the exercise program’s success was measured in terms of progress made towards that goal. Personal trainer Ben’s reporting how exercise allowed one of his clients to get off blood pressure medications supports this idea. If, however, the client's goal was related to enjoying exercise more, becoming more active, or losing weight, I interpreted these interactions framing exercise and fitness not as medical practice frames, but as self-improvement frames. While losing weight or becoming more active could be classified as physiological and therefore related to

medicine, there is a qualitative difference between the intentional pursuit of medical benefits and achieving them as the side-effect of a non-medical goal.

The boundary between fitness and nutrition was also negotiated. Nutritionists and dietitians dominate the diet and nutrition field, yet personal trainers may also provide diet advice. The boundary between fitness and nutrition was more easily traversed than the boundary between fitness and medicine. Trainers felt more comfortable recommending diet changes than they did making medical diagnoses and recommending treatments. This probably reflects the less rigorous legal definition and regulation of the nutrition compared to the practice of medicine.

Joseph, a personal trainer and chef, commented on the competition between nutritionists and trainers regarding diet and fitness:

One of the biggest debates going on since I've been in this field is about advising people on nutrition. Personal trainers, technically, are not allowed—not supposed—to give advice about nutrition. That's supposed to only be for registered dietitians. But it's such a grey area. . . . Who isn't going [to] tell your client, "You should really cut back on the fat . . . eat vegetables"? It's kind of just general advice. But dietitians get very up-in-arms about it because it's kind of intruding on their territory.

The "encroachment" of trainers on the nutritionist/dietician's "territory" was also evident in magazines; one article stated: "With the help of my trainer at the jujitsu school, I started replacing empty carbs with lean protein. (It's worth asking trainers for diet advice too.)"<sup>1</sup>

However, Amy, a personal trainer, said that she wouldn't necessarily trust a trainer to provide dietary advice:

I definitely look to see if the person is a dietitian or not—the person giving me information—or a doctor or something—if they actually know

what they're talking about. But if it's just like a personal trainer who had this idea about nutrition . . . who knows if it's true or not?

She believed that there was a clear boundary between these types of expertise and that proper training in a subject was important in claiming to be an expert and disseminating information—an example of the importance of credentials to credibility.

The lack of clearly defined boundaries between nutrition and fitness is a good example of how fields attempt to defend their own borders against encroachment, while simultaneously borrowing from and occasionally making incursions into neighboring disciplines. Fields overlap and a number of fields such as health and nutrition encroach on fitness as well as on each other.

At the macro level, fields compete with one another for recognition to garner rewards or benefits. Being recognized as an important field assists in: (1) securing financial support and (2) selling products and services. Financial support is critical for the success of any initiative, and fitness field businesses and programs are no different. Public fitness programs, in particular, face difficulty sustaining themselves, as funding is often hard to come by once initial grants run out. Kelly, who worked for a program to increase health, nutrition, and fitness in her city, explained that “[our program] was a six year, multimillion dollar initiative that was funded by [a private philanthropic foundation].” However, after six years, “we did not receive additional funding” and so the program could not continue. Granting agencies make their funding decisions based on the quality of the individual program and the perceived importance of the field overall. Hence, everyone in the fitness field has a shared interest in ensuring that fitness is perceived as an important and high-priority field of endeavor.

There is competition for resources among fields even within single organizations. University fitness programs are an example. Spencer, director of the fitness programs and campus recreation at a large urban university, explained that there is interdepartmental competition for university funding:

Obviously we are in constant . . . not fights . . . but we're nudging right next to athletics because they want more. Obviously academics, kinesiology, those kinds of things, might want more. So we've kind of got to put our foot forward and say, "Here's what we're doing and here's how it is measured and it is good."

He went on to say that this competition would likely be even more intense in the future: "The challenges going forward have to do with funding. . . . I actually think we're in better shape to pitch our product to the university officials than maybe athletics is in. . . . For us [the challenges are] space and facilities and funding." Spencer explained that campuses in urban areas were especially concerned with this because of the physical limitations on development. Departments have to demonstrate that they are "worthy to be considered for a new building."

The availability of funding for research also affects the way in which fields define themselves, what gets studied, and how the research is positioned. In recent years, for example, the funding for weight-loss programs and obesity research has increased dramatically. Thus, research studies exploring how exercise can be utilized to lose weight have a higher probability of being funded than programs that do not have a weight-loss focus. This affects not only what studies are pursued but also how exercise is viewed by the public as findings are played out in the media. Some respondents criticized how funding dictated the type of research being conducted and how the findings are portrayed. Nevertheless, it is a good example of how fields define

themselves in order to garner resources and how resource limitations cause competition and boundary encroachment among fields.

Fitness also competes with other fields for people's time, energy, and money. Fitness advocates must convince the public—already overwhelmed by the demands of work, family, and leisure pursuits—to invest time and money in fitness activities. Competition is intense; consumers are bombarded daily with messages to “buy this” or “buy that.” Establishing fitness as an important and valuable endeavor is essential in the competition to secure a share of consumers' discretionary spending on fitness.

Presenting fitness as a panacea appears to be one strategy by which the fitness industry competes against other fields. For example, articles presented physical activity as an alternative to medical treatment for pain.<sup>2</sup> Magazines also used fear tactics to emphasize the importance of fitness, often drawing upon our culture's negative attitudes toward illness, fatness, and aging. Magazines' scare tactics also included suggesting that without the proper expert advice—theirs, presumably—readers could be led astray. Thus, publications simultaneously promoted the importance of fitness as well as their own agenda of selling magazines.

Selling gym memberships and personal training sessions was another area of competition identified by respondents. Tanya, who had run a number of gym facilities, viewed the fitness industry as being driven by capitalism. She argued:

It is all about selling a product. It is all about marketing. Very rarely do I see something that I think is . . . really because they want people to be better. . . . I think it is about making a buck.

According to personal trainer Tanya, fitness clubs' profits are based on memberships, not necessarily on the desire to improve people's fitness or health:

Health clubs, they hope that you never use the club. . . . That's why they do all these little tricks: "Sign up and we will give you a year free." Because they know that usually they [new members] quit using it after 30 days.

The higher the general perception that fitness is important, the easier it is to attract members. Hence, while individual competitors in the industry need to differentiate themselves from one another, they all have a shared interest in elevating the public perception that they do as important and worthy of time and money.

I argue that in the struggle to enhance the importance of the fitness field in relation to other fields, "experts" play a pivotal role. The field needs experts to be seen as necessary and "special"; the experts need the field to elevate their own importance. Thus, there is a symbiotic relationship between a field and its experts. I identified three arguments supporting the need for fitness experts: (1) experts are needed to help the public sort through an overload of information; (2) experts have specialized knowledge that lay people lack; and (3) experts are able to provide people with invaluable guidance.

A common theme was that experts were necessary because of the plethora of fitness information available, not all of which was reliable or high quality. Many respondents discussed the information overload. Alexis said that as a personal trainer, "you have to manage what they are being bombarded with in health and fitness." Group instructor Jessica admitted, "Honestly, sometimes I don't know how to answer [their questions] . . . There is so much conflicting information out there and there's so much people are getting from news and TV." Trainers and instructors positioned themselves as essential to sort through the information. Personal trainer and magazine advisory board

member James said, “When we think about fitness and food and everything, people get so overwhelmed . . . what I'm doing is I'm putting it in a very simplistic format.”

Articles also reflected the need for experts to help manage information overload.

For example:

You either have no plan and "wing it" every workout, or you've read so many articles on training that you don't know what to trust, so you don't stick with any one program. But we're about to change that.<sup>3</sup>

Another article promised a “celebrity Pilates instructor” who “clears up the confusion.”<sup>4</sup>

Secondly, experts claimed they were essential because they have access to special knowledge and resources. Many of the respondents interviewed made statements suggesting that the public lacked the knowledge and training of experts. Mark said:

They don't have the educational background and the tools really aren't there to do so . . . I don't think the average individual would know how to access it . . . And so lots of people are hooked into doing things that are really not in their best interest. . . . They don't have the tools . . . to make informed decisions.

When I spoke with Mark about the college education of fitness professionals, he felt that a crucial component of fitness education should be training students how to assess the quality of information:

Do we really teach them how to evaluate the quality of the information that's out there and how to search for the expert who can help them make decisions about, you know, what kind of exercise to do and where to do it, from whom to get training, etcetera?

Therefore, fitness experts must not only possess special knowledge, they also need to be able to discern good advice from bad advice. This sets the expert apart from the average person, as Jessica explained:

I come to it with a lot of information. A lot of people come to it without anything. . . . If you have no background in the science and you have no

background in anything like that, how are you going to know how to separate messages? You don't.

Gabrielle, a magazine writer and editor noted that her readers will almost certainly not read the journal in which the original research study was published. Gabrielle saw her role as a disseminator who drew attention to research that otherwise might not have come into the limelight: “what I want to keep doing is finding the studies that are the most interesting and . . . that people should know about and cover those.” Experts provided a service by converting dense or jargon-laden scientific research into understandable and readable lay terminology and accessible media.

A third rationale for the necessity of experts in a field is that lay people need supervision and advice. One article chastised readers: “You really should trust us and do the workouts we provide in the magazine—but if you're going to design your own program, at least avoid these errors:”<sup>5</sup> Respondents also expressed concern that people required guidance. Paige, a physical therapist, said:

People are just given exercises and go home and do them and they're not done correctly. And I think people need supervision in order to stay active. . . . They hit a snag and they don't have someone to help them over it. And I think the snags are inevitable. . . . I really feel like life-long or long-term exercise requires—for most people—guidance so that they can change gears when they need to.

Respondents also claimed experts were necessary because of their ability to motivate people. Joseph explained that personal training was:

. . . really about the strategies you employ to make it happen. ‘Cause everybody knows what to eat, what not to eat. Everybody knows what's good for them and what's bad for them. It's how do you get that into your life; how do you make that happen? That's really the hard part. If it was easy, everybody would be looking good, looking thin.

The assertion that experts are necessary because people need guidance implementing fitness knowledge helps legitimize fitness as a field and elevate its status.

#### Mezzo Level Competition: Organizations as Competitors

At what I classify as the mezzo level, fitness organizations compete with one another for brand recognition, market share, and profits. Each enterprise seeks to differentiate itself from its competitors and to persuade consumers that its products offer special or unique value propositions. The principal struggle among fitness magazines is for readership since the size and demographics of a magazine's audience determine how much advertising it can sell and advertising is its most important source of revenue (Garvey 1996). Thus, there are strong economic incentives for a magazine to position itself as the preferred information resource for a particular market segment.

Such positioning was evident in the media kits magazines used to attract potential advertising clients. *Men's Health*, for example, claimed it "is the #1 source worldwide of information for and about men."<sup>6</sup> Another magazine claimed it had the "#1 Highest price paid by subscribers . . . more than our closest competitor."<sup>7</sup> *Men's Fitness*, a competitor of *Men's Health*, attempted to differentiate itself by claiming to focus primarily on fitness and as being "The Ultimate Performance Brand for Men."<sup>8</sup> The language used in magazines' articles also reflected competition, such as boasting "exclusive" content and "the best (and most effective)"<sup>9</sup> advice.

Like *Men's Fitness*, the women's magazine *Fitness* also claimed to have the most health and wellness content and to be the leader in fitness editorials, as compared to its competitors *Health*, *Self*, *Shape*, and *Women's Health*. *Shape*, on the other hand, marketed itself as a well-rounded magazine aimed at reader self-improvement. One

*Shape* article pledged to readers: “We’re here to help you live an enriching, satisfying, happy, and healthy life and be the best you’ve ever been.”<sup>10</sup>

Another strategy magazines employed to compete for readership was promising to provide advice from leading experts. For example: “Each week *Men’s Fitness* panel of experts answer your fitness questions.”<sup>11</sup> Similarly, *Shape* claimed it contained “the most authoritative fitness, nutrition, and health advice.”<sup>12</sup> One *Men’s Health* issue touted exercise advice from “top trainers and exercise scientists”<sup>13</sup> while another issue promised readers “new fitness tips from the country’s most innovative trainers.”<sup>14</sup> Because access to expert advice is an important reason to purchase a fitness magazine, publications promoted their writers as “experts” who were even “more expert” than their competitors’. Since the “experts” thus promoted also benefit, as do advertisers, the definition of “expert” was very flexible.

Magazines also competed by promising to provide the best quality advice, as opposed to “hype” or “bad” advice (from their competitors, presumably). From her experience in the publishing industry, interview respondent Rebecca believed that while the “news-worthiness” of article topics was important, editors had to negotiate between “putting the spotlight” on potentially short-lived trends and staying up-to-date. She was critical of “fluffy” publications (her term) that too readily attached themselves to trends:

They're always very keen to attach themselves to, you know, what is on everyone's mind right now and not always necessarily looking into the science behind it or seeing the longevity behind it or if there's [*sic*] any benefits or risks to it.

In contrast to this practice, Rebecca explained that her magazine wanted to ensure the information it published was “based in science.”

A common commercial response to competition is to segment markets and target different audiences. The existence of different magazines for men and women is evidence that the magazines in this study employ this strategy. Each gender was further segmented; *Men's Fitness*, envisioned that its typical reader was “in the gym 4-5 days every week,”<sup>15</sup> whereas *Men's Health* claimed “It’s the brand for active, successful, professional men who want greater control over their physical, mental, and emotional lives.”<sup>16</sup>

Advertisers select media based on the demographics of the audience. Therefore, magazines provided statistical information on their readership in media kits. For example, *Men's Fitness* reported that in 2011 its audience of 7,682,000 people was overwhelmingly male (90 percent) with a median age of 36.6 years and a median household income of \$74,471. *Men's Health* provided a chart in their 2012 media kit stating a total audience of 12,473,000 of which 84 percent were male with a median age of 37.4 years and a median household income of \$79,629.

According to the respondents I interviewed who were involved in fitness publishing, content was selected based on the target audience. Because different publications targeted different audiences, content and style differed among magazines. Rebecca explained that targeting the content toward the intended audience is a key step in designing and writing an article:

You have to always start by looking at your audience . . . and then, looking at the topic at hand and seeing, ‘Is our target audience gonna [go] away with anything, anything beneficial out of this piece?’ . . . There always has to be some service in there.

This process was important, she explained, because “if you're not speaking to a specific group, you may not be speaking to anyone at all.” Like editor Rebecca, writer Gabrielle also identified the importance of developing content with an intended audience in mind:

Generally the topics that I write about are a particular interest to reasonably well-educated, generally middle-aged people who want to maintain their health and also maintain their physical abilities well into old age . . . So the studies that seem to tell us how to do that . . . are the ones that interest me the most.

According to Rebecca, assumptions about the gender of the audience affect editors’ decisions about topics and style:

With women you can often read more, like, lifestyle aspects into a fitness magazine. You know, for example, like hair care products, like make-up . . . ‘cause with women a lot of time it's a whole package. . . . So if you're putting that much effort into your body, you want to make sure you look good too. So in some sense, we do pull that in a little bit more.

Gabrielle’s comments supported Rebecca’s. She noted the voice she utilized in women’s magazines was also affected by gender: “The voice tends to be played different [than in science publications]. It's generally a lot more informal . . . tends to be a lot breezier. . . . But they still want good solid reporting.” Likewise, Rebecca noted:

When you're speaking to women it's a bit more happy, maybe a bit more tongue and cheek to the overall article. You definitely want to like bring emotions into it and what not. Whereas with men a lot of times it's cut and dry. Maybe there's a little bit more attitude in there. So the delivery is definitely important as well.

It is probable that such editors’ gender stereotypes contribute to the strong gendering of fitness I observed in my analysis of content.

Visuals were also important in tailoring content to appeal to specific kinds of readers. Rebecca said: “I'm an editor, I love words and everything like that, but I do understand the purpose of . . . making it visually appealing. . .” She also speculated that

the format of the magazine articles has changed because “people are constantly online, attention spans are shorter.” Articles need to be “concise” and the visuals should be able to “speak for themselves.” Rebecca’s remarks indicated that online information has become a serious competitor to traditional publications for share of mind and advertising dollars. Magazines have been forced to adapt, in some cases, to some extent, by incorporating elements (like brevity and visuals) of their competitors.

Another competitive strategy used by magazines was to promise readers better results in less time in an effort to appeal to increasingly busy adults. One satisfied reader commented on “Workouts for Working Women”: “These workouts are great. [The trainer’s] plans are perfect for the busy woman. They aren’t overly long.”<sup>17</sup> Personal trainers also felt the need to offer advice on how to fit exercise into a busy schedule.

Mezzo level competition also includes the competition among firms selling fitness equipment, clothing, accessories, and services. As in the publishing industry, competition is intense. Different companies pursue different competitive strategies; some focus on quality, others on service, and some on the “quick buck.” Rebecca addressed the pressure to make money and come out with new products:

There's a lot more companies that are willing to like fuel money into perhaps these ideas or gimmicks or gadgets that aren't necessarily going to get people the results that they want . . . that really don't do anything at all. . . [They] “trick” people into purchasing these products in hope that they are going to get thin quick.

Robert, a store manager and running coach, also stressed the impact of marketing on sales: “Nike does a big marketing push and that’s probably going to sell . . . and drive people into the store.” Popular demand was so important that even if Robert personally did not like a shoe brand or style, he would still sell it in his store.

Commercial gyms and fitness centers are also businesses and, as such, are similarly driven by economic concerns and competitive realities. For example, group instructor Daphne believed that most women preferred women-only workout facilities “where they don’t have to deal with men watching them or deal with sweaty, grungy men.” Nevertheless, she recognized that:

Most women aren’t very good about putting themselves on the take-care-of list and . . . because of that it is very, very difficult to make a women’s-only gym a successful venture from a financial perspective. . . . And so while I think that it is a preferable option for a lot of women, from an actual survival perspective it is very difficult.

Technology has become an important element in the competition among exercise facilities. University program director Spencer described the pressure to have the latest exercise equipment:

We’ve gone into the thing of putting all the damn screens on a lot of the cardio machines. . . . and then all this stuff you are paying extra fees for. So if you buy an elliptical that is good, state-of-the-art, it might be \$4,000. You buy it with the entertainment package it’s another \$1,000 and a monthly charge. And when you have 65 of them, you know, you are talking an extra \$100,000. . . . So the industry is such that they are always trying to find more, just like [cell] phones . . . .

He observed: “All [gym-goers] want to do is go and get a good sweat up and get a good workout. Get their heartbeat up. Maybe run whatever ‘X’ amount of time or whatever; push themselves a little bit. They don’t need all the bells and whistles attached to it.” He concluded it was consumerism and competition within the fitness industry that drives these demands.

### Micro Level Competition: Individual Experts and Practitioners as Competitors

I defined the micro level of competition in the fitness field as the competition among individuals—such as researchers, board members, personal trainers, and program directors. The resources being contested for at the micro level include recognition and prestige, the economic benefits from being recognized as an expert (income, paid presentations, articles, endorsements, etc.), higher-profile clients, and more prestigious places to work. Competition at the micro level is likely to intensify as more people enter the field and the value of being an “expert” increases. In fact, a 2012 article on fitness careers stated, “The U.S. Department of Labor predicts that fitness-related jobs will multiply more rapidly than other occupations over the next six years.”<sup>18</sup>

Fitness experts compete for desirable positions. Some jobs offer greater financial incentives; others offer greater prestige, such as working at a high-end fitness center versus a more traditional “gym;” others offer greater autonomy; as personal trainer Ben explained:

I didn’t want to work at like a Bally’s or something and get paid like \$10.00 an hour as a personal trainer and work 50 hours a week just to make ends meet. . . . I wanted to be on my own. . . . [Some gyms] charge like a monthly fee and you can go in and everything else was completely up to you, so you found your own clients and you charge what you wanted to charge and you just used the facility.

Additional considerations were important for some individuals: for Elizabeth, furthering her own education while working and staying in an academic environment was very important: “I work exclusively with campus programs. I’ve never gone to a private sector or the corporate environment. . . . It was very intentional.”

The key challenge for independent trainers, as in any business, is finding and keeping clients. The competition for clients was one reason that individual trainers worked hard to differentiate their offerings and establish themselves as at least local experts.

Differentiation is one of the four generic strategies defined by the famous business strategist Michael Porter (1985). I observed a number of ways in which respondents attempted to differentiate themselves. One approach was to create a niche or specialty. Personal trainer Joseph observed:

We're headed into a much more—an era where niche specialties are going to become the norm with personal training. . . . You're going to have people who are doing post-rehab and trainers who specialize in pregnancy and moms. So the field is starting to split off into different specialty niches. . . . The guys who are—the people who are savvy with their business are finding that—just as doctors have become specialists—it's the same idea.

Amy, another personal trainer, described how she was setting herself apart from the competition and even articulated that she was “trying to give myself an edge over everybody else” by accumulating degrees:

I'm just trying to set myself up with as much education and credentials as I possibly can to be—to try to set myself apart from everyone else. From all the other trainers that are out there. . . . I'll be a dietician, as well as a trainer.

Cynthia took a similar approach by combining specialties to be able to offer clients what she considered “a more comprehensive approach”: the combination of being a personal trainer, medical training, and life coach training with a Health At Every Size® approach.

Tanya combined counseling with personal training and Joseph also found that it was beneficial to enhance his personal training with other skill sets. Not only was he a life

coach, but he was also a personal chef and specialized in working with clients over age 50.

A second strategy used to create differentiation—and thus reduce direct competition—was to offer individualized services, particularly in the area of motivation, since maintaining motivation is a key struggle for most exercisers. Respondents said that motivating people to exercise in the first place (attracting new clients) and then keeping them motivated to adhere to a program over time (retaining existing clients) were vital to success. Ben, Mark, and other respondents spoke at length about motivation techniques, in particular, individualization.

Trainers claimed that since every person was different, they tailored their advice. Amy explained that one of the necessary components of her work was “trying to figure out how each individual works, like what tactics work on this person that wouldn't work on the other person. Like trying to figure out how people tick and what makes them go and how you can motivate somebody.” Joseph also felt individualization was a crucial component of the successful trainer: “Each person is different, so you have to help them to see what's their best way.” Similarly, magazines tried to present workouts that the reader could tailor to his or her goals. For example, one magazine boasted that it offers “custom solutions from top trainers.”<sup>19</sup>

The mechanism of “individualizing” fitness plans, however, was very different for the personal trainer than for magazines. Trainers had personal contact with their clients and could adapt to their unique, lived situations. Trainers adjusted workouts to suit energy level, emotional well-being, and changes in physical aptitude (soreness, injury, etc.). This differed from the magazines, which addressed a broad and anonymous

audience. Although magazine writers tried to suggest modifications that would tailor the workout to specific needs, they obviously could not adapt to the unique and changing demands of each audience member. Thus, trainers had a competitive advantage vis-à-vis “off the shelf” advice in that their guidance was more personal—tailored to individual needs and social interactions.

In any service industry, the perceived quality of service affects client retention and commercial success. To be commercially successful, trainers said they had to perform emotional labor (Hochschild 1983; Wharton 2009) and be good at satisfying clients and consumers. Trainers thus also competed with each other on the quality of their service and emotional support as perceived by their clients.

Alexis argued that a successful trainer had to do more than possess knowledge about fitness: “It is not just about the science . . . It’s more than your knowledge . . . you might be a good trainer but [if you don’t connect] you are not going to be in business very long.” When asked to describe what connecting with clients entailed, Alexis said:

It is you being accessible beforehand and after-hand. Having that conversation in the locker room. . . . It is taking the time. . . . In this industry, I don’t really think you are “off.” You are not even off the clock if you are in the grocery store.

In addition to being “on” and accessible, emotional regulation was also necessary.

Elizabeth described training as being similar to acting:

It is very social, which sometimes can be rough. . . . Especially if you are [in] one of those moods where maybe you don’t necessarily feel like being all that social. . . . That is when you go in and turn it on and you make it happen and then you can just go back to being a grump later. As long as your participants don’t see you like that, that’s okay.

Emotional labor is a skill that can be developed over time and is an important contributor to success (Wharton 2009). Emotional labor is important since rapport with

clients may help prevent injury, lawsuits, or going out of business. For example, Alexis, like most trainers, believed it was critical to know the health history of the client. She argued that by establishing good rapport, trainers can get to know their clients and may find out health information clients may not realize matters for how they exercise—an experience she has had. Therefore, emotional labor may be an essential job competency as well as an important skill in distinguishing oneself from the competition.

Another challenge of working in the fitness industry, according to respondents, is staying up-to-date on the latest methods and science in order to remain competitive. Six respondents discussed the importance of “keeping up.” Amy explained that her mother, also a personal trainer, has had to adapt to changes in the fitness field. Amy believed it was important to stay “on top of it” to provide her clients with “the most current information.”

Joseph thought trainers should be “always learning and always being willing and open to learn new things” in order to stay competitive. He criticized trainers who did not continually change with developments in the industry and who “think they know everything there is to know.” He noted that only one or two other trainers where he works attended continuing education programs and conferences with him and that most trainers did not keep up with their certifications. Joseph did not understand this attitude: “I don’t get it, because, to me, you really want to be a true pro—a real, true professional—and you really have to learn.”

Although competition was a dominant feature of all three levels of the fitness field, interactions at the micro-level were not unrelentingly competitive, especially in the not-for-profit segment. For example, Spencer, a university fitness-program director,

characterized his relationship with his colleagues as one of camaraderie and sharing more than of competition. In fact, this was the aspect of his job that he liked most. Spencer said:

I can go to a conference and chat with people or talk with people or go to sessions that are being presented by colleagues and we're sharing it because I am not competing with them.

However, Spencer recognized that information sharing was not a standard within the fitness field, especially among for-profit companies:

I know LA Fitness isn't sharing with Bally's . . . they are not sharing their customer service methods. They're not sharing their problems. . . . I mean if you think about it there aren't too many professions [that share] . . . But I can call [a director at another university] on the phone in a minute and say, "Hey I'm dealing with this..." . . . that way we're able to share and keep up with stuff. . . . It's one of the best things about this profession, without a doubt.

Spencer's comments underscored Bourdieu's field theory and the general nature of competition. Competition is driven by the pursuit of valuable and limited resources in which one party's gain is another's loss. Perhaps because university recreation programs are not the determining factor in why incoming students choose one university over another, program directors at different universities do not experience direct competition. Collaboration across institutional lines helps the individual program directors succeed in their internal competition against other departments for funding and space.

### Summary

Consistent with Bourdieu's (1990) theory of fields, I identified a variety of actors and organizations that vie for positions, recognition, and resources within the fitness field. I also identified evidence of competition between fitness and other fields, including incursions, cross-overs and interdependencies.

I identified competition at three levels. At the macro level, the fitness field competes with other fields like medicine and nutrition for public attention and funding. Boundary disputes were evident about who is qualified to speak about fitness as well as to what extent fitness experts are qualified to speak for other fields. At the mezzo level, enterprises like companies, universities, and public programs compete for resources, most importantly money. Competition is most intense among organizations of the same type (for example, between gyms) but there is also crossover among categories, such as between home exercise equipment manufacturers and exercise facilities. At the micro level, individual experts contend for recognition, clients, positions, and the attendant economic and social benefits.

I realized that many of the struggles within the field, such as the credibility struggles, were really competition for economic capital (financial resources) and need to be viewed in that light. This is because capital can be converted from one form into another—for example, recognition as an authority can be translated into economic capital.

The nature of the competition was influenced by the stage of development of fitness as a profession (increased competition and specialization as the field grows), the conditions of other fields (size and saturation), and broader cultural changes affecting all fields (time demands, consumerism, individualism). Agents within the field have adopted a variety of strategies to minimize direct competition and gain a differential advantage for themselves. These included specialization, personalization or customization, and emotional labor. I hypothesize that the meanings of fitness are

influenced by the agents' negotiations of their position within the field and their struggles to become or remain relevant in the ever-shifting terrain of the changing field.

A recurring theme in the analysis of both the magazine content and interviews was the importance of being recognized as "expert" at all three levels of competition. Because of the critical role played by "experts," in the next chapter I will examine in detail the techniques used by experts to establish their legitimacy.

## CHAPTER 3

### THE STRUGGLE OVER FITNESS EXPERTISE

In fitness, as in other fields, certain individuals and enterprises become recognized as “experts.” Such recognition conveys advantages in the competition for resources. Those who successfully market themselves as experts have an advantage in securing clients, funding and grants, speaking and publishing opportunities, and so forth. In this chapter, I further explore the research question, “*How do opinion leaders support their arguments and stake claims for authority?*”

Bourdieu (1986, 1990, 1993) proposed that all cultural fields are characterized by competition and that one of the key areas of struggle is over establishing capital—in this case, expert status—since capital is advantageous in securing a larger share of limited resources. Competitions for expert recognition are classified as “credibility struggles” and have been studied by Epstein (1996), who coined the term, and Saguy (2013), among others. Establishing credibility requires accumulating various forms of capital. Hutson (2013) and Smith Maguire (2008) identified three specific forms of capital as important to credibility in the fitness field: bodily capital, human capital (such as certification), and social capital. In my research, I identified additional forms of capital as important in this field and the competitive strategies used to acquire them.

I describe the ways in which actors in the fitness field at the mezzo level of magazines and the micro level of individuals competed with one another and attempted to differentiate themselves in order to gain competitive advantage. While these strategies

are not necessarily unique to the fitness field, their usage provides insights into the nature of the field and the different forms of capital it comprises.

The strategies used by experts and those who rely on experts included credentialing, name-dropping, referencing personal fitness goal success, referencing commercial success, using science, and discrediting others. Each strategy had multiple forms, which suggests that within each strategy there are variations which garner differing degrees of legitimacy and credibility. According to Bourdieu (1986), the structure of the field shapes how capital functions within it and therefore the power of any given strategy may be specific to the fitness field. I identify what appeared to be preferred forms—those which had the greatest potential to confer status—as well as secondary and tertiary forms.

### Credentialing

The most prevalent strategy utilized by magazines was credentialing, the ratcheting up of credential accumulation as evidence of expertise. As Bourdieu (1986) explained, academic qualifications and other forms of institutionalized cultural capital serve as “a certificate of cultural competence” (pp. 241-258). Nearly 60 percent of all articles on exercise provided credentials. There was substantial variation across magazines, however, depending on the gender and characteristics of the targeted audience: men’s magazines were more likely than women’s magazines to provide credentials. For example, *Men’s Health* articles on exercise were the most likely to provide credentials (80 percent) and *Shape* articles were the least likely (45 percent). Almost all interview respondents (21 of 24) discussed credentialing, typically mentioning

their own qualifications and degrees, and generally discussing the importance of credentials.

An example of the use of credentialing as a strategy was the magazines' listing of academic or other credentials after authors' or advisory board members' names whenever these were available. I argue that the significance and prestige attributed to a credential depends on its value in the labor market:

The conversion of economic capital into cultural capital establishes the value, in terms of cultural capital, of the holder of a given qualification relative to other qualification holders and, by the same token, the monetary value for which it can be exchanged on the labor market. (Bourdieu 1986:241–258)

Therefore, the various credentials mentioned can be arranged in a hierarchy. The preferred form of this strategy—the form which likely conferred the most status and therefore economic value—was to reference well-recognized and widely-respected degrees such as PhD (Doctor of Philosophy), MD (Doctor of Medicine), and MS (Master of Science).

Other credentials, perhaps less-generally known but still respected within the fitness field, were also mentioned such as C.S.C.S. (Certified Strength and Conditioning Specialist), R.D. (Registered Dietitian), F.A.C.N. (Fellow of the American College of Nutrition), C.N.S. (Clinical Nurse Specialist), F.A.C.P.M. (Fellow of the American College of Preventative Medicine), F.A.C.P. (Fellow of the American College of Physicians), and F.A.C.S.M. (Fellow of the College of Sports Medicine).

Less prestigious (tertiary) credentials, such as C.P.T. (Certified Personal Trainer), were also used when more prestigious ones were not available. The National Commission for Certifying Agencies (NCCA) accredits certifying agencies like the

American Council on Exercise (ACE), the American College of Sports Medicine (ACSM), and the National Academy of Sports Medicine (NASM). Finally, magazine articles used the descriptor “trainer” without specifying a certification type, presumably when other credentials were lacking.

Credentials and/or training from certain organizations are more valuable than from others (Hutson 2013:67). For example, certifications from accredited programs are more prestigious than those from non-accredited programs.<sup>20</sup> Magazines emphasized a credential’s origin if the institution was well-known or respected in the field, or as if it were. For example, one article identified the expert trainer by her title and certification: “*Shape* Fitness Director Jeanine Detz is a National Academy of Sports Medicine-certified trainer.”<sup>21</sup> Another article about a trainer emphasized the renown of the trainer’s credentials: “Robertson has a master's in sports biomechanics from Ball State's world-renowned Human Performance Lab and is the co-owner of Indianapolis Fitness and Sports Training (IFAST), which is regarded as one of the country's top gyms.”<sup>22</sup> Whether or not the institution is actually world-renowned, and who regards this gym as “one of the country’s top gyms,” was not addressed. Nevertheless, highlighting credentials lent credibility to the trainer and the trainer’s advice, and therefore to the magazine itself.

Interview respondents indicated they were aware of the varying levels of reputation attached to credentials; when Gabrielle writes newspaper or magazine articles, she chooses “studies from peer-reviewed, fairly prestigious journals.” Physical therapist Paige said, “Some of [the licensing organizations] are more reputable than others, like the American College of Sports Medicine is very reputable.” Some respondents suggested

that knowledge of the reputation may influence potential clients' decisions in whom to hire as a trainer. Paige commented, "If you are looking for a fitness trainer you're probably not going to find good ones at a 24 Hour Fitness, as much as you would—this is just my impression—in a Y or in a university facility."

While clients may not be aware of these distinctions, employers I interviewed viewed certification as an important part of their quality control. For example, Elizabeth explained that from the job market demand side, certain degrees are preferable over others. In order to be hired to teach some fitness classes, she requires applicants have specific levels of experience and training. In describing the hiring preferences where she works, Elizabeth said:

We are ACSM, NASM people. That is what we prefer as far [as] our personal trainers go. ACE is also okay as well for us, especially as an entry level as a student personal trainer. . . . [For] our Spinning classes, they absolutely have to be Spinning-certified. There is no questions [*sic*] about that. . . . For our yoga teachers we require a 200 hour yoga teaching training just to walk in the door and to do an audition.

Like Elizabeth, a program director at another university, Andy, also emphasized the importance of credentials for employment at the gym where he works: "Our group fitness leaders, when they're hired, they have to have a national certification."

Elizabeth explained that educational degrees and assistantships were important qualifications for jobs in campus recreation for practical reasons. She believed that credentialing was not an arbitrary process and that the distinctions between different credentials were important. For people like Elizabeth, credentialing was seen as a way to institutionalize and standardize knowledge, training, and services (George 2013). Within what Collins (1979) refers to as the "credentialing of society," credentials are "marks of

distinction” (Bourdieu 1984) and “market signals” (Freidson 1994) that enable “workers to differentiate themselves from people whom they consider less qualified and to indicate a level of worker competence” (George 2013:195).

Nevertheless, respondents were critical of the credentialing system, even though it lent many of them legitimacy and credibility. Their two most common critiques were that some certifications were too easy to attain and that the fitness industry lacked regulation. Some areas had very low barriers to entry. For example, as one magazine article explained, the educational requirements for many fitness careers is a high school diploma.<sup>23</sup>

Alexis regularly helped prepare students to take the qualifying exam for certification and noted that many of her students were not highly educated. This was cause for concern among some respondents like Ben, who argued that the low barriers to entry were *too* low and that the preparation process was not rigorous enough:

This is an industry where you can . . . go to a workshop on Saturday and Sunday and take the test at the end of Sunday and if you pass, then you are a trainer. . . . There are some [certifying organizations] that you can go in and get it [the certification] the same day. . . . There are some that are actually you can just get it on-line. You pay like 50 bucks and I don’t know if you have to answer any questions but technically it’s a certification.

Personal trainer Amy even admitted that it would be possible to avoid the certification process altogether: “You actually don’t *have* to be certified. . . . But technically you should. But you *could* call yourself a trainer right now and start training people.” She concluded, “With trainers, definitely look for their certifications, just to make sure that they’re certified.” Ben, a personal trainer, agreed that it was important to verify trainers’ credentials. He explained, “The scary thing is people don’t ask [to see

trainers' certifications]. Out of all the clients that I have had I have probably had two or three ask me what my certification is. I have had one person [ask me for] proof of it.”

Most respondents felt it was advisable to attain additional education, certification, or training since the barriers to entry are so low. Alexis explained that the Zumba license requires participation in an eight hour workshop and a monthly licensing fee of \$40.00 for music and choreography. However, she explained, “It is recommended that they then go back and get an entry-level or a primary aerobic certification.”

Respondents voiced particular concern for some of the low-barrier certifications they felt did not adequately prepare teachers. Elizabeth identified a concern shared by multiple respondents about Zumba certifications: “I don’t think that they do a really good job of educating your instructors.” Elizabeth was worried, like others, that Zumba instructors may not be receiving proper safety training. She believed it was important to “have an instructor who has the right education—whether it is coming from a certification or maybe someone like me in my position who can make sure that they have everything they need to offer the class in a safe way, taking into account intensity level.”

Another critique of fitness credentialing was that the fitness industry lacked standards and regulation. Respondents expressed concern that once having attained credentials, many personal trainers and group fitness instructors did not receive enough oversight. Respondents also questioned the usefulness of the certification in preparing people to teach fitness and whether people actually applied what they learned during certification classes. Alexis wondered, “Do people actually apply [what they learned during certification classes] when they are out there? I hope so. I don’t know if they do.” She identified the problem as one of lack of regulation: “There [are] no fitness police

looking at them and managing them. It really depends on the manager that they have: whether the manager [really has] that level of ethics or professional ownership.”

Personal trainer Ben also argued that oversight was important and that the fitness industry needed “more regulation.” Other respondents agreed that whether or not trainers and instructors follow safety regulations, attend continuing education programs to keep their certification current, or keep up with new trends in the field, is left to the discretion of each organization.

For example, the staff evaluation process at the university facility where Elizabeth worked involved observing staff once a year at minimum. She explained that newer staff were evaluated at the start of the semester and follow-ups were conducted as needed. It was typical where she worked for staff to also be evaluated again the following semester. One aspect of Elizabeth’s job was to work with staff who needed “additional development.”

However, not all organizations functioned this way. Based on her experience working at different types of organizations, group instructor Jessica felt that there may be less regulation and oversight at independent gyms than at those affiliated with a university: “So once you’re hired [at some gyms] you can really do whatever you want . . . a lot of people don’t follow the guidelines. But nobody ever knows . . . and they don’t have those administrative checks.” From her years of teaching at various gyms, Jessica had observed that “not all the facilities are good at checking if your certification has expired.” These concerns suggested that while credentials may be important in the hiring process, they do not necessarily translate into meaningful practice. Furthermore,

maintenance of credentials may receive less attention in fitness than in other fields and maintenance of credentials is given less importance than their initial accrual.

Since the cultural capital that accrues from credentials is more valuable if it is difficult or time-consuming to obtain, it is logical that actors in the fitness field are critical of the credentialing systems that promise quick-and-easy certification; those degrade the value of credentials in general. As the fitness field continues to grow and professionalize, it is likely that credentialing as a form of capital and credibility will become increasingly important.

### Name-Dropping

The second most common strategy that magazines used to establish credibility and legitimize expertise was name-dropping. This strategy is also a form of social capital: claiming association with a well-known institution or person “rubs off”; it infers credibility which may or may not be deserved. As social capital, name-dropping referred to the “actual or potential resources which are linked to . . . membership in a group . . . which entitles [each of the group’s members] to credit, in the various senses of the word” (Bourdieu 1986:249). Across all magazines in this study, half of articles on exercise utilized this strategy. This strategy was also common among interview respondents: slightly more than half (14 of 24) of all respondents name-dropped.

Name-dropping occurred in two forms: either dropping the name of a well-known institution or the name of an individual. The goal was to suggest that the person being quoted must be credible because of his/her association with a reputable institution or already-famous person. For institutional name-dropping, the preferred form was reference to a famous name, for example, the Columbia University Medical Center.<sup>24</sup>

Magazines that referenced prestigious universities attempted to garner credibility from this association. The secondary form was to mention a less-well-known institution such as the University of Missouri.<sup>25</sup> This may still convey expertise from its status as a university or, in the case of the Human Performance Lab at the University of Connecticut,<sup>26</sup> from recognition by those familiar with the specific field in which the institution is famous, in this case, kinesiology. A tertiary form of name-dropping was reliance on an unnamed replacement such as “new research”<sup>27</sup> or “British research.”<sup>28</sup> While the institutions responsible for the research were not revealed, this strategy relied on the reputation of research centers generally and the assumption that research produces credible advice.

Name-dropping of individuals employed a similar strategy as for institutions: to imply that since the person has consulted with or worked with a famous individual, he/she really is an expert. The preferred strategy was to name a celebrity, even if the celebrity’s career or exact nature of the work done with that celebrity was irrelevant to the subject of the article. For example, an article titled “Get Fit: Turn on the Power” read, “top trainer Joe Dowdell is known for getting results, whether from A-list stars (he’s worked with Anne Hathaway and Eva Medes), pro athletes or supermodels.”<sup>29</sup>

Similarly, Gunnar Peterson is deemed expert because of his clientele:

Name just about any überbabe—Jennifer Lopez, Kim Kardashian or Angelina Jolie, for starters—not to mention some of the world’s best athletes, and Gunnar Peterson has trained her. He’s the go-to guy whether you want to get in shape for a movie, win a title fight (yes, he’s even trained Mike Tyson) or firm up for a close-up.<sup>30</sup>

Dropping names of famous clientele and their successful outcomes was a common tactic used by all the fitness publications as a way of establishing the expertise of their contributors.

Name-dropping also was a strategy used by the magazines to recommend themselves to readers. Publications tried to associate themselves with “the best” experts by inviting “brand-name” experts like Joe Dowdell or Gunnar Peterson to serve on their expert panels and advisory boards. The magazines also sought advice from stars of well-known exercise television shows and from fitness gurus so that they could drop their names into articles. Jillian Michaels, trainer from *The Biggest Loser* TV show, was quoted in articles such as “You’ll Say ‘Wow’”<sup>31</sup> and “Belly Blaster: Be a Loser!”<sup>32</sup> Denise Austin created routines for *Fitness Magazine*’s Express Workout in “Lose More Fat!”<sup>33</sup> Being able to mention experts and celebrities lent status (social capital) to the publication. The relationship is mutually beneficial: frequent mention simultaneously furthers the expert’s goal of achieving greater social status.

A secondary form of name-dropping was to reference unnamed but exceptionally fit persons by virtue of the sport they are associated with, such as “numerous NFL players”<sup>34</sup> or “some of the world’s top MMA fighters.”<sup>35</sup> The tertiary form to make sweeping statements such as describing a trainer who “works with an extensive roster of clients around the country.”<sup>36</sup> These statements were often highly ambiguous but implied popularity and, therefore, credibility.

### “Getting Fit” Success: It Worked for Me

Achieving the “fit look,” establishing a new fitness record, or losing weight were often used as a way to claim expertise in magazine articles. This “getting fit success” strategy was the third most common strategy used in these magazines and occurred in 45 percent of all articles on exercise. Personally attaining fitness goals or helping another person achieve them was offered as evidence of credibility. For example, one article explained how workout success provided a woman expert legitimacy: “‘I’m almost half the size I was before,’ says Tamera. ‘Women at church ask me for fitness advice—and even my daughter has started lifting weights.’”<sup>37</sup> People considered Tamera an expert just because she had lost weight and increased her fitness. Accordingly, a fitness “expert” is someone who has mastered a fitness goal. Similarly, a reader’s comments on a magazine issue read: “Dr. Oz is so fit at 51, I would take advice from him any day.”<sup>38</sup> Clearly, the reader equated the embodiment of fitness with authority and expertise, which is why many magazines and individuals used this strategy in the struggle for credibility.

The converse of the “she’s fit, she must be an expert” is that personal trainers and interview respondents reported feeling pressure to embody the “look” of fitness in order to attract clientele and to be taken seriously. This finding supports the idea that appearance confers expertise. Elizabeth, who had experience in personal training as well as in directing group fitness programs at a large university, addressed the pressure to look fit, which she described as the “physical image of being a fitness professional:”

There is a standard that you need to maintain a certain level of physical appearance in fitness to be taken seriously by . . . certain individuals in the industry who have this [attitude]: “Well if you aren’t in shape, then how do you know what you are talking about?”

Joseph, another personal trainer, echoed this idea: “Being in this business, I think I have to have the appearance. So appearance is really important to me.” He went on to explain that he has become more concerned about looking fit as he has gotten older because he worries about attracting new clientele. Amy, however, wasn’t sure that her looks matter to her personal training clients: “I don't know if they care what I look like; I've always looked like this to them.”

These findings support the claim that the fit look is a specific form of capital: body capital (Bourdieu 1984; Wacquant 1995a). Personal trainers earn body capital by embodying the fit look, which helps establish their authority in the fitness industry (Hutson 2013). According to Bourdieu (1986), any given cultural competence “derives a scarcity value from its position in the distribution of cultural capital and yields profits of distinction for its owner” (p. 283). Therefore, embodying the fit look may be valued, in part, because it is rare. The focus on appearance as a component of fitness necessitates constant body scrutiny and work, especially by those who desire to be seen as legitimate and credible within the fitness field. The implications of this focus are numerous: in addition to the assumption that the fit body is a symbol of health and morality, the fit body also symbolizes fitness authority and expertise (Hutson 2013). These resources may be unequally distributed by social status and the burden of body scrutiny may be felt more strongly by women, as suggested by Bordo (1993), among others.

Only six respondents discussed “getting fit success” as a strategy and two of these respondents actually questioned the utility and necessity of this strategy. For these two respondents, personal success at getting fit was not legitimizing. Personal trainer Tanya was especially critical of the use of looks as a symbol of expertise: “A lot of your

personal trainers are people who work out heavy themselves and because they look good people think they are an expert.” Getting fit or looking fit does not make someone an expert, according to Tanya:

How many times do people go on a diet and now they are the expert on dieting? How many people started an exercise program and now they are the expert on exercise? Do you see what I am saying? And this is how I think a lot of things are promoted, especially in the health and fitness industry, and I'm just really skeptical.

Thus, respondents voiced varying degrees of agreement with the importance of looks in conferring expertise. Some respondents felt ambivalent about whether looks confer expertise, others rejected the emphasis on looks, while still others embraced the idea that accumulating body capital is a necessary component to succeed in the fitness industry.

#### Commercial Success

References to commercial success were used as another “proof” of expertise. The implication is that the producer or creator of the product must possess specialized and trustworthy knowledge or they would not have been able to succeed in the marketplace. This strategy draws upon objectified cultural capital and economical capital (Bourdieu 1986). As the fourth most common strategy, referencing commercial success occurred in 40 percent of all articles on exercise. Magazines directly suggested that commercial success begets credibility. One article claims that CrossFit’s popularity gave the program “credibility that money couldn’t buy.”<sup>39</sup> Seven respondents also discussed this strategy; only one of them objected to the idea that market success was indicative of true expertise.

The preferred method of establishing expertise through commercial success was to cite a well-known book, DVD, workout, or other product. For example, an article in *Fitness* introduced Tony Horton with the following:

One of the hottest workouts still on people's lips these days—seven years after it was released—is P90X, the high-intensity DVD routine that everyone from office workers to celebrities raves about. Tony Horton, the man behind the juggernaut, just released P90X2, a next-level series that has more skill-based exercises and core and stability moves.<sup>40</sup>

This article's author used the fame of P90X to introduce Tony Horton and justify naming him as one of the “top trainers in the biz.”<sup>41</sup>

A secondary strategy was to cite a less-well-known book or product, as if it should be widely renowned. For example, an article read, “Until now, you haven't had many options . . . I'm going to outline two methods of carb manipulation I have researched, road tested, and ultimately trademarked. . . . If you want to get shredded and strong, use Carb Nite.”<sup>42</sup> Another strategy was to use ownership of a commercial enterprise as evidence of success, even though the particular institution may not be well known. For example, by describing a person as “owner and CEO of Browning Fitness,”<sup>43</sup> the status of “owner and CEO” gave the individual more credibility.

The emphasis on market success highlights the influence of the commercialism in the fitness industry. As the fitness industry continues to grow and attract more competitors, commercial success will be more difficult to obtain and therefore—in accordance with Bourdieu's theory—more even more valuable as a form of social capital.

#### It's Science

Another common strategy that magazines employed to try to heighten their credibility was referencing scientific studies and using biological explanations. Use of this strategy suggests that having scientific knowledge signifies the possession of cultural and symbolic capital. This finding is in accordance with Bourdieu's (2004) discussion of the symbolic power of this form of knowledge: “In scientific exchange, the scientist

makes a ‘contribution’ for which he is recognized by acts of public recognition such as citation among the sources of the knowledge used. Thus scientific capital is the product of recognition by competitors. . .” (p. 55).

Magazines employed the “it’s science” strategy in 34 percent of all articles on exercise, although there was wide variation across magazines (ranging from 14 to 59 percent). Health magazines used the “it’s science” strategy more frequently than fitness-specific magazines (56 percent of articles on exercise in health magazines, on average, compared to 33 percent of articles on exercise in fitness-specific magazines). Just over half of respondents (14 of 24) discussed the use of science as a legitimizing strategy.

Fitness, because of its conflation with health, was generally presented as an endeavor guided by science. Further, because the public generally equates scientific research with credibility (Gauchat 2011), it follows that advice based on some sort of scientific study must be good. While most people do not have access to the original scientific literature and, even if they did, would not be able to critique it, they nonetheless place value on things associated with “science” and “research” (Gauchat 2011). The “it’s science” strategy was the magazine’s effort to capitalize on the public’s regard for science, especially among the reader profile (for example, “successful, professional women”) that these magazines want to offer to potential advertisers.

Magazines and their experts frequently made reference to research studies and biological processes to explain why a particular exercise was effective and should be done. Although some of the reference sources were likely quite technical in their original format, they were recast in a way that was easy to read and understand. Authors almost always provided some reference to where or by whom the study was conducted or

published (name-dropping), although they rarely provided the full citation as would be expected in scholarly, academic literature.

In the following quote, dubious claim-making was contrasted with a presumably more-believable technique based on biology:

There's no shortage of creative types making unusual claims about the best paths to fitness. And it can be tempting to place Week into that category. But if you look deeply enough into the biomechanics of running and the nature of connective tissue, eventually you'll want to start learning how to spiral.<sup>44</sup>

The implication is that because the technique's creator uses scientific, biological evidence, his claims are more legitimate than "creative types," whose advice it would be wise to disregard.

To attract readership, magazines claimed to bring the latest scientific results to subscribers; one article advised readers to "act on this wisdom," which was comprised of "nearly surefire strategies."<sup>45</sup> Another article claimed that the method described in the article was "scientifically proven." According to the article's author: "On the list of runner bummers, shin pain ranks as one of the most annoying. Soothe the ouch with this proven three-step strategy from researchers at the University of Kansas Medical Center in Kansas City."<sup>46</sup>

The preferred form of "it's science"—as in the example above—was to combine it with name-dropping by citing a specific study from a famous institution or researcher or that was published in a respected journal. Examples included mentioning the *Journal of Strength and Conditioning*, a scholarly official journal of the National Strength and Conditioning Association, in an article in *Fitness* (April 2011) and the *British Journal of*

*Sports Medicine*, a scholarly official publication of the British Association of Sport and Exercise Medicine, in an article in *Shape* (July 2011).

The secondary form was to cite less well-known institutions, researchers, or publications while the tertiary form was to refer to “scientific studies” without naming them or providing specifics. For example, articles sometimes stated, “research shows . . .” or “a 2011 study found . . .” without citing a study, authors, or journals (Agatston 2011:100-107). Similarly, another article merely stated, “Yes, it’s scientifically proven”<sup>47</sup> without further details.

Another tertiary method was to rely on pseudo-science: using the terminology of the scientific method without revealing whether a controlled experiment was actually performed. An example of this was the following:

Scott trained 12 women using this program 4 times a week, and in just a month, one lost 5 inches off her waist! The 11 others had similarly excellent results, losing inches and pounds while gaining tone and definition.<sup>48</sup>

While this quote suggested that Scott performed an experiment to test his workout program’s effectiveness, there was no mention of any controls that would indicate whether the success described was actually due to Scott’s methods or to extraneous factors. Still, it sounds like science and would probably be seen as credible by most readers who lack scientific training.

To attract readership, sell advertising, and make money, magazines utilize scientific research in a way that benefits their commercial interests. As program director and group instructor Alexis explained about one article: “They pulled that one quote out and put it in there because they are sensationalizing [research] to sell their magazine.”

However, magazines are not the only actors to try to garner credibility by mentioning science. Individual trainers also employed the “it’s science” path to legitimacy: James described the fitness program he designed as “backed by human clinical research and data” and as being “scientifically proven.” Like magazines, James’ relied on this reference to scientific research to strategically position himself within the competitive fitness industry.

### Discrediting

Discrediting others’ advice was the final strategy I identified that both magazines and individuals employed to improve their own social capital in the fitness field. Men’s magazines utilized this tactic more frequently than women’s magazines (21 percent and 6 percent, respectively). Most respondents also utilized this strategy: 17 of the 24 respondents discredited other experts or information sources. Authors and experts attempted to demonstrate their own superiority by putting down other sources of information. They commonly advised on what *not* to do and what misinformation to avoid as a way to boost their own credibility. In the process of claiming cultural capital, actors also were carving out jurisdictional boundaries within the field.

The primary form in which experts used this strategy to buttress their claim to legitimacy was by directly refuting other experts’ claims. For example, in a question and answer section, the magazine’s expert claimed that the “muscle confusion fad”<sup>49</sup> doesn’t lead to as good results as making subtle changes to your workout. Not only did the expert state that “muscle confusion” was the wrong approach, but the word he used to describe the approach (“fad”) is pejorative. Similarly, another article discredited others by stating:

First off, forget anybody who swears that squats on a Bosu ball will make you the next Bode Miller: “Most of the research on unstable surface training shows that it doesn't offer an added benefit over traditional strength training,” says Michael Naperalsky, C.S.C.S.<sup>50</sup>

By refuting others' claims, publications try to show that “our experts are the best experts” thereby gaining competitive advantage over other sources of information.

A secondary tactic was offering warnings to readers suggesting that if they do not have the right knowledge (meaning from our experts), they could hurt themselves. In the “Ask *Men's Health*: Life's Questions, Answered”<sup>51</sup> section, a reader asked about his new trainer's advice to do crunches. *Men's Health* referenced the expert advice of Alwyn Cosgrove, C.S.C.S. to warn readers that the risk of doing crunches outweighs the rewards. The expert then provided a better exercise for the desired abdominal strength and muscular appearance. In another example, an article warned: “A belt can become a dangerous crutch. Build your core instead. In a new German study, powerlifters who reported wearing belts had higher injury rates than those who didn't.”<sup>52</sup> Again, the article's expert provided a way to avoid the problem. Readers were also offered advice about how to evaluate a trainer and how to avoid “bad” trainers who could provide harmful instruction. The expert in another article stated that it is “impossible to do a workout safely and correctly—especially one that includes heavy weights and advanced exercises—without proper training on form.” The article warned that “CrossFit and other take-it-to-the-limit workouts . . . can take a toll on your body and health” when done incorrectly.<sup>53</sup> The article discredited programs that do not have adequately trained staff while it also credentialed experts, since individuals should not do the exercises on their own without expert advice.

Another approach to discrediting was to combine it with “it’s science” as a way to dismiss other fitness advice as ineffective or less effective. In the article “Burn, Baby, Burn!,” *Fitness* used a variety of strategies to discredit other workouts and position theirs as the most reliable:

You’ll get up to three times more firming per rep as you torch a third more calories each minute—during and after your workout—compared with typical strength training. The skinny secret? Supersets! . . . Our supersculpting workout helps you sizzle mega calories even while you sleep. (Yes, it’s scientifically proven.)<sup>54</sup>

This excerpt illustrates many of the strategies commonly employed to establish credibility and gain capital in the field. First, it promised to be more efficient than any other workout (discrediting). Second, it promised to do so without as much time, effort, or equipment. Third, the language refers to “secrets” that are guaranteed to work, which are likely not to be disclosed from another source. Finally, “science” was emphasized to support the claims. The goal was to suggest that their “supersculpting workout” was the best, if not only, workout to use, implying that you just cannot trust advice from any other source.

In addition to discrediting other specific sources, magazines tried to gain credibility by suggesting that the reader may have been misinformed by others in the past. This tertiary form involved portraying their experts as clearing up confusion and providing the correct information to those who are inexperienced, misinformed, or uneducated, as in this excerpt from *Fitness*:

True or false? Flexperts say . . . You should limber up before every workout. False. A new study at Florida State University in Tallahassee determined that the total distance that runners were able to travel dropped by 3.4 percent when they stretched first.<sup>55</sup>

The implication is that experts possess fitness knowledge that readers do not, which enables them to identify what is fact or fiction. Thus, you need (our) experts to be successful. For example, in *Men's Fitness*, actor Josh Holloway described how trainer Kovach's expertise was invaluable to him. Kovach introduced Holloway to the practice of "muscle confusion," or not allowing the body to get too adapted to any routine or movement pattern. The article stated:

This suits Holloway perfectly. "I was doing a lot of boxing. . . . Then I realized my joints were hurting. So the concept of muscle confusion really was helpful. Suddenly all my joints started loosening up and my endurance increased."<sup>56</sup>

In this example, an expert's advice was invaluable to a non-expert looking to pursue fitness goals. The implication is that without the expertise provided by the magazine, readers may similarly be lost without the guidance of trustworthy sources.

The downside of the discrediting strategy, however, is that raising doubts about other so-called experts' credibility undermines the credibility of all experts. Personal trainer Ben reported that clients often did not trust his expertise initially, because they had previously been exposed to so many different ideas about how to get fit. He explained, "I don't know if they think I'm making it up as I go along or I don't know what they think." Ben's experiences illustrated a risk of the discrediting strategy: that not knowing who to trust, people will trust no one and the value of the whole field will be undermined, as in the common perception of the "used-car salesman."

## Summary

In this chapter, I examined how opinion leaders support their arguments and stake claims for authority. I identified six strategies used by individuals and publications in credibility struggles. All of the strategies all aimed at accumulating—or demonstrating the accumulation of—the various kinds of capital that distinguish experts from non-experts.

For example, credentialing and name-dropping symbolize cultural and social capital. “Get fit success” and use of scientific discourse are strategies to accumulate cultural capital. Referencing commercial success suggests the possession of economic capital while referencing scientific research suggests the possession of scientific capital. Looking fit was an important source of body capital for individual trainers. Table 3 summarizes the strategies and associated forms of capital I identified in the fitness field.

Table 3. Strategies Used to Accumulate Capital in Credibility Struggles

Strategy	Example	Capital
Credentialing	Listing academic degrees	Indicates cultural capital; knowledge; expertise
Name-Dropping	Mentioning celebrity client	“Borrowing” social capital from an established source; inferred by association
“Getting Fit” Success	Achieving the “fit look”	Body capital; experience/know-how
Commercial Success	Owning a gym	Economic capital
It’s Science	Referencing scientific research	Scientific knowledge and capital; conferred authority
Discrediting	Refuting another’s claim	Establishing capital by virtue of (favorable) comparison

Fitness field respondents used these strategies to support their own claims to expertise and to simultaneously create barriers for competitors, especially the ratcheting up of credentials. The anxiety around the lack of regulation in the fitness industry suggests a desire to heighten the social value of credential by tightening the requirements for entry into the field.

Each of the six strategies I identified had a preferred form (the one that posed the greatest barrier to entry to others claiming similar expertise) and backup secondary and tertiary forms that could be used when the preferred strategy was not available. The evidence of credibility struggles I identified, combined with the competitive nature of the field, suggest that fitness will continue to evolve as new entrants seek to “get a piece of the action” and as existing participants develop new competitive strategies in response. These endogenous forces provide insight into the current state of the fitness field and suggest how change occurs.

This study did not assess how readers responded to the various tactics used to establish credibility. An interesting future line of inquiry would which consumers of fitness information find the most compelling and credible. It is likely that the boundary-making and claims for expertise will increase, albeit in different forms, as the field becomes increasingly specialized and professionalized. It would be useful to know which strategies accrue the greatest capital.

## CHAPTER 4

### FITNESS DEFINED AS FUNCTIONALITY

Defining fitness may seem simple, but as with any social construct, the term has different meaning to different subpopulations. To many people outside the fitness field, the term fitness probably means a state of being in which the body is in good physical condition and able to function effectively, perhaps as a result of exercise. However, that definition of fitness fails to capture the breadth of meanings that respondents and magazines attached to the term. Moreover, the variations of definitions reveal agents' struggles to define the field to reflect their own habitus and competitive advantage.

In this and the next three chapters, I explore the ways in which popular media and field experts defined fitness and the discourses that framed the dissemination of fitness information. This chapter examines the ways in which fitness was defined as functionality—the conceptualization that most closely resembles the definition of fitness found in dictionaries. I identified the following themes: (1) fitness as capability; (2) fitness as peak physical or supranormal performance; (3) fitness as enjoyment of physical activity; and (4) fitness as lifestyle.

#### Fitness as Capability

Respondents sometimes referred to fitness as capability: being able to function physically and to move the body in the ways one desires. Conceptualizing fitness as capability was more common among Health At Every Size® (HAES) practitioners than other respondents. About half of all respondents defined fitness as function or capability,

but all five of the five HAES® practitioners used this definition, compared to only eight out of the 19 non-HAES® practitioners.

Some respondents defined fitness as the ability to participate in enjoyable activities. Professor and researcher Erin explained, “It’s being able to do the activities that you love.” Physical therapist Paige explained:

It implies potential as opposed to what you actually do. . . . “You’re fit” kind of means ready for something. . . . I used to do home healthcare and I remember going into this home of this woman who was 96 and had never exercised in her life but was perfectly competent and I needed to show the exercise that would really help her was one that one does on the floor and I said, “Well, can you get down to the floor?” and bingo, there she was.

In other words, a fit body is one that is capable of performing the everyday functions a person wants to accomplish.

Fitness magazine articles sometimes described fitness as being able to actively participate in important relationships: “Lauren (29) needs to be fit to keep up with her two daughters, ages 3 and 1” and “‘I eat right and exercise not just for myself, but to have energy to care for others,’ says the physical therapist, who moonlights as an aerobics instructor and personal trainer.”<sup>57</sup> In both these examples, women defined fitness as having the stamina to fulfill their gendered roles as caretakers, one of many examples I found of strongly gendered concepts of fitness (England 2005; Hochschild 1983).

A variation of the capability theme was training the body to perform functions a person needs to accomplish. Trainer James called this training “in application.” He explained that this meant training “the body the way it’s supposed to be conditioned to be relevant to your life.” James provided numerous examples of what happens when people do not exercise for functional capacity:

You go down and pick up your child and you hurt your lower back, or you pull the cord on your lawn mower and you sprain the muscles around your spine. . . . You have to train the way that life is presented to you and in front of you. If you are a football player you are trained in certain angles and you are trained in speed. If you are sitting at a desk you should be training your posterior.

Trainers often described fitness for older adults as functionality, that is, as the ability to perform physical acts like picking up a grandchild or moving boxes. Joseph explained that these were major goals for his personal-training clients: “the older people I work with—people in their 70s and 80s—just want to be able to get up out of a beach chair without struggling or want to be able to reach for things up [on a] high shelf. Stuff like that. Walk up stairs without being winded.” Similarly, Ben proudly related a story about one of his clients who, thanks to her strength training sessions, was able to lift heavier luggage: “She travels a lot for work so she always tell me when she puts her luggage in the overhead compartment and men are like, ‘Let me help you with that, old lady’ and they try to take it down and they can’t because it is too heavy.”

Fitness as the ability of older adults to perform everyday tasks rarely appeared in the magazines reviewed for this study. That is not surprising, given the target audience of most of the magazines, like *Shape* and *Men’s Fitness*, with their focus on appearance and youth. It is surprising, however, that functionality was not emphasized more in *Prevention* given that the demographic average is 40-year-old women<sup>58</sup> who would presumably be interested in maintaining physical capability.

In interviews, respondents frequently identified age as an important determinant in defining fitness. Many respondents described how capability varied across different life stages. For example, Elizabeth explained:

What you do continually throughout your life is going to change. . . . You have to kind of adjust: this is going to work for me right now and this is what makes me feel good in this moment. . . . Everyone goes through different life stages and so I feel that your activity needs to evolve . . . with that process. It is not going to be, “I have to run five miles a day every day for the rest of my life.” No, no it is not like that at all.

Conceptualizing fitness as the capability to function in day-to-day living did not necessarily link fitness to exercise. As editor Gabrielle explained, functional fitness allows “you to live life like you would like to lead [it] in terms of your physical capability.” Other definitions of fitness as capability, however, were more closely linked to the physical exertion of exercise. For example, some articles and respondents defined fitness in terms of measurable physiological parameters. “Fitness” in this sense meant a specific measurable capability, rather than day-to-day functionality or ability to do general activities. Thus, cardio-respiratory fitness was defined in one article as “your body’s ability to get oxygen to your muscles”<sup>59</sup> and, by another article, as “VO<sub>2</sub> max, or the maximum milliliters of oxygen per kilogram of body weight that I use in a minute, and my lactate threshold, the point at which the demand for oxygen surpasses my body's ability to take it in and deliver it efficiently to my muscles.”<sup>60</sup>

This definition of fitness as a quantifiable state reflected biological and scientific paradigms of the body; respondents who discussed fitness in this way usually had been educated in physiology, kinesiology, or exercise science. For example, Mark, who worked in a kinesiology department, explained, “There are four or five ways to look at [fitness]: cardiovascular fitness, muscular endurance, muscular strength, flexibility, and if you want, body fat/body percentage/body composition.”

Viewed as a quantifiable capacity, fitness could be determined by the ability to perform, for example, a given number of exercises without rest<sup>61</sup> or to pass a test of physicality such as the Basic Military Training fitness test or the Senior Fitness Test. In such tests, individuals perform as many repetitions as possible of a particular exercise (such as a push-up) within a set time limit.<sup>62</sup> The number achieved is then assigned a score or rated as pass/fail.

Other quantitative measures of physical fitness included “alignment, upper- and lower-body strength, flexibility, and core control;”<sup>63</sup> as well as recovery heart rate, cardio endurance, core strength, flexibility, waist circumference, waist-to-hip ratio, and body mass index.<sup>64</sup> Fitness magazines described using such measurements to track improvements in physical capacity, especially relating to power and strength.

Regardless of how fitness as capacity was measured, respondents and some magazine articles emphasized that fitness should be *balanced*, as illustrated in the following article quote:

Even the clients who were "fit" often displayed unbalanced fitness: The strong ones lacked endurance, the ones with good endurance lacked strength, and most of them struggled with injuries related to training for one goal at the expense of all others.<sup>65</sup>

Although magazines most often emphasized fitness as appearance, they noted that developing the body only for looks often leads to imbalances; one publication’s expert discussed the difference between *capacity* and *quality* of movement:

“When most people talk about fitness, they mean physical capacity—how much weight they can curl, how fast they can run,” Cook says. “But numerical information about strength and speed tells you nothing about the quality of your movement.” . . . Today’s exercise does not address balance as well as historical activity: “The active population of 120 years ago probably had greater levels of movement competency—their exercise

was more natural and less highly specialized,” says Cook. “This afforded them natural symmetry and balanced movement.” Now, he says, we sit way too much, and when we do exercise, it’s with repetitive movements, like treadmill running, cycling, and lifting routines that emphasize beach muscles.<sup>66</sup>

Trainers James and Ben also emphasized the importance of balance, and for James, balanced and functional fitness were more important than aesthetic appeal.

The idea of returning to full functionality after an injury or illness provided further variation on the theme of fitness as capability. Magazines and respondents saw exercise as a means to restore balance after a setback such as an injury. Articles that focused on returning to functionality after injury or pain treated the body as an improvable object and recommended specific exercises to accomplish this goal. Trainer James also stressed the importance of fitness in aiding recovery:

I always tell people our bodies are a bank. You have to make the correct deposits because when the withdrawals are needed, which [are] injuries, you have to have something saved in your bank.

#### Fitness as Peak Physical Performance

Fitness magazines and research respondents sometimes defined fitness as peak or supranormal physical performance, well beyond that necessary for activities of daily living. One magazine claimed: “*Men’s Fitness* is about one thing and one thing only—getting you to perform at a higher level through improving your fitness.”<sup>67</sup> Magazines claimed that their advice would enable both athletes and non-athletes to perform optimally. Even so, articles that discussed peak performance or “being one’s best” were relatively rare: they made up only eight percent (n=31) of men’s articles about exercise and four percent (n=18) of women’s articles about exercise.

My analysis suggests that fitness as functionality for athletes is a different construct than fitness as functionality for the general population. Although this research does not systematically analyze the meaning that athletes give to fitness, 19 of the 24 respondents I interviewed self-identified as former athletes or intense exercisers (runners, marathoners, body builders, etc.). Thus, I am able to observe some of the overlap as well as the distinctions made between sport or competitive fitness and "leisure" fitness.

The role of competition differed between athletes and non-athletes: whereas competition was a core element of the athletic habitus, non-athletes were less likely to define competition as an important part of fitness. Respondents who had been competitive athletes or rigorous exercisers associated fitness with concepts like achievement, capacity, and being one's best. Five respondents spoke about exercise and achievement, twelve discussed competition, and eleven talked about being athletic. Only one of the respondents who did not identify as an athlete—a program director—defined fitness as competitive.

Athletes in both magazines and interviews identified competition with others, as well as with themselves, as driving them to perform to their maximum physical capacity. This makes sense given that advancement and social status as an athlete are based on performance in competitions against oneself or others. The demands of athletic activities, which included cross-country running, track events, tennis, and lacrosse, were associated with a habitus that values intense effort, drive, self-motivation, persistence, and perseverance. According to trainers who had experience working with elite athletes, such individuals tended to be self-motivated and hard on themselves. Ben recalled from his

experience working as a strength and conditioning coach for athletes: “Every single exercise, they were giving 110 percent.”

Athletes must continually try to push past personal records and barriers and to surpass what may have once seemed impossible. To do this regularly requires immense physical endurance and psychological stamina. Such intense drive may lead to injuries when athletes, propelled by the temptation to exert themselves for the allure of achievement, do not recover fully or take time off to properly treat and heal injuries. Physical therapy assistant and doctor-in-training Jeffrey reported that during his training for the Olympics he permanently injured his shoulder as a result of overtraining. He admitted that it was his drive to be better—and, at the time, what he considered more “fit”—that led to his injury. Reflecting back on his training, he said that he used to believe that “being fit” meant always doing more, always training more, without recovery time that he now knows is necessary.

Injuries resulting from overtraining are a potential problem not only for professional athletes but also for youth. Only recently has attention been given to the negative aspects of competitive sports for youth—the long-term ramifications of overtraining and sports injuries. For example, Hyman’s (2013) *The Most Expensive Game In Town: The Rising Cost of Youth Sports and the Toll on Today's Families* reviews the physical, mental, and emotional costs (not to mention financial and time-related costs) of pressure to win. Too often, youth and adults alike are pursuing what to them is ultimate fitness: to be the most physically capable possible. Defined this way, fitness becomes an elusive, potentially damaging goal that is not necessarily correlated to physical or mental health and well-being.

Magazines rarely addressed the possibility that exercising could *increase* rather than decrease a person's chance for injury. One exception was the following article:

Every year 42 percent of exercisers hurt themselves, a recent study by the American College of Sports Medicine (ACSM) found. Knee pain and sprains as well as strains of the shoulders and upper arms are especially common; they help fuel more than \$2 billion in annual sales of over-the-counter pain relievers.<sup>68</sup>

This lack of a focus on the apparently high chance of injury further highlights the unbalanced framing of fitness as beneficial without adequate mention of the attendant risks.

Another difference between athletes and non-athletes was the greater intensity with which fitness for competition was pursued. For example, magazines described athletes' number of hours of training as being far-and-above what the average reader would attempt. Also, for athletes, fitness was sport- or activity-specific. Thus, fitness for a sprinter differed from fitness for a marathon runner or a body builder. The first requires training for short bursts of high speed, the second requires endurance, while the third emphasizes aesthetics over function or strength. Fitness magazines drew upon elements of these sport-specific definitions of fitness to provide variety to their readers by including workouts geared to increase fitness in a particular area like basketball, weight lifting, sprinting, or martial arts as well as less-specified workouts.

Respondents who no longer considered themselves competitive had to re-orient their concept of fitness. Many former athletes discussed how they no longer pursued fitness for the purpose of competing against others; they now exercised for other goals. Competition remained an element for some, but they emphasized personal gains and goals rather than beating records attained by others.

Previously competitive athletes' understandings of fitness also changed over time in response to bodily changes like injury or aging. For example, one competitive athlete described how a serious injury had changed his life outlook and orientation toward physical activity. While running track in college, personal trainer James suffered an injury that required several surgeries. As a result, his career path changed and he began to work with athletes, ultimately "falling in love with taking care of not only my body, but the bodies of my athletes as well." Thus, James's focus shifted from being solely about his own competitiveness in sports to incorporating health and wellness into training others.

Respondents described adjusting to their aging and its accompanying bodily limitations, some with regret and resistance and others with acceptance. For example, running coach Robert's injury was a source of great frustration for him. Although he joked about healing more quickly when he was younger, he kept returning to the subject of his injury, which indicated its importance to him. His regret was also highlighted by other comments he made, such as: "I've kind of given up on ever really running pain-free" and "When I'm coming down the steps I'm, like, hobbling and I'm sort of like, 'Crap, what am I gonna be like when I'm 90?'" Others, however, were more accepting of aging's effect on their physical capabilities. For example, professor and researcher Erin acknowledged that with aging has come "more of these aches and pains." At the same time, her greater experience lends her a competitive advantage in tennis matches: "very often I've had the experience of walking on the court with some young, macho, muscular guy in his twenties and of course, you know, I've played 32 years and he hasn't."

The elite or competitive athlete habitus differed from other types of exercisers such as leisure exercisers or weight loss exercisers. Movement out of this habitus as a result of aging or injury necessitated an adjustment in their definitions of fitness and expectations about bodily performance during exercise. Writer Gabrielle, for example, described how, for her, fitness no longer means being able to compete as it did when she was an athlete. These observations suggest that context, age, and habitus are influential variables in defining fitness.

### Fitness as Enjoyment of Physical Activity

While fitness as functionality was most often conceptualized as capacity or as a means to a desired goal, some articles and respondents suggested fitness is embodied experience—joy in bodily movement itself. This theme was distinct because it focused on the sensations of the body—the kinesthetic experience—rather than on physiological benefits or appearance. For example, when asked what fitness meant to her, physical therapist Paige explained:

It [has] something to do with enjoying my body. I mean it implies to me a little bit more than being able to do what you want to do. It has to do with body awareness.

For respondents like Paige, enjoying the body was about its function, not its looks.

The idea of fitness as enjoyment of the body in motion was rare in the magazines but relatively more common among interviews: 14 of 24 respondents discussed exercise as fun or enjoyable. Program directors and personal trainers were most likely to talk about this aspect of fitness.

The focus on embodied experience was a key theme for HAES® practitioners, a group dedicated to the idea that “fit” does not necessarily equate to a particular body size

or shape. For example, Doris, psychologist and HAES® practitioner, told me about the importance of creating a space in which bodies of all sizes could enjoy moving:

I wanted to make really joyful, dance-y-oriented classes that were going to be paced . . . for the people . . . anywhere from . . . 200-500 pounds in my class. . . . We just had a party twice a week.

Doris felt that it was critical that people experienced a positive connection with how exercise felt. Her use of the words “joyful” and “party” indicated that the priority was pleasure in movement rather than calorie burn, weight loss, appearance, or even functionality.

The HAES® respondents were not the only ones to conceptualize fitness as an embodied experience. For example, group instructor Jessica said that her parents enjoy hiking and bike riding: “my mom just likes moving.” Trainer James said his workout program is an “expression of fun” and that to him, physical fitness “is your celebration for the day. . . . I tell people, ‘Dance while you’re waking up in the morning. . . . You’ll be happy and you’ll be focused.’”

Respondents also suggested that social relationships created their enjoyment of exercise and significantly influenced both their initial and continuing involvement in fitness programs. They credited important others such as parents, friends, mentors, and coaches in shaping their habitus—their disposition and outlook toward physical activity. According to respondents, parents who provided ample opportunities to engage in enjoyable physical activities fostered their love for exercise. Amy identified her mother as a role model: “She was completely, 100 percent my influence for why I do what I do now [personal training] and she still does it now. She’s 54 and she’s in phenomenal shape.” Jessica also credited her parents as fostering her love of physical activity.

Program director and group instructor Alexis explained that she enjoyed physical activity because of the social connections that exercise provided:

I was the youngest of four but the biggest athlete in my family. That bonded me very closely with my father who never missed a game. . . . it was very social in nature . . . because of that level of family that the YMCA environment [provided].

Later, Alexis described losing “that social connection” in the competitiveness of college-level sports and said, “I wasn’t connected to the team or that environment, so it wasn’t family like it had been in grade school or high school. . . . Now, looking back, [I] realize why I quit competitive sports; because I didn’t have that [social] connection.”

Another important social aspect of exercise was the desire to help others or work with others. Respondents who felt strongly oriented toward working with others spoke enthusiastically of teaching people about exercise, getting others engaged in physical activity, and the power of their interactions with clients. Respondents believed their social relationships helped their clients both directly and indirectly. In this way, fitness was framed as service-oriented. This aspect of fitness work has been noted in studies of personal trainers, which found that trainers must be oriented toward care aspects of the job and must perform emotional labor (Hochschild 1983; Smith Maguire 2008). Smith Maguire observed that personal trainers emphasized “the importance of a particular kind of personality: someone who is extroverted and enthusiastic, enjoys talking to and helping people, and in general is a ‘people person’” (2008:163). I did not identify gender differences with respect to the care aspect of training among respondents in this study: both men and women trainers felt rewarded by this part of their work.

## Fitness as Lifestyle

Some magazine articles and respondents conceptualized fitness as a lifestyle: an approach to daily living that enhanced functionality and was characterized by valuing moving the body as much as possible. Articles that discussed fitness as a lifestyle or life outlook were 10 percent (n=35) of men's articles on exercise and six percent (n=31) of women's articles on exercise. An actor's comments in one article typify this perspective: "I know it's good to be healthy, but I stay fit because it makes sense. It's a way of life."<sup>69</sup> The idea that fitness is a process, practice, or a lifestyle contrasts with other understandings of fitness which see it as a measurable end goal. These definitions are not necessarily mutually exclusive, but indicate differences in emphasis on means versus ends.

Articles and respondents who talked about fitness as a practice or way of living mentioned that it involves being active on a regular basis. For example, the subject of one "success story" article reported that her trainer "explained that fitness doesn't have to be all-or-nothing, and I should push myself every day to be as active as possible."<sup>70</sup> Similarly, personal trainer Amy explained that fitness is a constant process: "It's not a diet where there's a beginning and an end to it. It's an every-single-day-for-the-rest-of-your-life thing." Amy also explained that she considers fitness to be "what I practice; it's part of who I am . . . it literally is a part of my life. It's my lifestyle. . . . I'm an active person. I think it kind of defines a part of me." Elizabeth similarly defined fitness as living an active lifestyle: "Basically it is being active throughout the day. So it is doing all the things that you would do, but it is taking the stairs versus taking the elevator, or walking to and from places versus driving your car or riding the bus."

The concept that fitness should be a lifelong practice assumes that the way fitness is pursued will change over time. As the body ages, the way fitness is practiced needs to adjust accordingly. This flexibility fits well with the idea that fitness means different things for different populations. For example, Amy explained that for her personal training client who recently had back surgery “being fit is something very different than it is for the 28-year-old kid that I just trained [who] can do anything and everything.” Alexis, a program director and group instructor, echoed the idea that people need to be able to adapt to changes. Likewise, magazine editor Rebecca defined fitness as needing to be “sustainable, approachable, and reasonable” such that it could be “something that you carry through life with you.”

#### Development of Habitus

Respondents who characterized fitness as functionality often pursued a career related to fitness because of a genuine enjoyment of bodily movement. Most respondents shared a sense of satisfaction from achieving physically-demanding goals and pushing themselves in ways that required physical exertion. These characteristics oriented people toward a particular understanding of fitness: people who said they loved exercise were more likely to think of fitness as a lifestyle rather than a chore. They also tended to focus on the embodied kinesthetic experience of exercise rather than on pursuing a particular goal such as achieving weight loss or the fit look. Alexis described the characteristics of a person who enjoys exercise:

They will find ways to move throughout their day. It won't feel right unless they are moving. . . . If you normally exercise on a regular routine and habit and you don't exercise, you start not to feel right. Something starts to feel like it is missing.

As a program director, Alexis's aim is to teach people how to engage in active living and to make exercise a habit. In other words, Alexis' goal is to help people develop an exercise habitus.

### Summary

This chapter is the first of four in which I report my findings related to the variety of ways in which fitness is defined and framed. The first major theme that I identified was fitness is as functionality—the ability of the body to perform physical tasks or feats. “Fitness as functionality” was further divided into a number of sub-themes depending on the respondent's habitus or the magazine's target audience. These included: (1) fitness as capability; (2) fitness as peak physical or supranormal performance; (3) fitness as enjoyment of physical activity; and (4) fitness as lifestyle.

Thus, my research reveals that there is a wide range of meanings attached to the idea of fitness, even among those who perceive fitness as functionality. These range from defining “fitness” as the ability of a 96-year-old to get up and down off the floor, to defining fitness as physical capability well above that of the general population, to defining fitness as specific, quantifiable physiologic parameters. Such a broad range of definitions suggests that the fitness field is still evolving and that the meaning-making process is still very active. The breadth of meanings within the construct of fitness as functionality is reflected in the broad range of advice offered and in who is considered an “expert” in the topic.

For most definitions of fitness as functionality, the discourse is mainly goal-oriented—how best to achieve a specific level, whether that is the activities of day-to-day living or as championship-level performance. “Experts” are then those who are

perceived as best able to provide advice on how to achieve that level of performance. Age strongly influenced the type of functionality desired; gender also influenced fitness as functionality—competition and peak performance being more common in men’s magazines than women’s. Regardless of the specific kind of functionality sought, respondents felt that most people could attain some level of fitness, irrespective of body size, shape, socioeconomic status, or age.

## CHAPTER 5

### FITNESS DEFINED AS HEALTH

In this chapter I discuss my second finding about how magazines and respondents define and frame fitness information: as health. I found that fitness and health were often discussed as if they were the same thing—implying that you are not truly healthy unless you are fit, and if you are fit you are healthy. Fitness was presented as improving physical and mental health in numerous ways, indicating a belief in a causal connection between fitness and physical as well as psychological well-being. In this section, I first address how magazines and respondents described fitness in relation to physical health and then how they connected fitness to psychological health.

The link made between fitness and physical health is not a new phenomenon: fitness has been associated with health since the time of the ancient Greeks. For example, Hippocrates, the fourth century B.C. Greek physician, saw a connection between exercise and health (Whorton 1982). Guiding principles passed down from the Greek tradition include “hygiene”—originally meaning health and encompassing the activities promoting health—as well as moderation in all things, including exertion and rest (Whorton 1982). Although Greeks admired the fit physique—as evidenced by the artwork depicting the youthful athletic body and the cultural renown for athleticism (Buchbinder 2013)—it is not clear that the Greeks conflated fitness with health in the same manner as we do today. Today, fitness is equated to health. It therefore comes under the purview of science and medicine, part of the larger social trend of medicalization (Conrad 1992), as evident in the increasing use of scientific terminology

in the fitness discourse. The conflation of health and fitness seems to have its roots in the rise of the fitness industry during a time when consumer culture was increasingly emphasizing health and body surveillance (Dworkin and Wachs 2009; Green 1986; Whorton 1982).

### Physical Health

Magazines in this study mentioned health frequently, particularly in relationship to exercise. Approximately 40 percent of all articles about exercise mentioned physical health. The effect of fitness on physical health was a commonly stated benefit. It is not surprising, given their titles, that health was a prevalent theme in *Prevention*, in which more than 65 percent of articles about exercise mentioned physical health, and in *Men's Health*, in which almost 60 percent of articles about exercise emphasized physical health. About a third of exercise articles in the other magazines I evaluated identified health as a benefit.

In interviews, all respondents discussed aspects of health in regard to fitness. The claimed physical health effects of fitness included, in particular: (1) preventing or reversing sickness and disease and (2) helping solve the “obesity epidemic.” Achieving the health benefits of fitness through exercise was presented as an individual choice and responsibility that required body surveillance and self-discipline. Fitness was presented as an essential component of being healthy: “‘I have a passion to help people understand fitness now,’ [a youth sports director] says. ‘Choosing a healthy lifestyle is about more than just controlling your weight.’”<sup>71</sup>

Magazine articles touted fitness as both preventative and curative.<sup>72</sup> In addition to lessening the chances of getting sick, exercise was also purported to lessen symptoms:

“A regular 30-minute walk could slash your risk of catching a cold by 43% and make symptoms less severe, according to the *British Journal of Sports Medicine*.”<sup>73</sup> Articles suggested businesses should encourage exercise because “Employees who exercised at work also required fewer sick days,”<sup>74</sup> which may help explain the growth of work wellness programs.

Reflecting the continuing trend of healthism, articles portrayed exercise as a crucial health risk management tool. Exercise was linked to the prevention of heart disease, diabetes, and cancer. In fact, in one article, fitness was touted as safeguarding the body from a preventable heart attack and even reversing atherosclerotic plaque buildup and other circulatory system problems.<sup>75</sup> Readers were also encouraged to exercise to manage diabetes: “So treat exercise like a prescription drug. You want to have a measured dose hitting your system nearly every day.”<sup>76</sup>

Articles relating health and exercise frequently used emotion-laden rhetoric: “After all, your life is at stake”<sup>77</sup>. Exercise was even promoted as preventing breast cancer recurrence: “But today the reasons to lace up a pair of sneakers are indisputable: Exercise can halve your risk of breast cancer recurrence, according to the Harvard Nurses’ Health Study, and women who exercise are 50% more likely to survive breast cancer than those who don’t work out.”<sup>78</sup>

Magazines capitalized on the human fear of death by claiming that being fit will prolong your life. One article stated: “The no. 1 driver in longevity isn’t how heavy you are. It’s how fit you are.”<sup>79</sup> Some articles specified by exactly how much longer readers could increase their lifespan (“Live Longer: Get moving for just 15 minutes six days a week and you’ll increase your lifespan by three years, according to a Taiwanese study”<sup>80</sup>)

while others made broader claims (“Thwart death by making exercise intrinsic to your life”<sup>81</sup>). Respondents also discussed the idea that fitness would increase longevity.

Personal trainer James explained:

There’s a thing called sarcopenia which takes place in people like when they get in their late 60s, early 70s: the muscle starts . . . to go *unless* you work out. If you’re working out, then it’s different: you can stop that. So it’s truly a fountain of youth.

Another article similarly played upon the fear of disability by presenting fitness as a risk-management strategy: “Being in shape from regular workouts allowed me to heal faster; my doctors said I would probably have been paralyzed if I had been weaker. We can’t predict accidents, but we can keep our bodies strong just in case.”<sup>82</sup> One possible interpretation of this message is that those who do not stay fit are irresponsible and should have to pay for the risk they take. Some companies have gone so far as to set higher insurance premiums for workers who do not participate in wellness programs, for example, by not exercising (Kaiser Family Health Foundation 2013).

According to the magazines reviewed, fitness affects not only one’s own health, but also the health of loved ones. For example, expectant mothers were told that exercising while pregnant could affect the future health of their babies: “At 1 Month: Your munchkin will have a stronger heart than her peers, thanks to your regular sweat sessions (at least 90 minutes a week during your pregnancy).”<sup>83</sup> This appeal clearly played on the parental sense of responsibility for the child’s well-being, tapping into feelings of parental duty in order to promote exercise. Similarly, women were told that exercising while pregnant may affect the height-to-weight ratio of their child: “At 2 years: Your toddler will be trimmer. New research published in the *Journal of Physical*

*Activity and Health* shows that the more active you are throughout your third trimester, the healthier your child's height-to-weight ratio will be.”<sup>84</sup> Respondents also discussed how their own fitness could affect the well-being of those close to the exerciser.

Both magazines and most respondents took for granted the existence of an epidemic of obesity. Fitness magazines capitalized on the moral panic by suggesting that fitness is a critical component of solving and preventing the “obesity epidemic” and its correlated diseases—type II diabetes, heart disease, and so forth. Five of the 24 respondents specifically mentioned obesity as a problem. However, some respondents did express concern about the hyperbole surrounding “obesity” and were dismayed by the negative attention being paid to fatness. Three respondents, all of whom were HAES® practitioners, criticized the “obesity epidemic” discourse and the presentation of fitness as a solution. Nine respondents disliked the cultural emphasis on weight loss. Likewise, some researchers, including Campos *et al.* (2006), Kwan and Graves (2013), Saguy and Almeling (2008), and Saguy (2013), have begun challenging the status of obesity as epidemic and the media portrayals of fatness.

My analysis indicates that magazines and most respondents assumed fitness was a state of health and exercise was a solution to fatness and “obesity,” which they assumed were unhealthy. For example, San Francisco’s focus on fitness was identified as a direct cause: “its fit-centric population also gives it the lowest rate of obesity.”<sup>85</sup> A similar notion that fitness was a solution to obesity motivated respondent Brittany to start a fitness program for young girls. She explained: “childhood obesity was on the rise and it was an issue.”

In addition to its connections to health, or perhaps because of them, fitness is also intertwined with diet, nutrition, and body size. Articles in this study conflated fitness and diet: “O’Mara estimates that 75% of fitness is diet”<sup>86</sup> and relied on a simple calorie-in, calorie-out model. Burning calories by exercising and eating the right calories to fuel exercise were such common themes within discourse about fitness that these notions seemed to be common-sense.

Fitness magazines and their experts intentionally or unintentionally contributed to the moral panic around obesity. Fitness and fatness were presented as incompatible: one cannot be fit and fat at the same time. This idea was exemplified by the following:

“Swick and other scientists are homing in on identifying the different genes responsible for energy expenditure . . . in the hopes of identifying the variables that make us fit as opposed to fat.”<sup>87</sup> In spite of the passing references to genetic predispositions, readers were also told that it is their responsibility to be fit and that they should not “blame bad genes for your extra flab” because it is “your environment—that is, food and activity—that is extremely important in ultimately determining your weight.”<sup>88</sup>

In an article exemplifying the moral panic over the “obesity epidemic,” poor diet and lack of exercise are blamed in order to describe both the cause of and the solution to the epidemic:

The fact is that our fast-food, sedentary lifestyle is *trumping the advances in medical science*. . . . In order to fully understand why we are now experiencing an epidemic of obesity, diabetes, and other chronic diseases, it’s useful to take a look back to the genesis of the fast-food, sedentary culture that’s responsible for our failing health.<sup>89</sup>

The causal links between exercise, diet, obesity, and physical health also were made by respondents.

## Psychological Health

Fitness was also purported to provide a variety of psychological health benefits. Thematic analysis of magazine articles and respondent interviews identified the following claims of psychological health benefits: (1) stress reduction; (2) ability to manage depression and recover from grief or setback; (3) improved brain function; (4) increased self-confidence; and (5) social benefits.

Women's magazines had slightly higher percentages of exercise articles that discussed psychological health than men's magazines: 48 percent of articles compared to 40 percent of articles, respectively. This gender difference—although not large—probably reflects the assumption that women are more in touch and concerned with their feelings and emotions than men and that men are less likely to seek help for health issues (Koopmans and Lamers 2007; Mackenzie 2006; Sabo 2009).

Whether readers suffered from stress, depression, or grief, magazines promised that exercise would help them cope and recover. Exercise was touted for its stress-relieving benefits, in particular. For example, readers were told to “sweat it out”: “When I'm feeling stressed, I hit the gym. . . . exercise is the best way to get out aggression and clear my mind.”<sup>90</sup> Respondents also reported that exercise is a tool for managing stress: Mark, Alexis, Jacob, Paige, Elizabeth, and Tanya all mentioned this benefit. Tanya, a personal trainer in her 50s, explained that exercise is “a great stress reducer for me.” Similarly, sports psychology professor and researcher Mark identified stress management and coping as two of the reasons why people engage in fitness activities. Jacob proudly described helping one of his personal training clients find stress relief from kickboxing.

The client reported that kickboxing helped lower his stress level so much that it was as if he had gotten a massage.

Magazines also portrayed exercise as an alternative to medication or as an additional strategy for coping with depression. Readers were encouraged to “think of [their] workout as Prozac” because exercise “may make you half as likely to suffer from symptoms of depression.”<sup>91</sup> One article reported a research finding suggesting cardiovascular exercise “may be as effective as prescription drugs for treating depression”<sup>92</sup> Magazine editor Rebecca and running coach Robert similarly stated that exercising helps with depression.

Magazines suggested that a fitness regimen is also beneficial to those who are grieving and can be used as a coping mechanism.<sup>93</sup> Similarly, fitness was portrayed as a tool that enables recovery from illness or accidents: “Fortitude, family, and fitness helped Ulsh on his road to recovery after sustaining life-threatening injuries. . . . through fitness he has regained life.”<sup>94</sup>

Improved brain health and function—such as improved memory and creativity as well as delayed “neural aging”—are also supposedly benefits of exercise and fitness. One article proclaimed, “Working out boosts production of the proteins that stimulate brain-cell growth. . . . It also revs your heart to pump more blood to your brain, which brings glucose and oxygen to help your neurons work optimally.”<sup>95</sup> Another article advised focusing workouts on cardiovascular exercise as it “may increase the volume of the hippocampus” which “controls memory and orientation.”<sup>96</sup> Similar articles cited research stating exercise can positively affect the brain by promoting its growth and functioning.

According to both articles and respondents, increased self-confidence is another psychological benefit of fitness. My analysis suggests that confidence results primarily from improvements to appearance due to exercise, but also stems from achieving goals and increasing capability. Success stories in magazines—in which readers reported how they lost weight or achieved other goals through exercise—called attention to the increased confidence the individual enjoyed as a result of weight loss. A success story about Nikki chronicled her changes in diet and how she exercised.” The effect on her confidence was described as:

The scale began moving in the right direction; with each smaller size Nikki purchased (from 24 to 8!), she gained confidence. . . . The ultimate reward: showing off her new figure at her 10-year high school reunion next month. “I was merely surviving before,” Nikki admits. “Now I’m living.”<sup>97</sup>

Another article asked: “How does Laurie Leiner stay swimsuit confident? ‘I really work on my fitness,’ says the fifty-something avid swimmer.”<sup>98</sup> The finding that women’s appearance influenced their self-confidence makes sense given the cultural importance of women’s looks (Bordo 1993; Wolf 2002; Zones 2005).

A smaller percentage of men's exercise-related articles mentioned confidence related to looks. However, a handful of men’s articles described increased self-confidence as a result of looking better, especially from having lost weight.<sup>99</sup> While there was a difference in prevalence, these findings suggest that some men feel ashamed of their weight. The findings also suggest that men’s self-esteem, like women's, is to some extent tied to how they perceive their looks in comparison to body ideals. This probably reflects changes in gender norms.

Ben, a personal trainer, explained that as his clients lost weight through exercise, their clothing choices indicated that they were feeling more confident:

[At first] they wear like long sleeve shirts and the very big sweatshirts and then, as they lose more weight, you can see the clothing [get] smaller and more form fitting and that is when you know. They will either comment to you like, “I can’t believe I am wearing a tank top right now.” So that’s the kind of stuff that I think is really cool.

The occasional article directly connected fitness to confidence without mentioning weight loss or appearance. For example: “Fitness is . . . ‘confidence. I feel as if I can do anything when I’m fit.’”<sup>100</sup> Thus, fitness was framed as fostering a sense of self-efficacy. This theme was also found in interviews. Group fitness instructor Jessica explained that she designs her classes to help the people attending develop confidence:

I want them to have this idea of what they are capable of and then exceed that by 10 percent, exceed that by 20 percent. So I do want them to get a good workout, but I care very much . . . about developing confidence. Like, I want them to do something that’s hard one week and then come back four weeks later and realize that, and kind of master it. Like, feel like they’re getting better. . . . I want that person to walk in the door, think it’s hard, and beat it.

Like Jessica, program director Doris also identified confidence as stemming from physically accomplishing something like learning “how to feel strength in your body” or learning “how to do a skill” like dancing. Based on the premise that fitness can promote confidence, Brittany had developed a program designed to teach girls self-confidence through fitness.

A final psychological-health subtheme is the connection that magazines made between fitness and social benefits. These benefits included making—or bettering—relationships and improving sex. Articles claimed that working out could help couples bond and remain attracted to one another “because fitness boosts your sex life, self-

esteem and energy.”<sup>101</sup> Magazines suggested that exercise is also beneficial to friendships. One magazine dedicated an entire article to describing friendships that began or were strengthened by exercise. The article stated:

Working out can strengthen your relationships, just as it tones your body, research shows. In fact, sharing a fun activity or hobby is the number-one predictor of a happy marriage. . . . It can also take your friendship to a whole new level. . . . Thanks to the feel-good endorphins that are released when you exercise, activities that get your blood pumping may help bring you closer to each other.<sup>102</sup>

Similarly, the subject of another article endorsed recreational team sports: he described how involvement in a soccer team “has broadened my social network. You meet people on the field and make friends in the bar afterward.”<sup>103</sup> In these ways, fitness was presented as improving or building relationships.

The social benefits of fitness also included a better sex life, according to magazine articles. As with many other aspects of fitness, however, there was a pronounced gender difference in the way the benefits were described. Female readers were encouraged to exercise for the physiological effects that intensify physical sensation during sex. One article exemplifying this theme instructed women to:

Work out to get turned on. Research shows that women who exercise feel better about their bodies and have more energy for sex. Physical activity releases hormones, such as endorphins and dopamine, that are believed to affect sex drive. Best of all, working up a sweat increases sexual sensations almost immediately, Meston’s groundbreaking studies have found. . . . The payoff? Better arousal and stronger orgasms.<sup>104</sup>

This article treated sexuality as a matter of physiology and provided a simple solution: exercise. Another article reassured women who might feel hesitant to believe that sex counts as exercise: “Seize the moment by rushing home and getting busy for at least 30 minutes—you’ll burn an average of 140 calories and up to 20 more if you orgasm. If only

all workouts were this much fun!”<sup>105</sup> Although women were encouraged to seek out sex more, the writers acknowledged that women continue to face social norms instructing them not to verbalize desire (Smith 2012). Thus, women were advised to not feel guilty about sex, because it burns calories. The emphasis was shifted to weight loss and appearance, in line with more traditional roles and advice for women.

Men were also encouraged to enjoy the benefits of fitness on their sex lives, but the message was different. In an article providing dating advice, men were told the reasons to date an athlete: “For starters: spandex, side-by-side workouts, and shared showers. Oh yeah, and better sex. A recent Turkish study found that elite female athletes have better clitoral blood flow and sexual function than sedentary women do.”<sup>106</sup> The advice mirrored that of women’s magazines: women who exercise not only look sexier but they also experience more sexual pleasure. Rather than focusing on how men’s bodies could look better, the emphasis was on women’s appearance and bodily function.

### Summary

In this chapter I have presented my second major finding with respect to how fitness is defined and framed. I found that both magazines and respondents used a health frame to conceptualize and convey fitness information, reflecting the continuing trends of healthism and medicalization. Fitness was often equated to physical health and both the physical as well as the psychological health benefits were widely promoted. Both magazines and interviewees often portrayed fitness as a cure-all, sometimes literally: “Exercise is about as close to being a panacea as anything in the medical arsenal.”<sup>107</sup> The supposed benefits of fitness ranged from to better health, to greater confidence, better

sex, and even to a better career: “Fitness and career longevity absolutely go hand-in-hand”<sup>108</sup>

In her study of fitness media, Smith Maguire (2008) also found claims of fitness as panacea, which were used as motivation to exercise. Being fit would—according to commercial purveyors of fitness—change your life for the better in all manner of ways. Just as it is assumed that beautiful people are happier, healthier, more successful, and smarter (Zones 2005), it seems that fit people are, too. The subject of one article portrayed fitness as “highly undervalued. Getting in shape changed my life.” Respondents also emphasized the plethora of benefits provided by fitness, although with less hyperbole than magazine articles.

The definition of fitness as health reflects the contemporary U.S. context in which biomedical knowledge drives commercial, political, and social agenda. Interest in fitness has grown in conjunction with heightened concern over fatness, the desire for healthy citizens and longevity, and the expansion of the commercial fitness industry. The fitness field, and individuals within it, benefit by linking fitness to health, because health is already highly valued. If fitness is positioned as important (or equivalent) to health, then fitness, by extension, is also an important field, worthy of time, money, and attention. Although the historical changes in health and medicine provide the context for the rise of the fitness industry, my research demonstrates how healthism has become engrained in the logic of fitness and has helped to shape the field.

Even if fitness is indeed tied to health—as all respondents and magazines assumed—the larger question of healthism’s effects still remains to be answered. Should people feel obligated to pursue health? At what personal and social cost? What are the

social consequences for those who cannot or do not pursue fitness? These questions are explored in the next chapter, which examines how magazines and respondents used discourses of morality and obligation in relation to fitness.

## CHAPTER 6

### FITNESS DEFINED AS OBLIGATION

The third major theme that I identified in exploring my research questions about the definition and discourse of fitness was portraying fitness as a moral duty and therefore obligation. These findings build upon those identified in the previous chapter on health: because “fitness equals health” and healthism are inherent to the logic of the field, discourses of responsibility abound. Three themes point to the connection among fitness, obligation, and morality: (1) the pursuit of fitness through exercise was presented as a chore or an obligation; (2) motivation was a challenge for people pursuing fitness; and (3) exercise was presented as a form of self-discipline.

#### Fitness as Chore and Obligation

Fitness magazines repeatedly characterized the body as an object that could be molded through physical activity to achieve idealized forms promulgated by the magazine’s experts and advertisers. The idea that anyone could “build” or “sculpt” the body was common: “A competitive drive and a passion for fitness helped this 36-year-old build the body—and career—of her dreams.”<sup>109</sup> Fitness magazines portrayed fitness as an individual choice, the result of making the effort to exercise and to eat a proper diet. For example, one article proclaimed: “At least 75% of how you experience age is under your control,”<sup>110</sup> suggesting that even aging is a personal choice.

Based on the assertions that (a) fitness is good and (b) that the body is improvable, it logically follows that one *should* strive to change one’s body towards desirable (“fit”) ends. By this logic, fitness is transformed into a moral imperative;

individuals have a duty to monitor body shape, weight, and ability and work toward improving them.

Dworkin and Wachs (2009) observed that the body is a social marker of morality. This is not a recent phenomenon: Featherstone, Hepworth, and Turner (1990) argue that appearance has been fused with morality since the Victorian era. In modern times, however, the connection between moral rectitude and exercise has made fitness an indicator of a person's character, which has further contributed to the negative assessment of fat or unfit bodies. One article warned readers of the financial cost of being overweight (and therefore perceived as "unfit"): "It pays to stay fit: Women who are 25 pounds overweight make \$13,847 less a year than those whose weight is average."<sup>111</sup> Rather than framing the problem as gender or body-size discrimination, the article placed responsibility on the individual to manage her body and therefore her earning opportunities.

Saguy (2013) hypothesized that how a problem is framed affects its evaluation and influences the proposed solution. When fatness is framed as an individual health problem, individuals are held responsible for being fat and solutions focus on individual action and responsibility. This framing is an example of what Crawford (1980) termed "healthism." Crawford argued that health, or at least the appearance of health, is viewed in our cultural moment as an individual project and thus responsibility for health outcomes lies with the individual. Because health is good, the pursuit of health is taken to be evidence of responsibility and morality.

According to Featherstone (1991a), the body is a "corporeal metaphor for health" (as quoted in Dworkin and Wachs (2009:12)). The "healthy" body today is idealized as

trim, toned, muscular, and without excess fat. The fit body is presented as an “irreducible and partly superior” body-ideal—better than health alone or beauty alone (Sassatelli 2010:14). Fitness is promoted to improve health, but perhaps more importantly, to produce the “look” of health. It is the “look” of health—as opposed to health itself—that symbolizes moral character.

Since the pursuit of health is a “socially legitimate” concern, the pursuit of fitness, too, becomes a serious and valued endeavor (Smith Maguire 2008:41)—a moral pursuit involving self-monitoring and individual responsibility. The magazines analyzed in this study overwhelmingly took the position that individuals are responsible for their health, that fitness is a proactive preventative measure, and therefore that individuals have a responsibility to stay fit.

Further evidence of how fitness was constructed as obligation is the way that magazines characterized its pursuit as more like work than leisure—not always pleasant or intrinsically rewarding—but a moral imperative. For example, fitness expert Jason O'Mara acknowledged that diet is an essential component of fitness but that his meal plan “gets dull after a while”<sup>112</sup> Men’s magazines, especially, described exercise as an unpleasant duty. For example, in one article an actor explained, “I don't necessarily enjoy being at the gym,” and that working out was “something I have to do, more than something I look forward to doing.”<sup>113</sup> Similarly, group instructor Daphne said, “If doing a Stair Master for 30 minutes staring off into space is your thing, fine, but I am not sure too many people really enjoy that.”

There were gender differences in how fitness was framed as obligation. Articles about exercise in men’s magazine articles were much more likely than women’s to

mention effort (34 percent and 20 percent, respectively). Men's workouts were often characterized as requiring "maximum effort"<sup>114</sup> and male readers bragged, for example: "I trained my ass off."<sup>115</sup> Men's articles emphasized the difficulty of workouts by describing workouts using the terminology such as: "intense and very tough,"<sup>116</sup> "not for the faint of heart,"<sup>117</sup> "a punishing training routine,"<sup>118</sup> "our hardest workout ever . . . so tough we bet you've never experienced anything like it . . . an enormous challenge for your body and mind,"<sup>119</sup> and "brutal."<sup>120</sup>

Articles claimed that exercise has to be difficult because: "You build muscle with hard work and sweat."<sup>121</sup> The implication is that desired results can be obtained only through arduous effort. Respondent Tanya, a personal trainer, explained the cultural belief is: "Unless you do it hard enough it doesn't count." Men's magazines repeatedly used violent imagery to refer to fat and calories as well as to describe the effect on muscles. For example, articles promised their workouts would: "burn fat and blast your core . . . smash your abs and obliques"<sup>122</sup> and "smoke calories, torch fat, and leave you, uh, exhausted."<sup>123</sup> This imagery suggests that molding the body—especially a masculine body—into a desired form requires beating it into submission and was presumably designed to appeal to a masculine ideal of aggressive action.

Women's articles on exercise, in contrast, were less likely than men's to discuss arduous effort, but they still acknowledged the importance of self-discipline. For example, women were told to "push yourself"<sup>124</sup> or "push it real good."<sup>125</sup> Women were encouraged to overcome "that little voice inside saying, 'Maybe I just can't do this.'"<sup>126</sup> Effort, endurance, and mental toughness were valued: one article advised readers to "Grin and bear it: A Tough Mudder takes mental and physical grit."<sup>127</sup>

Women’s magazines also often described workouts as difficult, but in general they eschewed the violent imagery found in men’s publications. For example, one article stated the following: “These power-packed routines deliver short but sweaty workouts that nudge you out of your comfort zone. . . . This high-energy routine . . . really cranks it.”<sup>128</sup> Another workout required “an ‘OMG I’m sweating buckets’ level” of effort.<sup>129</sup> Women were told they were no less tough than their male counterparts and that they could (and should) pursue workouts that were “all about feeling the burn.”<sup>130</sup> Even though some descriptors such as “grueling yet graceful”<sup>131</sup> suggested the workout was demanding, accompanying terms like “graceful” were appended to feminize the exercise.

A gender difference was also apparent in the photographs of models performing workouts. Models in men’s magazine photographs were characterized by seriousness, effort, and focus; they were rarely shown looking at the camera, smiling, or resting. Fitness magazines idealized masculine fit bodies as straining to perform and concentrating on the workout (see Illustrations 1 and 2). The men’s bodies were gleaming—perhaps to indicate sweat or to highlight their musculature. They were often grimacing. In contrast, female fitness models were shown smiling and performing gracefully and nearly effortlessly (see Illustrations 3 and 4).

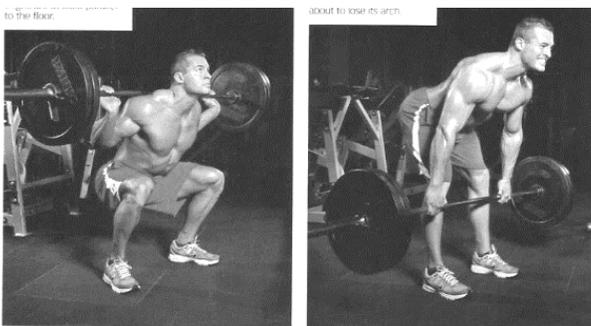


Illustration 1. Straining to Perform<sup>132</sup>

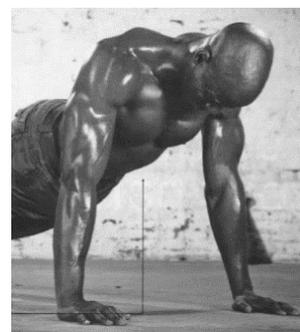


Illustration 2. Musculature<sup>133</sup>

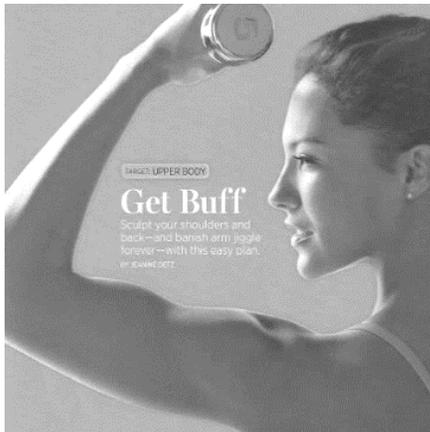


Illustration 3. Effortless Lifting<sup>134</sup>



Illustration 4. Smiling Grace<sup>135</sup>

### The Motivation Challenge

About one third of all articles on exercise were about motivation and/or perseverance. The emphasis placed on motivation underscores the framing of the pursuit of fitness as a chore involving hard work, the results of which are not immediately apparent. Women’s articles were only slightly more likely than men’s to discuss motivation (35 percent and 31 percent, respectively). Magazines presented themselves as sources of motivation: one magazine told the reader to “reignite your fit focus right here”<sup>136</sup> and a regular magazine section called “Our Fit Life” was described as having “motivating music, must-haves and stick-with-it secrets.”<sup>137</sup> Entire articles were dedicated to the topic of motivation. An article titled “Live Healthy: Supersize Your Self-Control” reassured readers that willpower would improve with training, like a “self-control muscle.”<sup>138</sup> Motivational tips and expert advice about motivation and perseverance appeared in almost every issue. Smith Maguire (2008), in her analysis of fitness media, reported a similar focus on motivation.

Research respondents also identified motivation as a key barrier to fitness. Personal trainers positioned themselves as sources of motivation and believed that their role was to inspire their clients to work harder and stick to their goals.

Women's magazines reminded readers that the effort was "worth it"—an admission that pursuing fitness was a chore or obligation, rather than a pleasure. Articles promised that exertion would pay off in desired results such as weight loss, muscle toning, or psychological benefits. Of the articles in women's magazines addressing motivation and perseverance, 14 percent talked about exercise as being worth the effort whereas only 4 percent of men's articles did so. The potential for weight control and mood improvement also were presented as justification for the effort required by a challenging workout.<sup>139</sup> In fact, hard work was presented as laudatory: "Nicole works harder for her body than anyone I know," says Ernster. "And it shows!"<sup>140</sup> Consistent with a definition of fitness as appearance, 9 percent of women's articles about motivation and 6 percent of men's articles named "improved looks" as being worth the effort.

Gender differences were also apparent in the use of competition as a motivational strategy. Men were encouraged to use competition—friendly or adversarial—as motivation. Men's magazines suggested competition is a good motivator: "Pick a sport or competition so you have a reason to be pushed."<sup>141</sup> Another article cited research supporting the physical and psychological benefits of competition.<sup>142</sup>

Men's articles suggested that appropriate fitness goals included adversarial rivalry, dominating others, or winning against them. For example, an article profiling an athlete quoted him as saying: "I want the challenge of someone beating my ass, and my coming back to show them what's what. You want to show what you're made of."<sup>143</sup>

Another article advised: “Don’t just participate in your summer [baseball] league—dominate it!”<sup>144</sup> Men’s magazines also reinforced gender stereotypes by suggesting that men find competition irresistible: “The competitive energy just gets the best out of everybody.”<sup>145</sup>

Women, however, were only encouraged to use *friendly* competition to motivate themselves to sustain their efforts and work harder:

Pick a runner in the park to keep pace with and spur you on. . . . Your focus switches from your fatigue to your friendly competition, making the distance seem to fly by.<sup>146</sup>

Women were not encouraged to beat their competition for the sake of winning or being the best, but simply to spur themselves on; to self-motivate. In fact, women’s magazines sometimes portrayed competing against oneself as better than competing against others: “I only race against myself in the pool. As long as I give it my all, I don’t worry what others do.”<sup>147</sup>

Even when women were encouraged to compete against others, the notion of competition was restrained. This is evident in the frequent use of the word “friendly” to describe competitive situations. For example: “Find a friendly rival: ‘I always glance at the girl next to me in class. If she’s hitting it harder, I know I have to pick up my game.’”<sup>148</sup> In this quote, even though the word “rival” was used, it was combined with the word “friendly” and the purpose of the competition was self-improvement rather than beating the other person. Thus, although some aggression in the form of competition was encouraged, women were supposed to temper their aggression.

Articles about motivation borrowed from psychology—often quoting psychologists or psychological research to enhance credibility: “For the mental oomph to

make it through those miles, heed these nuggets of motivated wisdom from the latest stride guides.”<sup>149</sup> Men’s and women’s magazines both recommended that readers use mantras and self-talk during exercise (8 percent and 12 percent, respectively). Twenty-one percent of women’s articles on exercise motivation and endurance and 25 percent of men’s discussed visualization or focusing on goals.

Articles on exercise motivation and endurance provided many other strategies, tips, and tricks to persevere in an intrinsically demotivating endeavor. This advice included how to make oneself exercise, how to push oneself during exercise, and how to think positively about exercise. Psychological tips included reframing goals, the power of mindset and positive thinking, using rewards and positive reinforcement, focusing on the moment or concentrating on something else, and using technology, music, or other entertainment. These examples illustrate the way in which fields overlap; psychological research and practice has carved out a niche for itself—motivational strategies—within the fitness field

Some respondents thought of motivation as an individual problem that required individualized solutions. For example, personal trainer Amy said that it takes a long time to “figure out how each individual works, like what tactics work on this person that wouldn't work on the other person. Like trying to figure out how people tick and . . . how you can motivate somebody.” Like Amy, many trainers also saw personalizing motivation as emotional labor (Hochschild 1983; Wharton 2009) they did with clients. Other respondents, however, thought there were variables that could predict effective motivation strategies. For example, researcher Mark suggested that gender might be a factor in determining what influences people to exercise and personal trainer Ben argued

that athletes are motivated differently than non-athletes. Personal trainer Tanya believed that “motivation” is actually not the problem in exercise resistance; rather, cultural expectations have created unrealistic expectations about engaging in unfulfilling exercise activities. Professor and researcher Erin commented on her reaction to people running on treadmills:

Everybody there just looks to me that they are always running in place, which reminds me of when I was a psychology grad student and we had all these rats on a . . . wheel and I always think, “I hope these people have a life.”

Thus, while magazines and some respondents conceptualized non-exercisers as having motivation problems, other respondents identified social predictors of exercise behavior and even questioned the social prescription of specific fitness activities as the problem.

To motivate readers, fitness magazines tried to soften the message that getting fit is difficult in a number of ways: (1) by suggesting that exercise gets easier; (2) by providing strategies for making exercise seem easier; (3) by claiming that exercise can feel effortless; and (4) by describing exercise as fun. At least one of these themes was present in 25 percent of women’s exercise articles on motivation and endurance and in 21 percent of men’s articles. The use of these strategies suggests that magazines felt the need to present information to readers in an upbeat, optimistic, and gentle tone to counterbalance the fitness-as-chore message and appeal to a wider audience, particularly to women and readers who were not used to exercising. This observation was supported by research respondents. For example, Ben explained that when working with personal training clients: “you have to be more nice to them and very slow and gradual. You don’t want to scare them.”

The promise that exercising would become easier with time and practice was a commonly used device. For example, one article reported: “‘I wanted to die after jogging for 90 seconds on day one,’ Beth admits. ‘But each run got a bit easier. Six months later I felt so powerful when I completed the 5K.’”<sup>150</sup> In another article, readers were reassured that sticking with a regime pays off: “getting to the gym goes from seeming like a slog to a cinch.”<sup>151</sup>

Another strategy was to provide tips on how to make exercise seem easier.<sup>152</sup> Readers were reassured that even small additions to their exercise routine would help them improve and that “challenging yourself doesn't mean killing yourself.”<sup>153</sup> Interview respondents also discussed the idea that overexertion was not necessary. Personal trainer Ben explained: “I think that you don't need to go through extremes to get there. . . . Slow and steady wins the race kind of thing.”

Another strategy to soften the “it's hard” message was to claim that readers would perceive certain workouts as effortless. For example, one article instructed readers to “do this most weekdays to rack up 45 minutes to an hour of exercise without even trying.”<sup>154</sup> Another described an exercise routine as physically challenging but perceived as effortless: “I'd spend hours moving to salsa or hip-hop and not even think about how fast my heart was pumping or how much I was working my core and leg muscles.”<sup>155</sup>

“Workouts can be fun” was another device writers used to soften the message about the drudgery of getting fit. Articles on motivation and endurance in men's and women's magazines talked about enjoyment at about equal rates (9 percent). Although I expected to find a gender difference in the positioning of exercise as enjoyable, a text search showed that women's exercise-related articles were only slightly more likely than

men's exercise-related articles to contain the word "fun" (14 percent compared to 10 percent, respectively). Articles suggested women could increase the enjoyment of exercising by finding new ways to exercise and trying new workouts: "Bored with your walking routine? Pump up the fun and the fat burn with this 50-minute interval routine."<sup>156</sup> Readers were advised to treat exercise like a game and to purposefully incorporate fun into their workouts.<sup>157</sup> Other articles claimed that exercise could be so enjoyable that it could distract exercisers from the effort they were exerting: "It was so much fun that I forgot I was working out."<sup>158</sup>

Softening the portrayal of exercise difficulty was likely meant to appeal to readers who were intimidated by exercise or who were looking to increase their physical activity without a lot of effort. Some research suggests that many people are deterred from exercise because they perceive it to be too difficult (Grubbs and Carter 2002; Lovell, Ansari, and Parker 2010). It is likely that magazines were simultaneously trying to appeal to readers who already exercised but desired novel challenges as well as to readers newer to exercise who needed reassurance and motivational support. This resulted in contradictory messages (it's brutal/it's effortless), sometimes within a single magazine issue.

The similarities and differences in how exercise was portrayed by gender is striking. On the one hand, magazines and trainers seemed to assume that men do not want to be coddled and do not need an upbeat, psychological approach. In fact, one magazine editor explained that the tone of articles to men and women was intentionally different. The assumption, presumably, was that men respond better to straightforward "in your face" language, whereas women respond better to language that is "fluffy" and

that sounds like “self-help literature.” Based on the violent imagery used to describe workouts in men’s magazines, it seemed that men were expected to want an intense workout—as if its difficulty made it a good workout. Women, on the other hand, might be told that the workout was really difficult, but the messages were usually softened in some way, either psychologically, emotionally, or by using motivational discourse. It appears that magazine assumed that women wanted to avoid difficulty and needed to be shown how to reframe the demands of the workout into something positive.

The problem with these mixed messages in the magazines is that readers are likely to become confused. In one article they were told to put forth maximum effort, in another they were told to avoid overdoing it. Although my research did not assess the perceptions of readers, it was clear that magazines frequently contained contradictory and potentially confusing messages. An interesting future line of inquiry would be the extent to which readers are aware of the contradictions and how they make sense of them.

### Self-Discipline

Both magazines and respondents acknowledged that exercise can be dull and repetitive; discipline is needed to stick to a regimen. Again, a gender difference was evident in how this was discussed. Although both men’s and women’s articles admired perseverance, men’s magazines were much more likely to stress its importance. Whereas 24 percent of men’s articles on exercise motivation mentioned perseverance, only 4 percent of women’s exercise motivation articles mentioned perseverance.

Magazines overwhelmingly portrayed the pursuit of fitness as an individual choice, although lip service was occasionally given to structural factors:

It helps to have miles of walking and biking paths and a local government that tries to make it easy for citizens to be healthy and active. But what really gives a town muscle are the choices made by the people who live there.<sup>159</sup>

Most articles consistently emphasized individual responsibility, agency, and choice.

Fitness was described as a goal that *any* person can achieve through training: “Reach your fitness resolution: you’ve made up your mind to get fitter than ever.”<sup>160</sup> The message is clear: all that is required is self-discipline. That is why fitness is seen as an external indicator of personal responsibility and self-control.

Articles and respondents provided readers with gendered strategies to help them develop self-discipline. Social support was a more common theme in women’s magazines than in men’s. Of articles on exercise and motivation, 26 percent of women’s discussed social support whereas only 18 percent of men’s articles mentioned it as a strategy. Social support strategies for sustaining exercise habits included relying on friends or loved ones, seeking affirmation or help from others, and exercising with another person: “people who work out with a buddy are more likely to stick to a routine than those who go it alone (peer pressure can be good!).”<sup>161</sup>

Social support also encompassed other forms of interaction. For example, one article reported the success of online support groups: “While exercisers in a University of Pittsburgh study who recorded their workouts—on paper or online—dropped weight, the ones who got online support with feedback lost the most of all.”<sup>162</sup>

Rebecca also noticed a gender difference in regard to social support. Based on her experience teaching group exercise classes and her involvement in bodybuilding, she noted that women tend to rely on social support more than men. She explained:

I think that women are very social in our own nature. So that's why . . . the support system helps women out. . . . Men may tend to be like lone sharks, like just working out, just nose-to-the-grindstone in the gym; whereas, women will, you know, feed off each other, form "teams" or groups and whatnot.

In her explanation, Rebecca reasoned that the behaviors she observed were due to “natural” differences between men and women. While the validity of these assumptions can be challenged, it was nevertheless apparent that gendered patterns of exercise motivation and discipline are reinforced by both trainers and fitness magazines.

Magazines recommended that readers make themselves accountable for their fitness efforts. Men’s and women’s magazines recommended the use of accountability at similar rates. A commonly suggested method was to set a goal and share it publically.

For example:

Jennifer vowed to run 1,000 miles in 365 days, or roughly 2.7 miles a day. . . . “I was accountable to nearly everyone I know. At work I wrote my miles-to-date on my cubicle whiteboard. My coworkers would pop in daily to check on my progress.”<sup>163</sup>

One article reasoned that public goal setting meant “you'll have to answer to all the people asking about your progress. This creates a sense of accountability and forces you to stick to your goals.”<sup>164</sup> Using social media was also encouraged.<sup>165</sup>

Men’s articles were only slightly more likely than women’s articles to discuss tracking progress as a strategy (9 percent and 4 percent, respectively). However, men’s magazines placed more emphasis on the importance of discipline: 15 percent of men’s exercise articles about motivation discussed topics of discipline, commitment, work ethic, and not making excuses—typically considered masculine traits.

Men’s magazines relied on the roles of men as fathers, husbands, or role models to the same extent that women’s magazines framed women in the traditional roles of

mothers or caretakers (7 percent of men's articles on motivation and 7 percent of women's articles on motivation discussed these roles). This similarity may reflect the increasing cultural emphasis of the "new man" or "new father" figure (Coltrane 1996; Hochschild 2003; Jones and Mosher 2013; Taylor et al. 2013). However, one article suggested that men should hold themselves accountable *as men* to work out. In other words, exercising was a hallmark of masculinity: "If you view your workout as mandatory—essentially part of the "job" of being a man—then it becomes a lot harder to skip."<sup>166</sup> There was no equivalent message directed toward women.

Women's magazines contained a higher percentage of success stories than men's magazines. In women's magazines, 16 percent of articles on exercise were success stories whereas in men's magazines, only 7 percent of articles on exercise were success stories. This gender difference may be due to gendered assumptions on the part of magazine writers and editors. It appears that magazines assumed (or have market research that shows) that women are more likely than men to want to read success stories or that women are more motivated by vicarious success.

My analysis suggested some gender convergence in messages about individual responsibility and the focus on health and nutrition. Messages directed both men and women to use fitness to maintain health, suggests it is no longer as "feminine" to monitor one's health and take preventative measures, like exercise. At the same time, however, this convergence may still present a gender trap. While risk-taking is typically described in research as being masculine (Sabo 2009), fitness magazines encouraged men not to take specific health risks such as poor diet, sedentariness, or fatness. Men were told: "outsmart flab," "upgrade your moves,"<sup>167</sup> and "protect your heart."<sup>168</sup> Articles framed

this type of risk-taking as making men weaker, softer, (and thus more feminine) and therefore advised against taking health risks. This reframing of risk-taking resisted dropping gender altogether (which would have indicated that convergence had occurred). It may be that magazines were trying to avoid the gender trap by redefining risk-taking. The message remained “be manly,” but now the definition of manliness included health management. Stereotypical ideas seemed to remain—gender persists—because avoiding risk was now another way to “man up.” However, both men and women were subject to the message that they should minimize health risks (healthism).

Recognizing that sustaining motivation to exercise is a problem, and sensing a commercial opportunity, companies have developed a variety of technologies to foster discipline and support exercise habits. Products range from heart rate monitors, to phone applications such as Nike’s Running App (Nike, Inc. 2014) that maps runs and tracks distance, pace, time and calories burned, and provides audio feedback, to gadgets like the Fitbit (Fitbit Inc. 2014), a product that tracks daily activity, calories burned and eaten, sleep, and weight.

Personal trainers also positioned themselves as able to facilitate exercise discipline. By providing tools, knowledge, guidance, and social support, trainers felt they were helping clients learn good exercise techniques and habits. However, while trainers believed they could help clients develop discipline, they also suggested that success was ultimately up to the individual, further evidence of the hegemonic concept of individual responsibility. For example, Amy admitted:

Sometimes, people frustrate me because I know they can do it, but they don't do it or they refuse to work hard enough or as hard as I know that they can. . . . I just want to yell at them and say, “You need to do this!” Or

“Change!” Or “Just do it!” . . . I can't do it for them, they have to do it themselves. So I give them all the tools and can speak to them and tell them how to change until I'm blue in the face. Not until they're ready to change. . . .

The overemphasis on individual agency in matters of fitness fails to recognize the complex interaction of macro and micro factors: structural and cultural forces shape and constrain individual choice.

The association of fitness with self-discipline is not new. Historically, fitness has been tied to morality as defined by good citizenship and also by religion. In the 1800s, exercise had distinctly religious underpinnings: the concern with building morality and character and intentional self-improvement in the pursuit of spiritual perfection. While religious associations were absent in the magazines analyzed, there was nevertheless emphasis on the individual's societal obligation to stay fit and healthy.

Some articles extended the concept of fitness to more than just individuals: magazines identified certain criteria to measure the “fitness” of a city or a college. For example, *Shape* ranked a list of fit cities<sup>169</sup> and *Men's Fitness* listed the 25 fittest colleges.<sup>170</sup> Fitness can even become a rallying cry for a nation. Physical therapist Paige—who is in her 60s—recalled that the first time she heard the word “fitness” was during the Cold War between the United States and the Soviet Union. She explained that “we had to become fit so that the Russians wouldn't be more fit than us.” She remembers that there suddenly emerged measures and awards for fitness. Michelle Obama's *Let's Move!* campaign is another example of promoting a fit population. These findings support the contention that in times of war and during heightened national security

threats, there is increased concern for citizens' bodies and the "fitness" of the nation (Armitage 2003; Dworkin and Wachs 2009; Oca 2005; Saltman 2003).

### Summary

Fitness as a duty or obligation was the third major definition to emerge from my research. The underlying assumptions—that fitness is good, and that it is a matter of personal choice—leads to the conclusion that fitness is a duty or obligation that each individual has to him- or herself as well as to society at large. Because achieving fitness requires self-control and goal-directed behavior, appearing fit has emerged as a form of social capital—an outward manifestation of the socially valued attributes of discipline and self-control. Historical macro forces such as the perception of enhanced control over longevity, the individualization of risk, and personal responsibility contributed to this characterization.

Fitness proponents frequently employed language that characterized exercise and the pursuit of fitness as an unpleasant or difficult chore. They acknowledged that motivation is a challenge. This, in turn, has opened a niche for psychologists and motivational experts to participate in the fitness field.

My analysis revealed strongly gendered treatment of the messages related to fitness as obligation. For example, the images used to illustrate exercise routines were very different for men versus women and there were notable differences in the recommendations for sustaining motivation. These differences likely reflect editors' and trainers' unexamined assumptions about gender, and possibly also market research about the appeal of certain messages. There was some evidence, however, of gender convergence in the messages about individual responsibility and health in magazines

articles and interviews. These observations about the gendering of fitness undoubtedly reflect larger social changes regarding gender in the United States.

## CHAPTER 7

### FITNESS DEFINED AS FORM

In this chapter I discuss the fourth theme that emerged from my research: how magazines and respondents defined fitness as form by equating it to the “look” of the fit body and the desirability of shaping a fit appearance. While both respondents and magazines emphasized appearance, both held complex conceptions of fitness that simultaneously referred to its ability to produce desirable bodies as well as the functional effects of exercise. Respondents were more likely to define fitness in terms of functionality and health, while magazines were more likely to emphasize aesthetics.

In the following sections, I review the characteristics of the fit look, the degree to which fit body ideals were gendered, the inherent assumption that the body’s appearance is changeable, the social pressures to meet fit body ideals, and the influences of feminism on fitness discourse. I argue that the historical trends of increased attention to appearance and changing gender norms continue to shape the fitness industry, but that internal forces such as consumerism and evolving definitions of fitness explain the current fit body ideals.

#### Components of the Fit Look

Magazines and respondents frequently described fitness as a specific “fit” appearance and identified improved appearance as the goal of pursuing fitness. Magazines emphasized the production of visually appealing, fit bodies, rather than a physiological or psychological state. The importance of appearance is illustrated by how frequently articles and respondents mentioned it: more than half (63 percent) of articles

about exercise mentioned appearance (articles coded at “looks” included any article that mentioned appearance, confidence related to appearance, gender/sexuality related to appearance, the look of muscles, or weight loss). Defining fitness as form involved ascribing higher aesthetic value to a fit appearance than to a fat or “out of shape” physique. Indeed, the phrase “out of shape” suggests a deviation from some ideal (presumably fit) shape.

Several aspects of the fit look were similar across men’s and women’s magazines. The bodies of the magazine models used to demonstrate exercises, as well as the bodies of celebrities and readers who were celebrated for their fitness, had in common the “look of fitness,” which was portrayed in both text and images as lean and muscular for both men and women. Illustrations 5 and 6 are typical; the woman is slender and her outfit and body position highlight the muscles in her upper arms, stomach, and legs.



Illustration 5. Toned Arms<sup>171</sup>

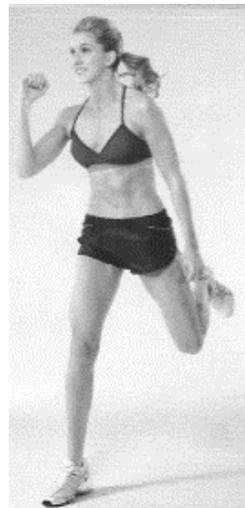


Illustration 6. Toned Body<sup>172</sup>

Women’s bodies used to illustrate exercise differed in some respects compared to those used to illustrate other topics like fashion. Models in non-exercise-related articles were slender but lacked the muscular definition of fitness models. In Illustration 7, for

example, the model's body has minimal body fat and her thinness is evident in her arms and the gap between her thighs as well as her flat stomach. Unlike Illustration 5 and 6, this model is not muscular—or at least her body is not in a position that emphasizes muscles. Women's magazines did not explicitly differentiate between these two body types, although some hints were given in the exercise-related articles that women desire to look “toned” as well as slender, rather than merely thin.



Illustration 7. Emphasizing Slenderness, Not Muscle<sup>173</sup>

Both men's and women's fitness magazines disparaged fat bodies. Fitness and fatness were characterized as incompatible states of embodiment: fitness as healthy and fatness as unhealthy. For example, health and fitness instructor Daphne explained that according to public opinion, “You are either fit or you are not. You are either thin or you are fat. You can't be fat and fit.” This discourse exemplifies what Saguy (2013) described as a “problem frame” in which fatness is understood as a problem in a medical, moral, public health, or aesthetic sense. With the sole exception of interviews with Health at Every Size® (HAES) practitioners, every magazine and research respondent stated that

weight loss is a reason to pursue fitness through exercise, reinforcing the social stigma associated with fatness in current US culture.

Articles and their accompanying images portrayed undesirable bodies as overweight, inactive, and poorly developed. In contrast to the numerous full-page images of “perfected” and idealized bodies, images of unfit bodies were infrequent and small. These less-than-ideal bodies were relegated to the “before” in “success stories” where they were triumphed over, rejected, and replaced by bodies in which the owner could finally take pride (see Illustrations 8 through 10).



Illustration 8. Confidence<sup>174</sup>

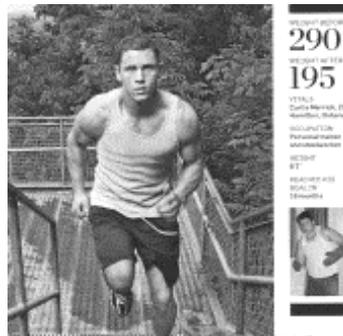


Illustration 9. Success<sup>175</sup>



Illustration 10. Newfound Energy<sup>176</sup>

Descriptions of unfit bodies treated them as problems, embarrassments, and shame-producers. “Success stories” celebrated the accomplishments (typically weight loss) of men and women, who were usually described as readers of the magazine in which they appeared, implying that had a role and, by inference, supporting the magazine’s credibility claim. These articles almost always provided the number of

pounds lost; “success” was framed in terms of becoming thin or losing weight. In one “success story,” Chad Hodgson referred to his weight as an unattractive problem:

I gained a lot of extra weight in college, where the freshman 15 turned into the senior 40. Some years later, during a trip to New York City with my girlfriend, I was winded from just walking around. I wanted to marry this girl—but who would want to marry me? So I joined a local gym's weight-loss competition and transformed my diet—and the pounds started falling off.<sup>177</sup>

Chad’s story characterized fatness as repulsive (“who would want to marry me?”) and celebrated the way in which he used fitness to triumph over fatness. Another article similarly suggested that weight loss would result in greater sexual appeal: “I am 20 pounds lighter, and girls want me.”<sup>178</sup>

Magazines portrayed unfit bodies as feminine: gluttonous, out of control, weak, lazy, and soft, rather than approximating hegemonic masculinity, which in this context was characterized by control, discipline, rationality, endurance, hardness, and strength. Successful exercisers brought their bodies toward masculine ideals by exerting mind over body through diet and physical activity. Although, historically, dieting and weight control have been seen as women’s issues (Bordo 1993), I found men’s magazines almost as likely as women’s magazines to promote weight loss, reflecting a continuing shift to greater body surveillance by men. One respondent, program director Doris, suggested that rejection of fatness may signify a rejection of the traditional hallmarks of femininity. The rejection of fatness in men’s magazines in particular may reflect the perception of fat as a feminizing trait (Monaghan 2008; Monaghan and Malson 2013; Saguy 2012; Temple Newhook, Gregory, and Twells 2015). Research suggests that increasing scrutiny of men’s bodies has resulted in higher rates of body dissatisfaction among men and has

contributed to trends such as muscle dysphoria and male anorexia (Bell and McNaughton 2007; Featherstone 2010).

Research respondents, in general, felt women are more concerned than men with losing weight and experience more body dissatisfaction. One respondent, Erin, explained that in addition to gender, sexuality also must be considered:

Women—whether they are lesbian or straight—are more focused on weight, diet more often, whatever, than men. But on some variables you will find that it is heterosexual women and gay men who are more focused on weight than lesbians or heterosexual men. Some people have said that it's really people who are involved with men, whether it is gay men or straight women, because men tend to really objectify appearance. . . . There's been a couple of kind of qualitative studies that have found that bisexual women . . . say, “Yes, you know, when I am involved with men I do tend to have more pressure to be thin.”

Personal trainers and program directors seldom reported weight loss as a primary goal they have for their clients, even though weight loss is often a goal clients have for themselves. While trainers might have supported and approved of weight loss goals, some—like Ben—believed it is inappropriate for them to suggest weight loss as a goal for clients.

Although magazines claimed that looking fit is not simply about being thin, there were self-contradictions. For example, the subject of an article claimed her goal for working out was not weight loss: “I don’t work out to lose weight; I want an athletic body that can move.”<sup>179</sup> Even so, the article emphasized the leanness of her body: “The first thing you notice about Kelly—besides her smile—are her sleek gams.” Additionally, the article provided a workout intended to help readers “replicate Kelly's lean look” which suggested the reader should desire to have a lean body.

These contradictions were inherent in interviews, as well. Amy, a personal trainer who was pursuing a degree in nutrition, framed fitness as being healthy and as helping individuals take care of themselves—not as about weight loss. She nevertheless concluded that the “weight will take care of itself” if clients make “good” choices.

Thinness was not necessarily equated with fitness, however; exercise was deemed necessary to be “healthy thin” rather than just thin. Some articles used the term “skinny fat” to refer to unhealthy thinness: “I was a skinny-fat couch potato. I never pushed myself physically.”<sup>180</sup> Skinny-fat would seem to be a contradiction in terms, but makes sense in a culture in which fat and unfit are synonymous. This idea was echoed in interviews during which respondents explicitly stated that people who are thin are not necessarily fit or healthy. Personal trainer Amy said, “Some people are just naturally thin. And those naturally thin people can be very unhealthy.”

Thus, achieving a fit appearance was conceptually distinct from simple weight loss. While getting “fit” often included losing fat, it also involved adding muscle in specific areas of the body. Leanness alone did not equate to fitness; rather, a fit look for both men and women also required “being toned,” a particular visibly muscular look especially in the upper arms, abdomens, and thighs. According to one article, fitness provided a “sculpted” look to the woman’s body; she should desire not merely to be “slim,” but also to be “tight and toned;”<sup>181</sup> being lean was not sufficient to qualify as “fit.”

Respondents explained, however, that looking fit did not necessarily mean that a person is functionally fit; rather, there are different kinds of “fitness.” Ben, a personal trainer, illustrated this idea by contrasting body builders to strength competitors:

Have you ever seen the strong man competition on ESPN? . . . Those guys are as strong, if not stronger, than the body builder but they don't look as good . . . They are incredibly fit; they just don't need to worry about having a six pack so they don't care that they have a layer of fat on their body, whereas a body builder needs to show everything. . . . [Weight lifters] are fit in a different way. They are stronger and [have] more functional strength whereas a body builder is more for show.

Ben suggested that it is possible for a man to look “good in a tight shirt” without being “fit” in a functional sense of the word. He said some men at the gym work on “glamour muscles” and described these men as having: “the big biceps and the big shoulders and everything, but they have a gut that they suck in and maybe their legs aren't strong and their lower back is probably weak so they focus on biceps and triceps.”

In his study of gendered and embodied cultural capital among bodybuilders, Bridges (2009) similarly noted the difference between the types of fitness pursued by bodybuilders and powerlifters. Bridges (2009) theorized that the groups' divergent fitness practices reflect “distinctions in gender capital” or the “knowledge, resources and aspects of identity available—within a given context—that permit access to regime-specific gendered identities” (p. 92). He found that an important source of this gender capital was the body, but bodybuilders and powerlifters pursued different routes to attaining gender capital and “fit” bodies as defined by their specific social group.

Both men's and women's magazines used the promise of improved appearance to promote exercising—indicating that appearance is culturally important for both men and women. Men's articles on exercise were as likely as women's articles on exercise to discuss appearance-related themes such as the look of muscle, gendered looks or looks related to sexual attractiveness, or weight loss (66 percent and 60 percent, respectively). For example, one men's workout was described as “a powerful method for people who

want to look good naked.”<sup>182</sup> Magazines presented similar types of workouts to men and women—a mix of cardiovascular exercise (“cardio”) and strength-training—and promised similar benefits: weight-loss, muscle development, and toning.

The emphasis on looks in both men’s and women’s magazines raises the question of whether gender norms are changing with regard to how much attention men and women are “supposed to” pay to their appearance. Researchers such as Bordo (1999) and Norman (2011) claim that men—especially heterosexual men—experience a double bind: they have been socialized that doing masculinity (West and Zimmerman 1987) necessitates disinterest in their appearance, bodies, and health; attention to the body and appearance are traditional hallmarks of femininity. At the same time, men are repeatedly reminded of the importance of their appearance—the social capital afforded by a masculine physique.

My review of men’s fitness magazines suggests that men attempt to negotiate this “gender trap” by rationalizing that their goal is a masculine endeavor: a look acquired through hard effort that signifies strength, power, virility, and sexual appeal. Rejecting softness and weakness allows them to avoid feminization and accomplish masculinity while simultaneously enjoying a degree of narcissism.

Commercial interests—in particular, efforts to market men’s grooming products (Rohlinger 2002; Shugart 2008)—may also have reduced the association between attention to appearance and femininity. Attention to the male body was thus portrayed as acceptable, as long as it required effort, discipline, and strength and was intended to prevent fatness and its associated feminization. Similar findings have been noted in studies of boxing and bodybuilding (Fussell 1991; Jefferson 1998; Klein 1993; Paradis

2012; Wacquant 1995a, 1995b, 1998, 2004). For example, in her study of boxing, Paradis (2012) drew upon Wacquant (1998) to understand how investment in the body and attention to its aesthetics are indicative of a fighter's ability and serve as symbolic capital, therefore allowing men to be attentive to their outward appearance without being feminized.

Personal trainer and magazine editor Rebecca proposed another explanation: focusing on losing weight is no longer seen as feminizing. She observed that in magazines:

It used to be less about fat loss for men. . . . It was more about growing size, growing muscles, you know, having more sex appeal, but again, with the shift in the population, there being more people overweight, more men are overweight as well; that's not necessarily something that they stay clear from anymore. You can have a weight loss or a fat loss article for men . . . A nutrition article for shedding weight for men is not seen as unmanly.

Rachel suggested media attention to the "obesity epidemic" has raised awareness about fatness and explains why articles were increasingly providing weight-loss instruction to men.

Although magazines encouraged both men and women to improve their appearance through exercise, the ideal "fit look" they presented was strongly gendered. Overwhelmingly, the images and text in fitness magazines perpetuated gendered body size and shape ideals, polarized men and women, and supported a gender dichotomy. The gender binary was reinforced by the way in which the text, and especially the accompanying photographs, focused on different areas of the body, and differentiated men's desired form from women's. In magazines, the ideal masculine body was visibly

muscular, while the idealized feminine body was lean and toned but much less visibly muscular. The ideal size, appearance, and location of muscles was also gender specific.

According to magazines, the masculine body ideal is characterized by striving: the hegemonic mode of embodiment is the body under construction that aims at bulking up, adding muscular strength and endurance, and becoming more fit. While muscularity was presented as the universal goal for men, magazines recognized different sizes of muscular bodies. The masculine fitness ideal, therefore, is not necessarily the biggest body or the most developed musculature; muscularity was admired in various bodies. That is not to say, however, that certain types of bodies were not preferred over others: images of male fitness models were predominantly of “hard” bodies with well-defined muscle contours and little to no body fat. Articles referred to the fit look for men using terms such as “cut,” “shredded,” and “jacked”—meaning defined lines of muscle under taut skin, the lack of body fat or softness, as well as the visibility of as many muscles as possible. Thick veins bulging across toned muscle was another common trait in photos of men (see Illustration 11); a characteristic notably absent in images of women.

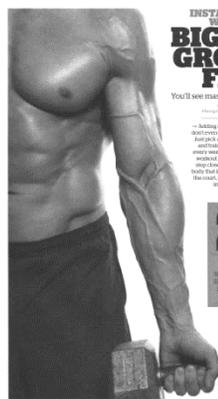


Illustration 11. Veins and Muscles<sup>183</sup>

The preferred type of masculine muscularity was also communicated through images of selected celebrities. While these differed from the detailed, gleaming perfection of fitness model bodies, the celebrities were touted for their achievements in weight loss, muscularity, and endurance. Celebrity bodies were typically shown active, performing workouts or in action-film shots. If not active, they were posed in clothing that accentuated the aspects of their bodies celebrated in the articles: breadth, bulk, and leanness, or laid-back, casual charm.

The most pronounced gender differences in fitness as form concerned the appearance of muscles. Both men's and women's magazines instructed readers to develop muscles through exercise, although this theme was more common in men's magazines: 25 percent of men's articles and 16 percent of women's articles about exercise mentioned muscle. Men's magazines were also more likely than women's magazines to discuss the look of muscle: 41 percent of men's articles on looks and 22 percent of women's articles on appearance mentioned muscle. Consequently, men's magazines were also more likely than women's magazines to recommend strength training: 37 percent of men's articles on exercise were solely about strength training while only 10 percent of women's articles were solely about strength training. These findings are consistent with Dworkin and Wachs' (2009) findings of the greater importance placed on muscularity for men and lend further support to my observation that gender strongly influences the meaning of fitness as form.

Both the amount the location of ideal musculature were gendered. While the fit look for men emphasized muscular chests, upper arms, and abdomens, the fit look for women emphasized toned legs, buttocks, and abdomens. Women who were presented as

embodying the ideal look often had some muscular definition in their abdominals and their upper arms, although much less than for men. Most of the women depicted as fit were slender, but their bodies were not the tall, extremely thin body ideals of fashion models. Although visible body fat in abdominals, arms, and thighs was rare, fit female models often had shape and mass to their arms and thighs as opposed to the current preference for flat-chested, narrow-hipped fashion models. Fit female models could have large breasts and round buttocks (albeit without cellulite), which added traditional signs of femininity to otherwise lean and hard bodies.

Dworkin and Wachs (2009) reported that women's magazines focus more on the lower body and men's focus more on the upper body. They suggested that this differential emphasis by gender indicated an historical polarization of masculinity and femininity. They explained that in Western cultures, women have been associated with the lower body, especially due to their reproductive organs. Women have also been stigmatized as less rational and inherently more tied to the body. Men, in contrast, have been associated with the upper body, rationality, logic, and the mind rather than the body (Grosz 1994; Laqueur 1990; Sennett 1994).

Men's and women's magazines both provided workouts intended to develop the abdominal muscles but men's contained more articles on abdominals than women's (38 percent compared to 27 percent). Men's magazines were also more likely to use the term "six-pack" (referring to the rectus abdominis muscles which, when developed, reveal six muscular bulges separated by bands of connective tissue) than women's.

Men's magazines also had more articles (44 percent) about building arm muscle than women's magazines (23 percent). This research findings is similar to previous

studies which have found that men are more likely than women to be directed to enhance upper-body muscularity (Dworkin and Wachs 2009). Magazines presented muscular arms to men as important markers of fitness, masculinity, and attractiveness. Women were told that “toning” their arms would make them more attractive, but toning was distinct from bulging biceps favored by men. Women’s articles were much less likely than men’s articles to contain workouts focusing on chest muscle development: only 18 percent of women’s articles mentioned the chest compared to 43 percent of men’s.

Dworkin and Wachs (2009) found that women’s magazines focused more on the lower body than men’s magazines. However, in this analysis, the women’s and men’s magazines had similar percentages of articles on developing leg muscles: 22 percent and 25 percent, respectively. While this does not necessarily mean that leg muscle is equally as important to men as to women, it does indicate that men’s magazines incorporated leg workouts at rates similar to women’s magazines. Magazines suggested that men should focus more on their legs than they have traditionally: “You shouldn't neglect a single inch of your body. That goes double for the legs, a body part that plenty of men either train just once a week or simply ignore.”<sup>184</sup> Another article castigated men with under-developed leg muscles: “Most guys neglect their legs. . . . If you want to run down the beach on more than a pair of toothpicks this summer, we've got a routine that will bring your legs up fast.”<sup>185</sup> This is further evidence of a cultural shift in which men are being encouraged to pay more attention to their appearance and that it is becoming socially acceptable for them to do so.

Women’s magazines were only slightly more likely to have buttocks workouts than men’s magazines (22 percent versus 17 percent). This similarity is somewhat

surprising, as other research has suggested that women, rather than men, are typically encouraged to think of this area of the body as a “problem area” that needs constant scrutiny and maintenance (Dworkin and Wachs 2009). However, bodily standards change over time; this finding may reflect a specific cultural moment in which men and women are being encouraged to scrutinize their bodies in similar ways. It is also indicative of the tension between the old masculine ideals (bulging muscles and veins) and the new narcissism (paying attention to the look of your buttocks).

I applied Dworkin’s and Wachs’s (2009) coding methodology and found that the men’s magazines I analyzed did indeed contain more articles on the upper body (22 percent of strength-training articles) than the lower body (8 percent) but that women’s magazines contained only slightly more articles the lower body (19 percent) than the upper body (15 percent). These differences were smaller than expected. The lack of a substantial difference suggests a different pattern than what Dworkin and Wachs observed.

This may be further evidence of shifting gender roles in which women’s roles are changing faster than men’s, as has been suggested by Hochschild (2003). Along with these shifting expectations for women, my research provides evidence that associated body ideals are also changing. The more substantial focus on women’s upper bodies might indicate a greater cultural acceptance of women’s musculature and physical strength in concert with greater acceptance of their entry into professions and roles historically considered masculine.

Men’s body ideals also appear to be shifting; the 2011 men’s magazines in this analysis emphasized the lower body much more than in the magazines from 1979-2002

analyzed by Dworkin and Wachs (2009). More than half of men's articles specifying an area of the body (64 percent) and 60 percent of women's articles specifying an area of the body focused on a combination of upper and lower body exercises. My analysis also suggests that both men and women are increasingly encouraged to pay attention to all areas of their bodies. However, an alternative explanation may be that the science driving the fitness industry is promoting a total-body approach to strength training. If this is the case, it may signal the influence of physical therapy expertise or new theoretical approaches to exercise.

Given the association of muscularity with masculinity, women's fitness magazines acknowledged that pursuing a fit look produces some gender anxiety. For example, some women expressed concern that lifting weights would make them overly muscular, rather than helping them achieve the toned but lean ideal. In one article, gym owner and trainer Joe Dowdell reassured readers: "Don't make the mistake of thinking that training for power will make you bulky. . . . It's not true. Some of the women with the best physiques train that way."<sup>186</sup> Interviews with personal trainers and group instructors also identified this theme. As Watts (2011) demonstrated, "too much" muscularity was perceived as masculinizing for women; women pursuing "fitness" need to maintain femininity by avoiding "bulking up"—becoming too muscular.

One women's article claimed: "Sculpted arms are the hallmark of a fit body."<sup>187</sup> This statement seemed gender-neutral, but the same article went on to claim that muscles themselves could be gendered: "These moves will give you toned yet feminine muscles that you'll love to flaunt." Women were assured in another article that exercise would improve their appearance and make their body more sexually appealing: "Make this

water workout part of your summer fitness regimen and you—and your sleek, toned bod—will heat up every pool party you go to!”<sup>188</sup>

My findings provide support for the argument that culture significantly influences body ideals and how individuals should attempt to attain them (Bordo 1993; Dworkin and Wachs 2009). The influence of culture on bodily practice is critically important, over and above whatever innate natural differences might exist (Dworkin and Wachs 2009). The focus on fitness as looks makes sense in a culture in which appearance is increasingly important (Shilling 1993; Witz et al. 2003; Wolkowitz 2006), that is focused on preventative health care (healthism) and in which youth is highly valued (Halliwell, Dittmar, and Orsborn 2007).

### Changing the Body

Fitness magazines—and the fitness industry as a whole—objectified the body. Fredrickson and Roberts defined objectification as “the experience of being treated *as a body* (or collection of body parts) valued predominantly for its use to (or consumption by) others” (1997:174). Objectification of the body is not necessarily sexual, although many studies have focused on the effects of sexual objectification such as Goffman’s (1979) and Jhally’s (2009) analyses of gender and advertising, among others (Bordo 1999; Hatton and Trautner 2011; Kang 1997). In this section, I discuss how magazines objectified the body in both sexual and nonsexual ways.

Both photographs and text focused on specific body parts rather than on the whole person. This narrow focus is an indication of objectification and is one of the criteria that Heldman’s (2012) and Jhally (2009) have used to identify when objectification is occurring. For example, some photographs accompanying articles

depicted only one area of the body cut off from the whole. This focus on disembodied body parts typically erases the individuality of the person, often by excluding the face, and presents the body parts as commodities—interchangeable objects.

Another aspect of objectification is the way in which bodies were represented visually. The purpose of these images might have been to: (1) provide visual instruction on how to perform exercises described in articles; (2) illustrate the appearance promised as a result; or (3) motivate readers. Regardless of intent, the bodies were treated as objects used to serve a function, rather than as individuals and persons. The models were literally objects—ideal bodies represented as if for consumer purchase. Models were treated as interchangeable—their importance was to demonstrate form and technique. A diagram, illustration, or different model could have replaced them. Nevertheless, they were eye-catching and covered large portions of the pages.

The text of articles similarly targeted specific areas of the body for improvement rather than the whole person. For example, one article promised a workout focused specifically on the buttocks (“Sculpt your backside. This tush-targeted workout takes the science of how to tone the three muscles in the glutes to the maximus.”<sup>189</sup>). Other articles provided individual exercises to address even more specific problems: “To shape more curves, try the Lift It! Trio. Tighten your rear with the Shrink It! Moves. Got saddlebags? Focus on the Trim It! Section.”<sup>190</sup> In one magazine for women, articles specified which body parts were “targeted” by each exercise. For example, the exercise move called “Strap-Happy Shaper” was said to target “shoulder, upper and middle back, abs” in a workout that promised to “sculpt smoking arms and banish bra-strap bulge with these targeted shapers.”<sup>191</sup>

It is unclear how the reader was intended to “read” the images of objectified bodies. Male models in men’s magazines were often photographed wearing only shorts. The lack of clothing and the focus on the body were similar to the ways media commonly portray women, providing the reader a voyeuristic experience in which the model’s body can be scrutinized, compared to one’s own, admired, and even desired. The accompanying text encouraged readers to desire the bodies in the photographs. Although not explicitly sexual, it was (perhaps intentionally) unclear whether a male reader was intended to feel desire for the body merely because he wanted his own body to approximate it, or because he was actually intended to find that type of body sexually desirable.

Magazines attempted to resist the homoeroticism of men looking at other men’s bodies by relying on heteronormativity and hegemonic masculinity, but the tension was there nonetheless. While models were in many ways overtly coded as traditionally masculine (broad shoulders, defined muscles, stern expression, direct eye contact), there was still blurring when it came to sexual desire. In fact, models in men’s fitness magazines were depicted in many ways like models in gay men’s magazines. In gay men’s magazines, sexual appeal is often emphasized by oiled bodies, hairlessness, and lack of clothing (Carter and Stooksberry 2013). Ostensibly, the shirtlessness in fitness magazines provided proof of muscles in action to suggest the workouts’ effectiveness. Nevertheless, the models’ bodies were objectified (note how the head was cropped in Illustration 12; a common practice in portrayals of women). Similar findings in media have been observed by Bordo (1999) and Buchbinder (2013).

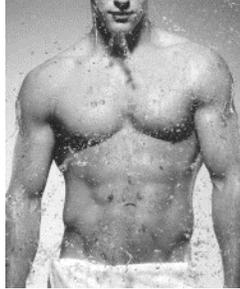


Illustration 12. Objectification of Men<sup>192</sup>

These tensions evoke questions about the contemporary perception of gender and sexuality. Rohlinger (2002) argued that notions of masculinity and the depictions of masculinity in media have continued to change in response to both the gay liberation movement and economic incentives to sell self-care products to men. He suggested that “as homosexuality is increasingly viewed as a legitimate lifestyle, advertisers step up the imagery they disseminate in the mainstream” (2002:65). The combination of these factors results in the proliferation of sexualized, objectified images of men.

Magazines repeatedly promised both men and women that they could shape their bodies to conform to societal ideals. This implies that not only is the body an object, but it is one that can be modified towards a desired end. For example, one of the men’s magazines had a poster series titled “The Body You Want”<sup>193</sup> instructing readers how to achieve the look in its accompanying photographs. Women were told they could “shape sexy muscles” and follow the workout plan “for a hot body.”<sup>194</sup> Similarly, in an article entitled “Built for the Beach,” men were instructed how to “sculpt a better body.”<sup>195</sup>

The language used indicated the body was malleable and improvable; the phrases “build a barrel chest”<sup>196</sup> and “carve out that surfer physique”<sup>197</sup> illustrate this point.

Magazines perpetuated mind-body dualism in which the body was controllable through

the exertion of mind over matter. For example, one article stated: “The body can do incredible things as long as the mind supports it.”<sup>198</sup> The implication in such articles was that individuals have agency and control over their bodies. Also implied was that *every* person could (and should) control and change his/her body.

In interviews, a number of respondents also endorsed the belief that the body is malleable. Editor and trainer Rebecca said that it is possible to change your “physique”: “You can change your body and you can make it look how you want it to . . . [with] the right program and a little bit of effort.”

Magazine articles rarely acknowledged limitations to body improvement. Readers were promised that they could sculpt an ideal body, regardless of their current weight, gender, shape, bone structure, time demands, or physical limitations. Only a few articles identified practical limits to the ability of any one person to achieve what she desires. In one rare instance, the article’s expert explained: “‘People say, ‘I want her butt,’ but you can’t have it, and you shouldn’t want it,’ Dr. Marango says. ‘Instead, within your own structure, maximize what you have.’”<sup>199</sup> Similarly, the title of the article series “Sculpt *Your* Best Body Ever” (emphasis added) suggested that each reader must necessarily work within the limits of her own body potential. However, most articles seemed to defy restrictions, suggesting that everyone could change their metabolism, weight, and muscularity, among other things. For example, Joe Dowdell, *Fitness* advisory board member, claimed in one article that following a three-month P90X program is “enough time to completely change your body composition.”<sup>200</sup>

Defining fitness as appearance presupposes that the body is an object on display for others to judge. Thus, magazines posited that a key reason to engage in exercise and

other fitness activities was to ready the body for exhibition. Four themes emerged that centered on being seen and evaluated by other people: (1) preparing the body to be seen at particular times; (2) producing a sexually appealing body; (3) maintaining a youthful appearance; and (4) losing weight.

A strong seasonal effect was observed; articles in the spring drew attention to the need to prepare for having one's body on display in a swimsuit. Men were encouraged to work on their bodies in order to look fit—meaning muscular and strong—when they were at the beach (as stated succinctly in the article's title, "Built for the Beach"). A corresponding article for women was entitled "Bikini Body Countdown."<sup>201</sup>

Trainers also mentioned that clients used fitness to prepare their bodies for display at particular times. Respondents Tanya, a personal trainer and life coach, and Spencer, director of campus recreation at a large university, noted a seasonal pattern to gym memberships in which membership levels spike in January, presumably due to New Year's resolutions. Personal trainer Amy provided the example of a client who told her, "My mother's wedding is in three months; I need to get my arms looking good."

How fitness for sexual appeal was described also was strongly gendered. Women's magazines told women which exercises would make them look "sexy" and "hot." However, men's magazines, even when the reason to look fit was to enhance sexual appeal, did not identify the look of muscles as "sexy" or tell them to work out to "be hot." Men's magazines used the words "sexy" and "hot" to describe women, not to direct how men should look: further evidence of objectification of women and gendering of fitness.

A third theme of fitness-for-evaluation was improving bodies to make them look younger. In fact, articles claimed that looking fit is a way to “defy your age.”<sup>202</sup> “Saggy skin,” for example, supposedly could be alleviated by strength-training, because “skin looks more taut over supportive muscles.”<sup>203</sup> The theme of fitness in order to look young also appeared in interviews. Ben, a personal trainer, reported that he often was contacted by women when they reached a “milestone” birthday, like age 30 or 50. He reasoned that women reaching these culturally significant ages sought out fitness training in an attempt to hold onto their youth, or at least their youthful look. This focus on appearance illustrated a (Western) cultural aversion to aging and a rejection of bodies that look old (Halliwell and Dittmar 2003).

#### Societal Pressures: Fit Look Required of Practitioners

Given the high social capital associated with appearance, personal trainers and others engaged in the fitness field reported feeling pressure to embody the look of fitness in order to attract clientele and to be taken seriously. As program director Doris explained, the fit body is a “form of social power” that people in the fitness community value. Elizabeth, who had experience in personal training as well as in directing group fitness programs at a large university, explained that there is a “physical image of being a fitness professional” that produces pressure to look fit:

I feel like sometimes there is a standard that you need to maintain a certain level of physical appearance in fitness to be taken seriously .... “Well if you aren’t in shape, then how do you know what you are talking about?”

Joseph, another personal trainer, echoed this idea: “Being in this business I think I have to have the appearance.” He went on to explain that he had become more concerned

about looking fit as he had gotten older because he worried about attracting new clientele.

Daphne, a group instructor, related the story of an acquaintance in the fitness industry:

There is a professional trainer that I know who is struggling now that she has totally overworked her body for 50 years. . . . She is starting to have the effects of that and she can't do stuff. . . . Her whole identity and worth is tied up in this—the way she physically presents [herself] and how her clients have seen her in this physical presentation . . . where do you turn to for help with that? It is certainly not within the fitness industry because there are younger, leaner, hungrier personal trainers that are ready to just jump right in there.

These findings support the claim that the fit look is a specific form of capital: body capital (Bourdieu 1984; Wacquant 1995a). Personal trainers earn body capital by embodying the fit look, which helps establish their authority and credibility in the fitness industry (Hutson 2013). The focus on appearance as a component of fitness necessitates constant body scrutiny and work, especially by those who desire to be seen as experts within the fitness field. The implications of this focus are numerous: in addition to the assumption that the fit body is a symbol of health and morality, the fit body also symbolizes fitness authority and legitimacy (Hutson 2013). These resources may be unequally distributed by social status and the burden of body scrutiny may be felt more strongly by women, as suggested by Bordo (1993).

## Influences of Feminism on Fitness Discourse

The feminist ideal of empowerment has influenced the fitness industry. Women are encouraged to empower themselves through fitness. For example, *Shape*'s 2013 media kit statement stated that the magazine's mission is to "empower women to live life to its fullest." Discourse like this may assist in breaking down some of the traditional barriers that have historically prevented women from exercising and pursuing fitness and sports. Likewise, women's magazines also encouraged women to take time for themselves without feeling guilty. For example: "I made myself a priority. . . . After years of taking care of others, this reader is finally focusing on herself. . ." <sup>204</sup> references the gendered aspects of caregiving and that many women do feel guilty about taking time for self-care. Other articles, however, reinforced hegemonic gender roles by suggesting that by taking care of themselves by exercising, women could better care for others.

Other examples of the influence of feminist rhetoric on fitness discourse were the articles and trainers advising women to empower themselves by becoming stronger physically and mentally. For example, personal trainer Ben explained that many of his female clients "love the idea of being strong" and watching their strength increase. Even so, contradictions persist: The message in one article that women can be strong and still be feminine was undermined by use of the phrase "man up" <sup>205</sup> suggesting that women can be powerful only by becoming like men.

The interpretation of this apparently "feminist rhetoric" should proceed cautiously. A close reading of the text and examination of images shows how feminist ideals—like female empowerment—were subverted in fitness discourse by perpetuating the focus on women's appearance, traditional gender roles, and gender polarization.

Even though the fit look encompasses looking “strong,” the empowerment rhetoric has not changed the social pressures on women to focus on their appearance. For example, one article reassured readers—using empowering language—that building muscle as a woman is regarded as ideal: “(remember all the buzz surrounding Michelle Obama's shoulders and biceps?). They tell the world you're not the least bit afraid to pump a little iron -- and that you like to look strong!”<sup>206</sup> Although this article encouraged women to build strong, muscular arms that seem to be admired publically, the focus on how women’s arms look did nothing to challenge the paramount importance of women’s appearance. Therefore, although telling women to look strong may seem to coincide with feminism’s goals of female empowerment, it is actually a kind of pseudo-feminism that does not contribute towards gender equality or changing gender roles. As research on the current “post-feminist” movement has suggested, feminist rhetoric has been incorporated into a neoliberal agenda promoting consumerism, individualism, and personal responsibility (Pomerantz, Raby, and Stefanik 2013; Taft 2004).

Other research has suggested that when women engage in activities that display their bodies, there is the potential for sexual empowerment (Regehr 2012). Participating “in sport, exercise, and physical activity can increase women’s physical competence, perceptions of a competent self, and . . . empowered experience of their bodies” (Liimakka 2011:444). Research studies on recreational burlesque, pole dancing, and sex work, women reported experiencing empowerment through their bodies, rather than feeling objectified or victimized (Barton 2002; Regehr 2012; Whitehead and Kurz 2009). Although physical activity may foster individual empowerment, it “does not seem to enhance women’s critical awareness or women’s collective empowerment” (Liimakka

2011:444). Researchers also note that the individual-level experience of empowerment may occur alongside—and perhaps contribute to the perpetuation of—societal-level oppression (Regehr 2012; Strelan, Mehaffey, and Tiggemann 2003).

Body positivity is not necessarily linked to attainment of hegemonic beauty ideals. For example, Bernstein observed that middle-class sex workers developed body-positive approaches to sexual labor by idealizing the “pleasure-seeking, pleasure-deserving, sensuous female body” (2007:98–101). Unlike workers in the upper tiers of the industry, workers in the middle reported that “doing sex work became an occasion for developing an acceptance of their own bodily deviations from the mass-mediated ideal” (Bernstein 2007:100). Perhaps for a segment of the population, fitness can also produce bodily pleasure and appreciation (of a variety of body types) without conforming to the mainstream body ideals. However, body work aimed at producing hegemonic beauty ideals may be a necessity for those in other contexts as a job requirement or social-status-related expectation. Access to narratives of body positivity and acceptance may be limited, especially by social class.

Overwhelmingly, the message in magazines was that readers should not be satisfied with their current state. Occasionally, the publications I studied appeared to promote self-acceptance. For example, one women’s article suggested: “It’s exhausting when you’re always critical of yourself. Just love who you are!”<sup>207</sup> In another article, after training for a marathon, one woman said, “I have a new appreciation for the body I seemed to see only flaws in before.”<sup>208</sup> While the message was encouraging—she had learned to think positively about her body—the only reason she was able to do so was by

getting in shape while training for a long-distance run. The underlying message was that one can only accept and feel proud of one's body once it is fit.

Body acceptance poses an interesting paradox for fitness magazines. It is necessary, albeit contradictory, to simultaneously make the readers feel good *and* bad about their bodies. On the one hand, fitness magazines know that they need to help readers feel good about themselves; they will not buy a magazine that is too discouraging. On the other hand, they need readers to experience a degree of dissatisfaction with their current bodies so that they will continue to purchase the self-help advice promulgated by the publication and the products offered by its advertisers.

The women's empowerment discourse poses a similar paradox. Developing feelings of self-empowerment and efficacy may be beneficial regardless of whether the source is in one's looks (attaining the "fit look" or losing weight) or sexuality. However, some researchers suggest that if approximating hegemonic beauty ideals is the predominant means by which women can access feelings of power, then self-empowerment discourse has merely been co-opted to perpetuate the current gender order (Jhally 2009; Pomerantz et al. 2013; Strelan et al. 2003). Furthermore, just as various forms of sex work can be exploitative for some women and liberating for others, it may be that pursuing appearance-based fitness goals may have various effects for different women (Bernstein 2007; Regehr 2012).

I identified what I consider evidence of a cultural backlash or resistance to feminism and female empowerment. For example, in spite of fitness magazines' utilization of feminist rhetoric, text and photographs in both men's and women's magazines repeatedly sexually objectified women's bodies. Women were encouraged to

be fit in order to be sexually attractive to men, while men were encouraged to pursue women who were sexy. An article providing dating tips to men, for example, advised that when pursuing an athlete, men should “appeal to her vanity” by telling her “how attractive you find her muscles.”<sup>209</sup> Commenting on her body “shows that you understand and value what she’s doing.” In reality, it reduces her personhood and treats her as an object. While objectification is not necessarily harmful, the effect was more insidious when objectification was accompanied by other advice suggesting that dating an athlete is simply a means to an end. The same article suggested dating an athlete for only the man’s benefits: “spandex,” “better sex,” and the possibility that “you might lose your own gut in the process.”

Little queering of gender was evident in the magazines I analyzed. In attempting to explain the persistence of gender polarization, Dworkin and Wachs (2009) and Buchbinder (2013) explore whether or not polarization is caused by a “crisis of masculinity.” Dworkin and Wachs argue that the gender differences in fit body ideals and the imagery associated with hegemonic masculinity is evidence that men are experiencing a crisis in which they feel the need to maintain their position in the gender hierarchy by differentiating themselves from women. Buchbinder (2013) adds to this discussion by arguing that the notion of a crisis of masculinity is overly simplistic and ignores the many shifts in gender roles and expectations that have given rise to many moments of cultural anxiety about the status of masculinity. Therefore, while it may be accurate to suggest that gender polarization within the fitness field represents a response to anxiety among men, this particular historical moment must be placed in the context of an ever-changing gender system.

There was even evidence of a backlash against gender convergence in some of the men's magazines analyzed. This occurred primarily when magazines stressed that any and all weakness must be overcome, advising readers to pursue a form of masculinity that rejected any taint of femininity. For example, one article on bench pressing claimed: "Benching 225 is a rite of passage. When you can do it, it means you're starting to get strong; you're not a girly man anymore."<sup>210</sup> Similarly, a men's article acknowledged that: "You wouldn't be caught dead on the inner-thigh machine:" it is considered a machine for women<sup>211</sup>. Another article suggested that men should adamantly reject softness: "If you want to piss off Pau Gasol, try calling him 'soft.' Like a marshmallow. Or call him 'Pau-der' puff."<sup>212</sup> Magazines encouraged men to avoid being "weak," "injured," "skinny," "fat," and "skinny-fat."<sup>213</sup> These descriptors hinted at femininity and perhaps even homosexuality, both of which were either absent or actively rejected in men's fitness magazines.

### Summary

In this chapter, I described the fourth framing device—fitness as form—that magazines and respondents used to define fitness and present fitness information. I also presented my findings with respect to the extent to which this frame reinforced or challenged hegemonic concepts of gender, health, and ideal bodies. I found that fitness magazines overwhelmingly perpetuated gendered body ideals, endorsed a narrow definition of fitness, and promoted body surveillance.

Gendered body ideals were evident throughout the text and in the choice of images. This was especially evident in the discussion of musculature—how much and where it was deemed appropriate were very different for men as opposed to for women.

There were marked differences in the portrayal of the fit woman versus the fit man, although both tended to objectify the body and emphasize the importance of appearance.

The objectification of both men's and women's bodies in fitness magazines raises at least two key questions. First, does objectification of bodies—especially sexual objectification—always have negative consequences for women? Second, if men are also being objectified and sold “bodily problematization,” does this affect them in the same ways that it has been thought to affect women?

Jhally (2009) noted that it is the lack of diversity in images of women that is the real problem: if women were represented in a wide variety of depictions, a little sexual objectification would not be as harmful. For example, if women's magazines used photographs of female athletes or fitness models that were not scantily clad and were less obviously “made-up” with cosmetics and perfect hair-dos, it would suggest that the pursuit of fitness is not just for appearance and sexual appeal. Therefore, whether or not women can be agentic and self-empowered even if they objectify themselves is perhaps not the key issue. Rather, it is that media images that portray objectification as the only way in which women can be agentic and empowered may cause women to feel they need to objectify themselves.

With respect to the consequences of objectifying men's bodies, Dworkin and Wachs (2009) suggested that men still retain subjecthood to a greater degree than women. Following the Western philosophic notion of a subject/object dichotomy, men have often been understood as subjects and women as objects. Haug (1999), however, argued that women experience the “subjective-aspects-within-being-as-object.” In other words, there are subjective experiences in the production of an identity in which one objectifies

oneself. In other words, women's objectification through fitness may produce pleasurable subjective aspects, such as the production of identity and subjecthood even as they strive to meet current cultural ideals. Building upon Haug's theory, Dworkin and Wachs suggested that men experience parallel "objective aspects-within-being-as-subject" (2009:33). That is, men's objectification still symbolizes their subjecthood and male power, in spite of matrices of domination which produce divergent experiences for subordinate masculinities (Hill Collins 1990). For example, although men's bodies in fitness magazines were displayed as objects, they were muscular bodies that evoked power and its attendant independence.

All in all, fitness magazines overwhelmingly reinforced the importance of gender in regard to fitness, but also as a social system. Indeed, the very existence of different fitness publications for men and women suggests how widespread and deeply seated the gender dichotomy remains.

Commercial interests undoubtedly influence the social conception and presentation of "fitness" and "health" in the publications I analyzed. Competition for readers is keen and advertising revenues are closely related to readership. To appear balanced and reader-friendly, magazines incorporated "politically-correct" ideas such as body acceptance discourse and female empowerment. Pomerantz et al. (2013) describe to this marketing strategy as "pseudo-feminist branding" (p. 189); principles such as empowerment have been co-opted for commercial ends, discourse that "equates consumerism and hypersexuality with liberation and individualized freedom" (p. 187). Fitness magazines overwhelmingly reinforced hegemonic gendered body ideals and presented no serious debate or challenge of the status quo. Since magazines are

commercial enterprises that need to appeal to a broad, mainstream, national audience, it is not surprising that they did not evidence more radical or queer notions of gender or challenge the importance of appearance.

## CHAPTER 8

### DESIRED CHANGES TO FITNESS

As I have shown, fitness was defined in different ways by different respondents in the field, depending on the agent's position, habitus, and personal agenda. Not surprisingly, given the range of perspectives, respondents were critical of some of the prevailing paradigms about fitness. They expressed the desire for changes in the fitness industry and in the definition of fitness as understood by the public.

In this chapter, I describe the changes desired by respondents and show how what the respondents feel needs to be changed revealed their underlying beliefs, assumptions, and dispositions (habitus) as well as the current doxa of the fitness field. Respondents who shared a similar habitus tended to share similar frustrations with the current state of the field; differences in habitus produced divergent opinions. Individuals whose habitus is "out of sync" with the prevailing doxa of a field experience frustration and feel out a place, which Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992) termed hysteresis. People experience hysteresis when there is a transformation in the individual's habitus without corresponding changes in the field's doxa or vice versa. Hysteresis also occurs when there is a mismatch between habitus and field because "the structuring of [one's] habitus does not match that of the social context" or logic of the field (Grenfell 2012:56). The experience of *hysteresis* may expose, and potentially even challenge, the doxa of the field. According to Bourdieu:

The dominated classes have an interest in pushing back the limits of *doxa* and exposing the arbitrariness of the taken for granted; the dominant classes have an interest in defending the integrity of doxa, or, short of this, of establishing in its place the necessarily imperfect substitute, orthodoxy.

. . . straight, or rather *straightened*, opinion, which aims, without ever entirely succeeding, at restoring the primal state of innocence of doxa. (Bourdieu 1977:169)

Thus, within the fitness field, those who benefit least from the current structure of the field are most likely to suggest changes to the fitness industry.

I identified three recurring themes that indicated mismatch between respondents' habitus and the doxa of the field: (1) Fitness should be about more than just appearance or weight loss; (2) Fitness should be perceived as a life-long endeavor; and (3) Fitness should be made accessible to everyone, not just the affluent, already fit, or slender. Each of these is discussed below. I argue that the dissatisfaction with how fitness is currently defined suggests the continuing evolution of the field and the need for continued attention to fitness as a social construct.

#### Fitness Should Not Just Be about Appearance or Weight Loss

Nine of the 24 respondents said that they would like people to stop equating fitness with the ideal appearance of the body—one of the most prevalent themes in fitness magazines. This concern was voiced almost exclusively by respondents: few articles articulated alternatives to the definition of fitness as physical attractiveness. This view was also expressed only by women respondents; none of the men critiqued the association between fitness and looks. I suspect that this reflects the historically greater importance of women's appearance and women's feelings of pressure to look fit. Among respondents, Health At Every Size® practitioners were the most likely to express this critique (6 of the 9 respondents) and to provide the strongest critiques, although a number of others also expressed criticism of the "fitness as form" paradigm. Of the nine respondents who indicated that fitness should not be about looks, three were program

directors, four were trainers or group instructors, one was a professor and researcher, and one was a physical therapist.

These findings are consistent with the observation that the “fitness as appearance” and anti-fat bias are strongly gendered. The failure of magazines to challenge the appearance paradigm is consistent with their need to attract and retain advertisers, many of whom market grooming and other products designed to enhance appearance and promote weight loss.

Respondents were careful to distinguish between the look of fitness and what they perceived as actual fitness, which had more to do with physical capacity and a healthy, well-rounded approach to exercise. Although they recognized that the fit body symbolizes health, they also pointed out that the fit look was not necessarily fit or healthy (see Jutel & Buetow (2007)). Jessica, a group fitness instructor, for example, distinguished between looking fit and behaving in ways that indicate a fit lifestyle:

I don't think anyone could look at me and say I'm not fit. But if I stood next to [my friend] and someone said, “Which one of these two is the more fit?” people are going to pick her nine times out of ten. Like, if all you did was look at our bodies and ask no other questions, people would pick her. Now if you got to ask ten questions, like lifestyle kind of things, I would win.

It frustrated Jessica that people judge each other's fitness based solely on looks because she believed that behavior was more important. Many respondents voiced similar opinion that looks shouldn't matter as much as they did. Like Jessica, program director Brittany argued that what people do was more important than how they look: “To be fit you don't have to be rail thin or a total hard body. I'd want people to realize that fitness isn't all rock hard abs. It is doing what's right for your body.”

If fitness were defined by functionality and capacity without regard to appearance, respondents reasoned, then a wider range of bodies would be recognized as being fit. Indeed, health and fitness instructor Daphne pointed out that there are people who are heavy but who nevertheless have high levels of strength and endurance, such as Olympic weight-lifters or shot-putters. Similarly, Daphne argued that athletes in wheelchairs may not meet the hegemonic fit body ideal portrayed in fitness magazines, but they are nevertheless fit.

Respondents voiced concern that the fit look was part of a larger process in which our culture socialized people, especially young women, to obsess about their appearance. Doris, a program director, argued that people were taught to look at their bodies “from the outside” and to think of the body as “a source of potential social humiliation.” Doris and other respondents were vehement that judging people based on their body size is a form of discrimination that fosters a culture conducive to body image, eating, and compulsive exercise disorders.

Another problem that respondents identified with “fitness as form” was that appearance-based judgments may actually discourage—rather than encourage—people to exercise, actually creating a barrier to fitness. Program director Alexis said, “That is what I would change about the industry: that you don’t have to lose those ten pounds before you come to the gym.” Like Alexis, respondents who wanted to make fitness accessible for people of all body sizes identified intimidation as a major barrier and felt that exercise environments needed to be non-judgmental, safe spaces. Many respondents described the gym as a place where people felt judged by their bodies and abilities, which

deterred people from exercising. Personal trainer Tanya argued that contemporary gyms and health clubs “are for the fit who want to be fitter.”

Even within the fitness magazines, which overwhelmingly celebrated the fit look, there were occasional suggestions that equating fitness with appearance could be problematic. As the following article quote suggested, the fit look could be intimidating to those who do not feel that their own bodies measure up: “For years I’ve let my insecurity about my muffin top and hip bulges keep me from working out in public. Being surrounded by fit women makes me feel envious of their bodies and completely hopeless about my own.”<sup>214</sup>

Another change that respondents believed is necessary is greater recognition of structural factors—that there is more to fitness than just individual responsibility. They proposed that spaces need to be created where all people feel welcome and that fitness needs to be redefined. HAES® respondents, in particular, felt they were contributing to the changes they wanted to see in fitness. For example, Doris described the impetus that led her to create a body-positive, size-neutral exercise gym: “It was very much coming out of my concern that there was [*sic*] so few places that . . . higher-weight women were able to go and just . . . have some fun physical activity in a place where it wasn’t designed to change their body size and it wasn’t part of a diet and we weren’t gonna be weighed.” Like Doris, professor and researcher Erin wanted people to understand that “you don’t have to be young or extremely thin . . . in order to enjoy movement.”

The idea that all bodies could enjoy fitness and be fit came primarily from those who challenged mainstream messages of exercise being solely about pursuing weight loss and improved appearance, although a few examples of this perspective were discussed in

magazine articles as well. One article described the atmosphere at a center designed to help women enjoy being active:

The pulse of tribal drumming fills the air. Jeannie Troy, 48 and 220 pounds, dances wildly, pogo-ing like a punk rocker at a Green Day concert and shaking her sweaty hair. All around her, women--whose body sizes range from average to well over 300 pounds--grin as they get their groove on. This is what fitness looks like at Green Mountain at Fox Run, a center in Vermont for women determined to end their weight struggles. As the class breaks up, applause erupts and Troy grabs a towel. Her face is bright red and her extra-large purple T-shirt is blotched with sweat, but she's beaming. "I've finally learned to take to heart that saying 'Dance like nobody's watching,'" she says.<sup>215</sup>

Personal trainers and program directors experienced a conflict of interests when a client's main goal was to improve appearance, since many felt they should not focus on appearance. In order to please their clients and retain their business, trainers had to resign themselves to being hypocritical (at once critiquing the focus on aesthetics and simultaneously helping clients pursuing it). For some trainers, this conflict was navigated by attempting to shift clients' attitudes about fitness away from weight loss and looks. Other trainers negotiated the potential tension by framing a focus on looks as simply a way to motivate clients and as secondary in importance to the health benefits of fitness. For some, a focus on looks was not problematic since they, too, were concerned with their appearance and desired the "right" look.

A closely related theme discussed by nine respondents who wanted to change the emphasis on appearance was that fitness should not be equated with weight loss. Not surprisingly, this view was most strongly expressed by the HAES® practitioners, but was voiced by other respondents as well. All of the respondents who argued fitness should not be about weight loss were women, and six of the nine were HAES® practitioners.

Some respondents explained that positioning fitness as weight control was a major barrier to exercise enjoyment. They argued that framing exercise as a means to lose weight prevented people from focusing on the embodied experience itself and prevented them from figuring out what physical activity was the most enjoyable rather than “most effective.”

Other respondents questioned the extent to which people can actually change their bodies. Elizabeth argued that the goal of attaining the ideal body was unrealistic for most people:

Let’s say if people had a fair amount of money and time to commit to it and resources to help them with other aspects . . . they could probably get kind of close, but it is not fully possible. Unfortunately . . . I feel that a lot of people have that desire or that unrealistic expectation that it is possible.

She cited media as the source of this unrealistic expectation. Group instructor Jessica also identified fitness trainers as contributing to the belief that anyone could attain the ideal body and therefore needed to exercise in order to lose weight and “wear a bikini.”

In spite of the common desire to shift fitness away from weight, respondents in the fitness field nevertheless faced difficulty in their work because their beliefs challenged the current paradigm. Frustration with the fitness industry’s focus on appearance and weight loss was nearly universal; attempts to present alternative paradigms were rare. Respondents who taught or did research on non-weight-loss-oriented fitness reported experiencing resistance and discrediting. Personal trainer Tanya’s experiences typify what it was like to question the established doctrine. Tanya firmly believed that fitness experts “need to teach people other ways to measure the benefits of exercise” besides weight loss. However, doing so was a constant challenge:

The biggest problem is convincing people that [even] if you don't lose a single pound, that exercise is incredibly healthy for all these other reasons. I would say that, unanimously, across the board, is the most difficult hurdle for people to overcome.

She related the story of one client who could barely walk when they began working together:

Her last day she . . . was walking without her cane. . . . And you know what she came in to tell me? That she is not going to continue seeing me anymore . . . that swimming and water aerobics does not burn fat and that she didn't know why she was still coming to see me.

Tanya explained that people measured her success as a trainer based exclusively on whether or not her clients lost weight: "They will say, 'Oh, [Tanya] is great but I didn't lose any weight when I was working with her.'" Not only did clients measure her success by weight loss, but medical professionals did as well, in spite of evidence that their well-being improved in other ways. For example, a client had blood work done that indicated a significant decrease in her triglycerides, blood pressure, and cholesterol, yet Tanya reported, "The doctor still said [to the client], 'I don't think you are seeing the right person because you are still not losing any weight.'"

Erin, a professor and researcher, reported similar experiences of discrediting and antagonism within the realm of academia:

When I do [other research], I have two or three editors vying for the article. . . . When I do stuff on Fat Studies, people raise their eyebrows. . . . I can go through five or six journals with really hostile comments by the reviewers. . . . And it would not have occurred to me to do my job talk on Fat Studies.

Personal experiences with weight control and body image shaped many of the respondents' orientations to fitness. Those who had lost weight due to exercise, like those in the success stories in magazines, viewed exercise as a means of maintaining

appearance and as the solution to unattractive body fat. People who reported that exercise improved their body image and self-confidence were less likely to be critical of “fitness as form.” For example, program director Brittany told me that she felt better about herself when she weighed less and was, according to her, in better shape. Self-confidence was a result, for some, of improved appearance while for others was a result of focusing on what the body can do rather than how it looks. Most women did not report feelings of pride or of self-confidence in their bodies until later in life and usually only after they redefined fitness as something other than looks. Ben’s clients, for example, told him how much better they felt about themselves as their strength improved.

Respondents whose struggles with weight were not “solved” by exercise sometimes reported redefining exercises’ purpose and their orientation to their bodies when they were faced with the reality that weight loss was not sustainable or desirable. For example, program director Doris recalled:

I’d gone through this 30-pound cycle, you know, back and forth and I didn’t feel like I thought I would feel. I felt kind of like, “What am I doing this for?” . . . I thought, “This can’t be good for my body . . . it’s got to be better for me [to] just stay at one place.”

Group instructor Daphne’s history of weight cycling was very similar to Doris’ and she also eventually reached a point at which she “got fed up” with “feeling like a failure.” Daphne connected with a specialist who introduced her to a “different paradigm where you appreciated and accepted your body the way that is was and you start to pay attention to what you are doing to take care of yourself from a health and wellness perspective.” With this new perspective, Daphne began working as a fitness instructor running educational programs for students, incorporating what she calls “fun fitness” into her

curriculum about body image, self-esteem, health, and well-being. Other critics of the “fitness as form” paradigm described their awareness of the prevalence of body image, eating, and exercise disorders in our culture as shaping their perspective, rather than direct personal experiences.

Respondents also described age as important in shaping their orientation to fitness. Respondents who had experienced the effects of age on their own bodies or in their work with clients were more likely to critique hegemonic definitions of fitness as appearance.

Thus, how people define fitness was frequently related to whether or not they were personally successful in achieving bodily change as a result of exercise. Even so, not all respondents who experienced bodily change or approximated the fit body ideal accepted “fitness as form.” Likewise, not all those who had struggled with weight or body image rejected fitness as form. Thus, embracing exercise for its physical effects results from both personal experience as well as exposure to cultural ideas about the effects of exercise through media and social interactions.

#### Fitness Should Be a Life-Long Endeavor

Respondents were emphatic that fitness should be an enjoyable, life-long endeavor. That contrasted with many of the fitness magazines’ portrayals of exercise—especially for men—as tough and even unpleasant. According to some respondents, achieving life-long fitness required a radical change in how exercise was perceived by the public; fitness should be seen as a fun leisure activity rather than an unpleasant obligation. For example, program director Doris proposed “recess” for all: children and adults alike. She believed that creating more opportunities for both children and adults to

spend more time out of their day in “recess” or playful activities would orient people towards enjoying physical activity and provide a host of other benefits.

For other respondents, re-conceptualizing fitness was less radical and more about finding some physical activity that was enjoyable to the individual. They indicated that once a person was exposed to exercising and began to make progress toward their personal goals, their attitude towards exercise would shift such that the pursuit of fitness would become more enjoyable. Program director Alexis, for example, believed that encouraging college students to engage in exercise they like would help them develop habits that they would keep for a lifetime. She explained: “Make it enjoyable and part of your life, you won’t stop doing it . . . if you like it you will keep doing it. If it is a negative, you are not going to keep doing it.” Likewise, another program director, Brittany, hoped that by introducing young girls to the idea that exercise could be fun, she could foster good life-long habits.

Respondents who shared the view that fitness should be about life-long engagement with exercise often had a history of enjoying sports or active hobbies in their youth. They credited these positive early experiences with shaping their outlook on fitness. The program directors I interviewed hypothesized that children carry early-formed orientations towards exercise into adulthood. They noted that program members who lacked experience with physically active hobbies or exercise activities were less likely to engage in exercise on their own. With increased exposure, some program members seemed to get excited and more involved. On the other hand, program members who perceived exercise as difficult or even as punishment (for example, for

being fat) were more likely to drop out, especially in the absence of encouragement from other sources.

Directors explained that developing an orientation to fitness (*habitus*) was a cultural and educational problem: when physical activity was consistently associated with negative experiences such as being unskilled, being punished, being embarrassed publically, or doing unfulfilling and uninteresting activities, it became an undesirable endeavor. Respondents believed that education systems and parents who forced exercise on children were likely to instill the idea that exercise was unpleasant and something to be avoided. Program directors believed that kids should be taught to be physically active in ways that encouraged a positive attitude toward—and enjoyment of—fitness.

Respondents also agreed that moderation was important for any exercise endeavor to be sustainable. There was consensus that exercise aimed at attaining the “fit look” may *not* be sustainable. For example, magazine editor Rebecca explained that even within the fitness model and body building communities, there was an understanding that most people do not sustain their physique year-round. Rachel concluded that it was unreasonable for the average person to expect to do so, and, she added, probably not very healthy, because of the extreme eating and exercise behaviors it required. Elizabeth also supported the idea that sustaining the fit look was not only difficult but also may be an unreasonable goal for most people. Of “people who look that way,” Elizabeth said:

(1) They have really good genes; and (2) They work really hard to do that and they sacrifice a lot of other things because that is what is important to them to do. . . . I don't think it is a sustainable lifestyle for a long period of time. For some people it is because they are wired that way, but most people aren't.

Ben wanted to change the perception of fitness as requiring extremism. He argued: “You don’t need to go through extremes to get there. . . . Slow and steady wins the race.” Ben explained that some of his personal training clients thought that extremes were more effective than a well-rounded, sustainable approach. He wanted to change their opinion:

I have had clients who . . . tried to do like two hours a day working out and then only eating like 1,000 calories and then when I tell them they only need to work out half an hour a day and less time during the week and eat more calories, they look at me like I have three heads and they don’t believe me. . . . Once people have tried that, it is hard to go back to something more well-rounded because they have tried an extreme and that didn’t work. So [they believe that] if the extreme doesn’t work nothing else will.

Not only did Ben believe that extreme behaviors were not sustainable, but he also did not believe they were effective. Rather, he argued that fitness required sustainable activity over a long period. Respondents who shared this habitus typically had experience working with older adults who were more focused on longevity and function than looks or competition.

Respondents emphasized the importance of adequate rest and recovery, further rejecting the idea that extreme exercise was always essential for fitness. They explained that fitness required balancing effort with restraint because it was possible to “overdo it.” Rebecca noted that the problem of “overdoing it” was often overlooked: “People sometimes take these things to extremes. . . . They’re training so much . . . that they can hurt themselves.” Magazines rarely mentioned the importance of moderation. Compulsive exercise, or over-exercise, was only discussed in a few articles, and only briefly. One such article stated:

Working out is clearly healthy, but too much activity can lead to overuse injuries . . . And a few avid gym-goers actually become addicted to exercise . . . “Compulsive exercisers often set up unrealistic goals and are tormented by anxiety when they don't meet them.”<sup>216</sup>

Another article on over-exercise provided advice to readers explaining how to judge if their training regimens were too hard (indications of overtraining include nagging injuries, lack of results, or losing weight when the attempt is to bulk up).

Fitness promotion was problematic because at one end of the spectrum, the sedentary segment of the population should be exercising more. At the other end of the spectrum, people can become compulsive about exercising. Neither extreme qualified as fitness, according to respondents. For example, personal trainer Tanya disliked popular fitness slogans which promoted extreme behavior:

There has been so much damage with the “no pain, no gain” philosophy and the “Just Do It”. To me those two are probably the most . . . psychologically destructive. “Just Do It” implies just get over yourself and get up and do it. And the “no pain” or “no gain” theory has been it has either got to be hard work or it doesn't count. . . . You don't have a laziness problem. You don't have a self-discipline problem. You do not have a motivation problem. The problem is the rules that you're trying to follow. That is the problem. And our culture sets us up to fail because there's a multimillion dollar business out there.

Thus, she considered body awareness to be an important skill. Tanya explained, “I'm trying to teach them to trust their body. I am trying to teach them to listen to their body.”

In doing so, she believed that her clients could develop a sense of when to push themselves and when to rest. Program director and group instructor Elizabeth had a similar perspective:

You don't have to feel awesome every day. You can have days where you are having a low-energy day and you need to listen to that and acknowledge that and be okay with that. Because the next day is a totally different opportunity to try it again and do something different and maybe

the next day will be better. . . . But so many people don't think that that it's okay to do that.

Like Tanya and Elizabeth, Ben said that “everything in fitness is ‘do in moderation.’”

This perspective seemed to be associated with respondents who have been working longer in the fitness field, perhaps reflecting the wisdom of experience.

Respondents who had formal academic or certification training reported that these had helped shape their understanding of fitness by emphasizing proper technique and safety—aspects of exercise that some respondents felt were not adequately emphasized elsewhere. Respondents suggested that proper fitness training should stress the importance of safety above and beyond aesthetics or other goals. Of the 24 respondents, 13 discussed safety. They were quick to critique improper form and unsafe exercise which they said were due either to lack of education or because the individual was focused on doing exercise for the wrong reasons.

Respondents often worried that trainers and other followers of new exercise trends such as CrossFit or Zumba were not properly following safety protocol. For example, Brittany expressed concern about whether or not the trainers leading the program she ran emphasized proper technique to the kids. She gave the examples of squats and explained the importance of proper form to prevent injury and the need to monitor kids, especially in CrossFit activities.

Respondents also suggested the proper training enables exercisers to safely modify exercises to their individual needs and abilities. Elizabeth credited her training with enabling her to adjust exercises and know her limits but worried that many people

lack this education. She does not believe that people know how to judge whether an exercise program is appropriate for them:

I think with home fitness you have to be really careful. . . . It depends on the education of the person who is going to be using it. . . . I know my limits and I know how to modify things. If they are showing me something that I know I can't do I know what I can do instead or how to adjust the exercise for me. . . . Not so much everybody else.

Thus, respondents felt that fitness training and education needs to change to prioritize safety and proper technique according to the latest research standards. Since standards and safety measures are subject to change, respondents also stressed that it was critical to stay “up to date” on the latest findings by reading journal articles, checking certifying organization websites, and maintaining certifications through recertification processes. In these ways, those who had attained formal education and training endorsed these routes to fitness knowledge as legitimate and as the means by which one could provide good exercise methods and advice. Respondents did not seem overly concerned that the standards were subject to change: rather, they indicated trust in the science behind the current safety recommendations, even as these recommendations had the potential to be overturned as harmful at some future date.

Another common complaint, especially among trainers, was the tendency of fitness magazines and fitness purveyors to promise “quick fixes”; they wanted to see the industry present a more realistic view. Even editor Rebecca criticized magazines because they “definitely draw attention to the quick fix schemes.” Program director and group instructor Elizabeth argued that there are no quick fixes and fitness was not easy: “It is never a quick fix. There is no pill out there that we can take as of yet.” She wished that “we would just try to stop telling people” that it was easy and instead “just make it

realistic for them and say, ‘If this is what you want, this is what needs to happen.’” Like Elizabeth, personal trainer Joseph emphasized that there were no quick fixes and added that our culture fostered this false belief:

It can take months and *years* for the benefit to be seen, which is—in our society everybody is—it’s way too long. We’re used to everything in 30 and 60 minutes . . . like on TV. . . . Or like the Biggest Loser, in 8 weeks everybody’s lost 100 pounds and it’s happily-ever-after. And it’s not like that at all.

While most respondents agreed that there are no quick fixes, not all respondents shared the same perspective on the difficulty of fitness or how long it would take to become fit. Amy, a personal trainer, was ambivalent: “Sometimes it takes a long time and it’s not instant gratification. Sometimes it is, sometimes it’s not.” Rebecca said that people “don’t understand how easy it can actually be and how quickly those changes can actually happen.” At the same time, however, Rebecca cautioned that suggesting results always occur quickly is a mistake. While she doesn’t want people to think that fitness is extremely difficult to attain, she suggested that setting reasonable goals is crucial:

People, you know, generally wanna throw themselves into your fitness or diet routine and that usually leads to their downfall 'cause we try to take on too much all at once. . . . If they would extend that timeframe and . . . adopt to a more, you know, moderate way of approaching it, they would be able to reach their goals. Frankly, it'll be a longer timeframe, but it'll be more sustainable.

Differences of opinion in how long it would take and how difficult it is to become fit may be due, in part, to divergent definitions of what fitness means. It is also likely that personal and professional experiences have shaped respondents’ perceptions.

#### Fitness Should Be Accessible to Everyone

Respondents also wanted to make exercise available to everyone by creating spaces where everyone can exercise, regardless of their current level of fitness or

socioeconomic status. This theme was identified by public program directors in particular (four of the eight), and by all Health At Every Size® practitioners. It probably reflects their direct experience with issues of access. Access to exercise opportunities is an intersectional issue involving class, race/ethnicity, gender, and urbanicity. Public program directors with whom I spoke identified low income urban areas, children, and girls as populations they could assist by providing safe and enjoyable areas in which to participate in programs that encourage physical activity. Particular issues raised by respondents included lack of previous exposure (know-how), lack of safe spaces (routes, parks, recreation centers, etc.), lack of wealth for equipment and/or coaching, lack of non-sport-related options, and lack of engaging and sustainable options. Kelly, who had been involved in the implementation of public programming intended to increase fitness in urban areas, reported that cultural and language barriers were additional impediments in one urban area; the project plans had not taken these into account.

Respondents identified the built environment as a structural impediment to fitness: barriers include the amount of time spent commuting in cars and jobs which require workers to sit at desks for long hours. Program director Doris believed that shifting the focus from individual choices to structural changes would be more effective in getting people to be physically active. Efforts should be focused on making it easier and more natural for people to move their bodies; creating environments “that are just incredibly inviting.” Doris emphasized that any large-scale plan to increase physical activity needs to take into consideration “social justice issue[s] that have to do with people’s environments not being supportive of human health . . . healthism, economic inequality, racism, poverty, pollution, access to health care.”

Brittany's concerns about accessibility were based on her observation that non-sports activities were not widely available to low-income urban populations, especially for adolescent girls. The social groups that her public programs target do not have the financial resources to afford personal training, exercise or sports equipment, or membership at facilities with adequate opportunities for physically active activities. Brittany's programs target two intersecting problems: the lack of access for low-income urban populations and gendered inequality of access.

The theme of access was rarely addressed by magazine articles, which were aimed mainly at readers with the time to exercise and the resources to buy their advertiser's products. One exception was as follows:

As the executive director of Healthyworks Community Fitness, a nonprofit fitness center founded by a health club chain in Boston, the 31-year-old certified trainer is focused on providing gym access to all women, regardless of income. Her two facilities offer free or extremely low-cost membership. One is actually located in a homeless shelter. What some might consider a superfluous activity for women in need of jobs, home and health care, Laurent sees as essential.<sup>217</sup>

While some articles suggested exercises that required no special equipment, these were typically geared toward readers who were traveling, rather than unable to afford equipment.

### Summary

In researching public discourses about fitness, I identified dissatisfaction with the prevailing paradigms. These critiques reflect examples of hysteresis as defined by Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992)—when individual habitus is in conflict with the prevailing doxa of the field. The mismatch was reflected in three specific changes desired by respondents: (1) Fitness should be about more than just appearance or weight

loss; (2) Fitness should be perceived as a life-long endeavor; and (3) Fitness should be made accessible to everyone.

The desired changes voiced by respondents are evidence of an on-going struggle over what fitness should ideally mean; as a social construct, fitness remains ambiguous. That respondents expressed hope for changing how fitness is understood points to the continuing evolution of the concept in our current cultural context. Further, it indicates that respondents believed that change is possible. This belief came across most strongly from trainers and program directors who had designed programs to achieve their desired changes. In spite of being up against a multi-billion dollar consumer industry, respondents hope to make a difference via grassroots social change.

Changes in the field are likely to align with the interests of the groups with the most social and economic capital. Although lay people can affect changes, as shown by Epstein's (1996) research on AIDS activists, groups with more capital tend to be more influential. It is likely that only those with sufficient capital will be able to effect change (see Saguy's (2013) work on debates over the meaning of fat). Thus, it is unlikely that the public perception of fitness will become less focused on weight loss (because interest groups like HAES® have relatively little economic capital) and more likely that those interested in expanding fitness to be accessible to wider populations and to be about longevity will prevail (because those groups, such as government-funded programs, have more economic capital). Bourdieu (1993) explained: "It is the struggle between the dominant and the aspirants, between those who hold titles (of writers, philosophers, scholars, etc.) and their challengers . . . that constitutes the history of the field" (p. 187). Although fields and associated forms of habitus do change over time, the process is slow,

especially because “a hierarchy of relations is established between different domains, the works and the agents having a varying amount of legitimizing authority” (p. 121). Thus, since HAES® practitioners have less legitimizing authority within the hierarchy of the fitness field, it is less likely that their definitions of fitness will achieve ascendancy. Furthermore, since HAES® practitioners challenge the doxa of the field, they are likely to experience resistance and be “pushed out” by field adherents who benefit from the status quo.

Nevertheless, I argue that the issues respondents raised, especially social justice concerns and the potential harms of current fitness promotion, should be taken seriously by both researchers and fitness field participants. Attention to the meanings of the term “fitness” as it evolves is a worthy field of sociological inquiry that will reveal the changing internal dynamics of the field.

## CHAPTER 9

### CONCLUSION

In this study I examined fitness as a field using content analysis of fitness media and interviews with a variety of fitness industry participants to address the following research questions: *Who are the knowledge producers and disseminators in the field of fitness? How do these opinion leaders support their arguments and stake claims for authority? What is fitness according to popular media and field experts? What discourses frame the dissemination of fitness information? To what extent do these discourses reinforce or challenge hegemonic concepts of gender, health, and ideal bodies?* The approach provided rich insight into the structure and logic of the field; the social construction of fitness; its promotion as related to gender, healthism, embodiment, and consumerism; and the types of habitus of those in the field.

#### Key Findings and Discussion

I first identified who popular fitness magazines presented to the public as experts, and how the magazines presented them. I then conducted interviews with people who were in key positions to transmit fitness knowledge to the public.

I found that the magazines' definition of fitness "expert" was very loose. It ranged from medical professionals and research scientists to owners of successful fitness businesses and people who had lost weight through exercise. Factors such as the writer's definitions of fitness and the objective of the article influenced who the magazines treated as an expert. My interviews reinforced this conclusion: respondents' perspectives on

who qualified as an expert varied depending on their habitus, position within the industry, training, and objectives.

I also found evidence of credibility struggles over the accrual of expertise—acknowledgement as a legitimate authority. Participants in any field characterized by competition try to adopt strategies in order to gain competitive advantage over others. In the fitness field, one source of competitive differentiation was to claim expertise, either as an individual seeking recognition or as an organization. Because fitness includes a large commercial component, recognition as an expert can be converted into economic capital in a number of ways which further intensifies the struggle for credibility.

Expertise provides competitive advantage in proportion to how difficult it is to establish. The higher the barriers to entry in any market, the greater the value for those who succeed in overcoming them (Porter 1985). Thus, the harder it is to accumulate the necessary social capital to be recognized as an expert, the more valuable is such recognition. The professionalization of other occupations, such as medicine and law, reflects the fact that “the greater the workers’ monopoly or social closure is around a specific form of work, the greater the economic and cultural rewards attached to that occupation” (George 2013:196).

The credibility struggles I observed in the fitness field indicate continuing professionalization of the field. These credibility struggles will likely continue as more players join the field and competition intensifies. New actors will attempt to redefine fitness to their advantage, new types of experts and expertise will emerge, and the playing field will change. If fitness continues to fall under the purview of health and biomedicine, strategies for claiming expertise will likely remain credentialing and citing

scientific studies. If the current neoliberal paradigm and its focus on personal responsibility persists, then being “fit” and helping others become “fit” will continue to produce legitimacy.

My analysis indicates that, at present, traditional credentials, academic and professional training, and specialized knowledge remain important criteria for claiming expertise, as evidenced by how often and how prominently they are emphasized by those who possess them. However, both Epstein (1996) and Saguy’s (2013) work demonstrate that “lay persons” can and do weigh in on scientific debates and influence the conversation around topics affecting the public. I also found instances in which “lay people” were able to influence knowledge, policy, and public practice by utilizing science as a tool, attaining the fit look, or achieving commercial success to position themselves as credible spokespersons in the fitness field. Such techniques were especially important to proponents of viewpoints that differ from the prevailing “fit or fat” dichotomy.

I conclude that fitness is still evolving as a field and, as such, is characterized by growing professionalism and ongoing credibility struggles. The result is that the public receives confusing, and at times contradictory, advice and information about fitness.

In addition to competition among individuals for recognition as experts, I also found evidence of competition for resources at the organizational (mezzo) and field (macro) levels. As such, I argue that fitness satisfies Bourdieu’s criteria for a field in which participants compete with one another for valuable resources (funding, social capital, clients) and over the boundaries and even definition of the field. At the field level, fitness jockeys with other fields to be seen as worthy of public attention and

funding. Field-level boundary work is especially evident when there is significant overlap between fields, such as between nutrition and fitness.

At the micro level of individual competition, I observed field participants using a variety of strategies to remain competitive, including claiming expertise, specialization, personalization or customization, and emotional labor. I hypothesized that agents' struggles to become or remain relevant in the ever-shifting terrain of the changing field influence the meanings of fitness and explain why there is so much variation in its definitions.

I argue that four large-scale social forces—the ascendancy of modern medicine and health, changes in labor and the economy, changing gender expectations, and the evolution of media—have contributed to the current constructs of fitness and that these roots are still evident in the ongoing evolution and struggles within the field. Although other macro forces have certainly contributed to the current state of affairs, I am not able to address them in the scope of this research. This analysis revealed the predominance of the health paradigm and the persistent power of the gender system, even as the specific manifestations of health and gender are changing.

I identified endogenous forces of the fitness field. Different participants in the field emphasized different aspects of fitness based on their personal or commercial goals, leading to the plurality of definitions as well as the evolution of the social conception of the term over time. I identified four main definitions of fitness: (1) fitness as function; (2) fitness as health; (3) fitness as obligation; and (4) fitness as form. Although I discuss each definition in turn, there is substantial overlap. For example, “healthism” is at the intersection of fitness as health and fitness as obligation.

### *Fitness as Function*

Definitions of fitness that focused on the function were mainly goal-oriented, although there was wide variation in desired goals. Age and gender influenced the type of functionality desired: functionality for everyday tasks was more important to older adults, functionality for competition and peak performance was more common in men's magazines than in women's. The competitive, athletic habitus was associated with the definition of fitness as supranormal performance.

The "fitness as lifestyle" habitus is developed through prolonged, positive experiences with physical activity. Respondents who had good experiences with exercise from a young age or who enjoyed the embodied feeling of fitness were more likely to conceptualize fitness as a lifestyle. Regardless of the type of function, respondents felt that most bodies could attain some form of functionality through fitness, irrespective of body size, shape, socioeconomic status, or age.

### *Fitness as Health*

Magazines and respondents universally assumed that fitness was a health-promoting activity. Fitness was presented as a panacea: in addition to directly causing improved physical and mental health, the promised benefits of fitness extended to social and economic realms. I argue that the definition of fitness as health reflects the contemporary U.S. context in which biomedical knowledge drives commercial, political, and social agenda. Scientific medical authorities continue to shape the concept of fitness, as evidenced by magazines' and respondents' frequent usage of science and biology to explain and promote fitness.

Interest in fitness has grown in conjunction with heightened concern over fatness, the desire for healthy citizenry and longevity, and the expansion of the commercial fitness industry. Attaching fitness to health makes sense when viewed in the context of competition for resources. The fitness field, and individuals within it, benefit because health is already highly valued. Fitness as health builds on healthism, which obliges individuals to pursue health. If fitness is positioned as important to health, then fitness, by extension, is also an important field, worthy of time, money, and attention.

### *Fitness as Obligation*

Fitness was framed as an individual choice and effort. Therefore, being fit was taken as an external marker of moral rectitude and self-discipline and has become a source of social capital. If one accepts that the body is an improvable object, then it follows that one has a duty to improve it; failure to do so indicates personal failure as well as an invitation for social sanction. I found many instances of language that invoked the idea that fitness indicated moral and social superiority. The conflation of fitness with morality dates to at least the “Muscular Christianity” movements of the mid-1800s and received additional impetus from the YMCA and YWCA, presidential campaigns to create good citizens who are “fit,” and the increasing dominance of healthism in a neoliberal times. Fatness was often contrasted to fitness. Obesity, therefore, indicates moral turpitude and was described in pejorative terms. There is a small, but vocal minority, such as Health At Every Size® practitioners, who challenge current ideas about fitness and health (especially the polar opposition of “fit” and “fat”). As body size continues to increase in the US, I anticipate that such voices will continued to challenge mainstream definitions of fitness, and contribute to an evolving definition.

Magazines in this analysis focused on personal obligation and relied on healthism to promote fitness. Even though exercisers are supposed to develop self-discipline, both magazines and experts acknowledge that motivational strategies are required. This further supports the idea that fitness is an obligation rather than a hedonistic activity. These findings complement and add to Dworkin and Wachs' (2009) and Smith Maguire's (2008) observations about discipline discourse in fitness media.

The framing of fitness as individual responsibility renders invisible the structural conditions that produce and reproduce health disparities and uneven power relations with fitness. These uneven power relations mapped onto both gender and class hierarchies and thus reify these differences. Fitness advocates often held a narrow understanding of fitness as a personal choice, ignoring social justice and structural concerns such as accessibility. The emphasis on personal choice—especially in the magazines which appealed to a relatively affluent audience—ignored the facts that many people lack the time, energy, facilities, or financial resources to pursue the fitness held up as ideal. The discourse of personal choice reveals a tendency to “blame the victim” without considering other causes or questioning either the desirability of fitness or the framing of fitness as a social imperative.

### *Fitness as Form*

I argue that one of the forces shaping the fitness field is the heightened attention to appearance resulting from both changes in the economy and the prevalence of media images. I concur with Dworkin and Wachs, who proposed that both men and women are increasingly constituted as objects and both are experiencing bodily dissatisfaction in postindustrial consumer culture (2009:7). In their analysis of fitness media, Dworkin and

Wachs concluded that both men and women are being sold “bodily problematization”—the solution to which is further purchases (2009:8). In other words, the body is portrayed as something to monitor and modify for others’ consumption. Some researchers have argued that men’s and women’s appearance, behavior, concerns, and consumption are converging (Bordo 1999; Buchbinder 2013; Rohlinger 2002; Shilling 1993). My analysis provides further evidence of gender convergence in this regard; both men and women were encouraged to monitor and scrutinize their bodies and to modify them to meet “fit” ideals.

I observed that while both men’s and women’s fitness magazines shared an emphasis on looks, weight loss, and the idea that the body is an object that could be improved, these gender similarities should not be misread as indicating gender equality or as a successful outcome of feminism. I found evidence of the resurgence of masculinism and antifeminism that Dworkin and Wachs (2009) argued proves men and women are not yet on equal ground. Similarly, my analysis supports Featherstone’s (2010) contention that women’s bodies are typically subject to greater scrutiny than men’s. He noted that men have been increasingly drawn into what he calls the “consumer culture body image game” (2010:202) in which appearance is of concern for men as well as for women. Encouraging men to scrutinize their bodies in a way traditionally expected of women is not a sign of gender progress.

Fitness magazines overwhelmingly reinforced and perpetuated gender stereotypes in the way they presented and discussed fitness. For example, men’s magazines often presented discomfort as essential and the ability to overcome it as achieving masculinity. This finding reflects the traditional mind-body dualism in which the dangers of the body

and its appetites are controlled by the civilized and disciplined mind. In the nineteenth century, women were thought to be more susceptible to bodily urges, unlike men who could control their bodies. As Buchbinder noted: “women have been constructed as coextensive with their bodies (they *are* bodies), whereas men are deemed to *use* their bodies . . . men have been defined as oriented toward reason and the will” (2013:123).

Magazines also encouraged women to discipline their bodies, but were more likely to provide strategies other than sheer willpower. While discipline and obligation discourse was directed to both men and women, the variety and volume of techniques presented to women seemed to suggest that not only are women more receptive than men to advice, but also that women need more instruction on how to submit the body to the mind. Thus, gender differences were reified. I hypothesize that these content decisions are driven by the commercial need of the magazines to attract and retain readers which causes editors to select articles, images, and messages that will appeal to pre-existing notations about gender, ideal body forms, etc. rather than “rock the boat” by presenting alternative points of view.

My analysis contributes to an understanding of how consumerism perpetuates the status quo. The persistence of gender polarization in fitness magazines indicates that in order to maintain their popularity, magazines are reluctant to stray too far from the current paradigm. While some progress has been made—mostly in the form of lip service to social movements such as female empowerment and body acceptance—fitness magazines presented no serious challenges to hegemonic body ideals or gendered ways of thinking about the body. It is likely that commercial interests and consumerism have contributed to a small degree to gender convergence in fitness ideals. Unfortunately, this

was most pronounced in selling men on the need to closely manage their appearance and treat the body as an object for display, rather than in de-emphasizing or queering gender.

All of the four definitions of fitness assume that the body is an improvable object. Overwhelmingly, the body was conceptualized as an object to be manipulated and shaped for particular ends, such as appearance, health, delayed aging, and so forth. Magazines, in particular, objectified the body and encouraged people's dissatisfaction with their bodies, regardless of how fit they already are, presumably to drive consumption of fitness products and services.

If the body is improvable, then "more is better." Magazines' and respondents' recommendations often concentrated on showing exercisers how to increase their workout frequency and effort (more is better). Of concern is the lack of balanced advice. Many articles and respondents never addressed how to schedule flexibility and "off" days for adequate recovery. This was perhaps because they assumed that people tended to not exercise enough, rather than to exercise too much. Discussions of recovery time and the dangers of over-exercise were rare or brief. This is problematic, because in the spectrum of physical activity, too much exercise can also be damaging (Freimuth, Moniz, and Kim 2011; Schreiber and Hausenblas 2015; Yates 1991).

Many participants expressed a desire for changes in the way that fitness is defined and promoted. The desire for change reveals tensions in the field and the probability of continued evolution; it also elucidates differences in habitus and potential hysteresis. The strongest concerns were about the implications of promoting fitness as an ideal activity as well as the perpetuation of ideal body shapes. There are other problematic aspects of fitness as well. In particular, fitness was perceived as an individual responsibility that

was idealized as a look, lifestyle, and health activity. Few respondents articulated awareness of socio-structural barriers to access. This is not surprising: scholars have critiqued the promises of fitness because of the lack of attention to socio-structural factors shaping not only the idealization, but also the ability to pursue fitness (McElroy 2002; Neville 2013). I did find some respondents who articulated social justice concerns in regard to fitness and some were actively working to remedy what they saw as problems. In particular, the use of human rights claims to discourage size shaming and discrimination may be an important social force shaping the fitness field in the future.

### Practical Implications

The practical implications and recommendations for public programs, personal trainers, group instructors, and other fitness professionals include:

- Work to incorporate different definitions and goals of fitness to better address the needs of all clients/participants (e.g., not all people exercise in order to lose weight; not all people pursue fitness in order to be more sexually attractive)
- Focus *less* on weight loss and *more* on fostering positive embodied experiences that are sustainable and easily accessible (this is especially important for children)
- Continue to focus on functional fitness exercises, especially for older clientele, to increase balance and improve daily living
- Reduce gender-specific and heteronormative messages to appeal to a broader audience and reduce stereotyping and body-size discrimination

## Suggestions for Future Research

This study did not assess what perceptions consumers have of the credibility of magazines or experts. Future research should examine which strategies for legitimizing expertise are the most persuasive with which audiences and how strategies used in the fitness field compare and contrast with those in other fields.

This study did not focus on the intersections of gender with race/ethnicity, class, age, and/or sexuality. These variables may predict variations in habitus and in definitions of fitness and should be considered in future analyses. Additionally, research should investigate visual fitness media.

I argue that the ultimate “truth” of fitness’ effects or definitions is not as important as the types of actors involved, the strategies by which knowledge claims and legitimacy struggles are made, and the socio-structural factors framing the particular manifestations of fitness. Therefore, I recommend the following suggestions for fitness research:

- The potential harms and erasures produced by framing fitness in particular ways should be investigated.
- Efforts should be made to determine to what extent competitive and conflicting claims confuse the public and as such discourage the pursuit of fitness.
- Barriers to fitness should be examined more holistically. Individual-level motivation is not the only factor to take into account; exercise or fitness habitus is likely developed over time and is influenced by socio-economic and built-environment determinants.

- We should document changes in the fitness field; as the cultural context continues to shift, accompanying changes will occur in the fitness field. We should expect that such changes will include: better understanding of weight and body diversity; new fitness equipment, technology, and science; new players in the field (“experts”); new economic situations which will affect who will have access to fitness in terms of money and time; and changing built environments which may constrain or facilitate access.

My research supports the call for continued critique of fitness and the fitness industry. Critical attention is needed particularly because the promotion of fitness holds the false promise of meritocracy: fitness appears to be available and achievable to all. In reality, those who have access and time (and are not intimidated to exercise) are more likely to develop an exercise habitus. The type of fitness promoted by magazine images is particularly difficult to achieve and requires physiognomy and resources available only to some. I anticipate that, as the importance of fitness and health continue to dominate media discourse and government programming, more variations of how to achieve fitness and definitions of fitness will emerge.

In conclusion, sociological inquiry has an important role to play in understanding how perceptions of fitness are formed and promulgated, why some definitions gain ascendancy, and what is the impact of commercialization on the social construction of health and fitness.

## NOTES

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- <sup>1</sup> *Men's Health*. 2011. "Belly Off Club," May, p. 62.
- <sup>2</sup> *Men's Health*. 2012. "The Best Life: Health," February, p. 50.
- <sup>3</sup> *Men's Fitness*. 2011. "The Idiot's Guide to Getting Strong," June-July, pp. 115-130.
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APPENDIX A  
CODES FOR MAGAZINE ARTICLES

Code	Explanation
FITNESS	definition/what is fitness?
Embarrassment/What to avoid	what does not count as fitness? what mistakes or embarrassing activities/ideas should be avoided?
EXERCISE	any mention of exercise of physical activity
What s/he does OR what to do	regarding exercise
Why/Expected Result	of exercise
Individualized	exercise program/workout is individualized/modified for individual needs
Time Saving	exercise is promised to be quick/time saving tricks
Education/Credentials	of anyone involved in promoting exercise or any discussion of education/credential requirements
Calories/Fuel	calories/fuel requirements for performing exercise
Power/Function	exercise described as increasing power/function
Muscle	exercise described as increasing musculature
Effort	description of effort required to exercise
Work with what you have	no equipment needed, no purchase necessary to perform this exercise
Relationships/sex	how does exercise influence relationships/sex
Gender	gendered activities, goals
SPORTS	any mention of sports, exercise for sports
Achievement	sports achievements, exercise achievements
Competition/Being the best	in sports or in exercise activities
HEALTH, PHYSICAL	any mention of physical health as related to exercise
Science	use of science to explain or describe exercise, reference to scientific research/studies
Guidelines	for how to be healthy using exercise
Pain	mention of discomfort, injury, pain as a result of exercise or that exercise can alleviate

Warning	health-related warnings (what to do or what not to do re: exercise to avoid poor health)
HEALTH, EMOTIONAL/MENTAL	any mention of mental/psychological/emotional health as related to exercise
Advice/Coaching:	any mention of advisors, coaches, mentors or the advice they provided
Motivation/Endurance	motivation strategies or sources, descriptions of endurance
Gender	gender-specific effects or behaviors related to mental health and exercise
LOOKS, BODY	any discussion of looks as related to exercise (cause or effect of exercise)
Weight loss	any mention of weight/fat loss related to exercise
Struggle/Problem	any struggle or problem with looks/weight/fat
Eating, bad	any discussion of “bad” eating habits
Eating, good	any discussion of “good” eating habits
What she did/what to do	to solve the struggle/problem, especially related to exercise
Result	the results of those changes (physical/psychological/etc.)
Muscle	changes in muscular appearance
Gender/Sexuality	gendered looks or increased sexiness/sex life as a result of exercise
Confidence	increased or decreased confidence related to looks
DIET/NUTRITION	any discussion of food as related to exercise
LIFE/OUTLOOK	exercise lifestyle, life changes, life outlook related to exercise
EXPERTS	names of experts in article
TYPES OF EXERCISE	what kind of exercise was mentioned
PRODUCTS/CONSUMER ITEMS	were there products/consumer goods mentioned
IMAGE	description of what image(s) accompanied the text

APPENDIX B  
INTERVIEW GUIDE

Interview Questions by Topic:

1. Definition of fitness/importance of fitness
  - a. In your opinion, what is fitness?
  - b. How does one attain or pursue fitness?
    - i. Are some methods better than others?
    - ii. Fit for what? (What's the goal of fitness?)
  - c. How did you come to develop this definition?
  - d. Who can be fit?
  - e. If you could make a change in how people perceive fitness, what would it be?
  - f. Is gender related to fitness? If so, in what ways? Sexuality?
2. Personal interest in exercise/fitness
  - a. How did you come to be involved in (training/writing/research/program development)?
  - b. In what other ways have you been involved in exercise-related activities?
3. Sources of information and evaluation of these (and other) sources
  - a. Where do you get information about exercise/the body/health?
  - b. What do you read?
  - c. What sources would you recommend to someone wanting to learn more about (exercise/fitness/your field)? (client, student, etc.)

- d. How do you evaluate the quality of a source?
4. Position in relation to hot topics/debates/new ideas
- a. What new trends or ideas have you heard of in the past year?
  - b. What is your opinion on (as mentioned in previous question)?
  - c. How do you evaluate a new trend?
  - d. What changes have you seen in (your field) over time?
5. Job description
- a. Tell me more about this position. (What are your responsibilities? What other people do you work with?)
  - b. How did you come to work here? (Unless previously answered)
  - c. What do you envision to be the purpose(s) of your work?
  - d. What are your future aspirations for your career?
  - e. What do you estimate is a starting salary for someone in your line of work? After 5 years? What is the top end?
6. Credentials/training
- a. What kinds of credentials were required when you were hired for this position (or qualifications of new hires)?
  - b. Tell me about your experience earning (the credentials).
  - c. Tell me about the ongoing training requirements for this position (if there are any).

Additional questions specific to certain groups of research participants:

Magazine editors/writers

- 1. What is your process?

- a. How do you identify a topic? (How are decisions made about the topics of articles?)
- b. What sources of information do you use? (See questions on sources)
2. What are the goals of your column/article/writing?
3. Have you ever proposed a piece that was declined? Why do you think this was?
4. What kinds of feedback, if any, do you get from readers?

Program directors (public/academic/other)

5. What do you see as the overall goals of (organization)?
6. How are (the programs) designed and managed?
7. What is the process for a policy/program to be put into place from its inception to its enactment?
  - a. Who is involved in the process?
  - b. What are the guidelines that govern policy/program construction?
8. What are some of the new programs since you have been working here?
9. What other changes have you seen over your time here?
10. Do you ever find yourself at odds with these or with policies/programs that are in place?
11. How is your program funded?
  - a. Are the funds restricted in any way and if so, how?
  - b. Is it difficult to get funding for this kind of work?
12. What do you estimate is a starting salary for someone in your line of work? After 5 years? What is the top end?

APPENDIX C  
CODES FOR INTERVIEWS

Code

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INTERVIEWEE

Pseudonym

Date of interview

Gender

Occupation (primary, secondary, tertiary)

Age

Experience level (beginner, intermediate, advanced)

Health at Every Size® (yes/no)

Interview length (min)

FITNESS

Definition of fitness

Discusses changes in definition over time

Embarrassment/What to avoid

One size doesn't fit everyone

Influences (what has shaped understanding of fitness)

Discussed desired changes in definition/industry/public perception

DESIRED CHANGES

Fitness should not equal looks

Fitness should not equal weight loss

Fitness should be accessible (SES)

EXERCISE

Guidelines

Individualized program (unique for each person)

Time Saving (quick fixes)

Calories/Fuel needed for exercise

Power/Function/Ability to do

Confidence (in self)

Muscle

Effort (easy versus hard)

Work with what you have (no gym required, less equipment required)

Relationships/social/sex benefits, motivations

Gender

## SPORTS

Achievement

Competition/Being the best

Being “athletic”

Recreation versus athletic department, exercise versus sports

Self-identified athlete or intense exerciser

## HEALTH, PHYSICAL

Science

Physical health guidelines

Pain

Safety

Warning (don't do this because...)

## HEALTH, EMOTIONAL/MENTAL

Advice/Coaching

Motivation/Endurance

Burn out (in one's own job)

Gender emotion/mental health

## LOOKS, BODY

Looks; looks and clients

Genetics/body as changeable or not changeable

Weight loss

Barriers to exercise (job, time, health, perception as unenjoyable, environment)

Eating (bad/good)

Muscle (looks)

Gender/Sexuality (looks)

Confidence (looks)

#### DIET/NUTRITION

#### LIFE/OUTLOOK

Fitness as lifestyle

Fitness as fun/enjoyable

#### EXPERTS

Education

Training

Credentials

Experience

Discipline/specific for certain kind of activity

Positioning around a fitness debate/myth

Judgment/evaluation (how to evaluate a source)

Bureaucracy

Funding, money

Communication of information to the public (scientific jargon vs easy to read)

Boundary making

Pressure to produce new material (magazines, news)

Pressure to keep up (with industry, with looks)

Necessity of having experts

Definition of a good instructor (gets results, continual education and training, looks)

#### FAT/OBESITY

Obesity is a problem

Questions obesity/epidemic

## APPENDIX D

### RESPONDENT CHARACTERISTICS

Pseudonym	Gender	Age	Experience	HAES®	Occupation
Jessica	Woman	30s	Intermediate	No	Group instructor
Daphne	Woman	60s	Advanced	Yes	Group instructor
Tony	Man	20s	Beginner	No	Group instructor
Cynthia	Woman	50s	Intermediate	Yes	Personal trainer
Tanya	Woman	50s	Intermediate	Yes	Personal trainer
Amy	Woman	20s	Beginner	No	Personal trainer
Jacob	Man	40s	Intermediate	No	Personal trainer
Ben	Man	30s	Beginner	No	Personal trainer
Joseph	Man	50s	Advanced	No	Personal trainer, chef
James	Man	40s	Advanced	No	Personal trainer, writer, advisory board
Paige	Woman	50s	Advanced	No	Physical therapist, group instructor
Jeffrey	Man	30s	Intermediate	No	Physical therapist, in med school
Erin	Woman	50s	Advanced	Yes	Professor, researcher
Mark	Man	60s	Advanced	No	Professor, researcher
Kelly	Woman	30s	Intermediate	No	Program director
Brittany	Woman	30s	Intermediate	No	Program director
Doris	Woman	60s	Advanced	Yes	Program director
Andy	Man	20s	Beginner	No	Program director
Spencer	Man	60s	Advanced	No	Program director
Alexis	Woman	30s	Advanced	No	Program director, group instructor
Elizabeth	Woman	30s	Intermediate	No	Program director, group instructor
Robert	Man	40s	Intermediate	No	Program director, personal trainer, store owner
Gabrielle	Woman	60s	Advanced	No	Writer
Rebecca	Woman	30s	Beginner	No	Writer, personal trainer