

2016

Getting 'in' and 'out of alignment': some insights into the cultural imagery of fitness from the perspective of experienced gym adherents

Ross D. Neville

Catherine Gorman

Follow this and additional works at: <https://arrow.tudublin.ie/tfschhmtart>



Part of the [Sports Sciences Commons](#), and the [Sports Studies Commons](#)

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the School of Hospitality Management and Tourism at ARROW@TU Dublin. It has been accepted for inclusion in Articles by an authorized administrator of ARROW@TU Dublin. For more information, please contact arrow.admin@tudublin.ie, aisling.coyne@tudublin.ie, gerard.connolly@tudublin.ie.



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-Share Alike 4.0 License](#)
Funder: Technological University Dublin



Getting 'in' and 'out of alignment': some insights into the cultural imagery of fitness from the perspective of experienced gym adherents

Ross D. Neville & Catherine Gorman

To cite this article: Ross D. Neville & Catherine Gorman (2016) Getting 'in' and 'out of alignment': some insights into the cultural imagery of fitness from the perspective of experienced gym adherents, *Qualitative Research in Sport, Exercise and Health*, 8:2, 147-164, DOI: [10.1080/2159676X.2015.1099561](https://doi.org/10.1080/2159676X.2015.1099561)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/2159676X.2015.1099561>



Published online: 25 Oct 2015.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 455



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)



Citing articles: 2 View citing articles [↗](#)

Getting 'in' and 'out of alignment': some insights into the cultural imagery of fitness from the perspective of experienced gym adherents

Ross D. Neville^a and Catherine Gorman^b

^aSchool of Sport, Exercise & Rehabilitation Sciences, University of Birmingham, Birmingham, UK; ^bCollege of Arts & Tourism, Dublin Institute of Technology, Dublin, Ireland

ABSTRACT

While the identification of risks associated with sedentary lifestyles provided a strong foundation for what we understand by 'fitness' today, research across the social sciences and humanities has been rather more ambivalent about the term. One important cause for concern here is the cultural proximity of 'fitness' to consumer culture by means of the 'fitness industry'. It has been shown, for example, that the pursuit of fitness has become increasingly, if not exclusively, a matter of attending to the body as a marker of social status: something to be consumed for; something to be consumed by others. In this paper, findings from a study on the meaning of fitness are presented in order to explore how consigning fitness to consumption activity can also overlook complex self-understandings that accrue on the basis of ongoing activity and increased experience. Specifically, findings from in-depth semi-structured interviews with 12 experienced gym-goers indicate the importance of a more generalised understanding of fitness (than has been explored in previous research), one that focuses more on the alignment of intention and action in everyday life situations than on the alignment of bodies with normative physical ideals. The paper concludes by acknowledging that, while consumption activity has become a critical component within the cultural imagery of fitness, there is a great deal of nuance yet to be drawn out when examining the relationship between biopolitical discourse and everyday practice in this context.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 27 January 2015
Accepted 27 August 2015

KEYWORDS

Fitness; body-embodiment; consumption; body-self alignment; affect

Introduction

The early identification of risks associated with sedentary lifestyles enabled the fitness industry to emerge as a hybrid cultural form which offered opportunities for leisure time physical activity from a variety of traditionally institutionalised disciplines. An important cultural platform for this,¹ in the US at least, was of a post-WW2 citizenry gone soft as a result of too much affluence, a Cold War citizenry gone soft in comparison to its Soviet counterparts, a citizenry, John F. Kennedy lamented, of such diminishing physical vigour that it was becoming unable to meet the great and vital challenges confronting their own nation (Green 1986, Goldstein 1992). Though mobilising bodies around nationalistic insecurities served as an important vector for fitness, Eisenman and Barnett (1979) recognised that an industry only really boomed in the 1970s when it focused on the provision of lifestyle responses for what was,

at that time, an increasingly therapeutic culture (cf. Wright 2008, 2011). The narrative, Eisenman and Barnett observed, was a tripartite of individualisation, humanisation, and self-actualisation, as the fitness industry fed off the then wider cultural diffusion of psychological knowledge (Wright 2008, cf. Lupton 1995, pp. 54–61). In fact, radiating out of a burgeoning physical culture in Gold's Gym, on Muscle Beach, and down the Venice boardwalk, during the 1970s and through the 1980s the fitness industry became something of an object lesson in what Foucault (1983) referred to as the 'Californian cult of the self' (p. 245, cf. Klein 1993, p. 37, Andreasson and Johansson 2014).

Little has occurred in the meantime to sever this trajectory or make such associational claims obsolete.² In fact, over the course of the ensuing decades, it is precisely this increased valorisation of 'care for the self' (Foucault 1988, p. 4) that the fitness industry latched onto, transformed, and which stands today as an activity-identity-experience infrastructure so vast as to be recognised as one of the true powerhouses in international commercial leisure (cf. Markula 2003, 2004, Smith Maguire 2008a, Sassatelli 2010). According to a Datamonitor report published in 2011, for example, fitness clubs operate as the largest segment of the global leisure facilities sector, accounting for 45% of its overall value (compared to 2003 report where no coherent data were reported, only the fact of growth in fitness as an emerging global market, Datamonitor 2003). Within the fitness club market itself, in 2013, the International Health, Racquet & Sportsclub Association (IHRSA) reported that the fitness industry generated annual revenues of \$77.5 billion with approximately 150,000 clubs serving 140 million members (IHRSA 2014). Compared to their 2010 report, which valued the sector at around \$70 billion with approximately 128,000 clubs serving 119 million members (IHRSA 2010), it is difficult to think of another industry which, given such mitigating economic conditions, has enjoyed such a strong growth trend.³

In spite of this growth, it would be a misunderstanding of the magnitude of fitness to consider it solely on quantitative terms. Rather, the emergence of the fitness industry exemplifies how there was something qualitatively distinct about the ways in which individuals were expected to relate to, reflect, and act upon their bodies in the latter half of the twentieth century. As Eagleton (1993) has perhaps most adequately summed it up, in modern society, it is 'not quite true that I have a body' and also 'not quite true that I am one either' (p. 7). And because of this, Eagleton continues, 'The body has been at once the focus for a vital deepening of radical politics and a desperate displacement of them' (ibid.).⁴ That there is an inherent ambivalence which extends to the body in modern society (Bauman 2000, pp. 76–80, 2005, pp. 89–102) has been an important point of departure for sociological research in this area. In this paper, we seek to contribute to this body of research by exploring the everyday factors that attend to and impact upon gym-going as an expression of the modern valorisation of fitness. In order to situate our analysis, we begin with an overview of sociological literature and related sub-disciplinary empirical research which has helped us to understand the cultural location of fitness. Far from simply being a matter of pursuing increases in health, it is argued that fitness has cultural resonances which link it more directly to consumption. Fitness, in other words, is presented as a concept which exemplifies the shift that has occurred in modern society from social engineering towards performativity: i.e. from threats to the 'social body at risk' to the construction of 'individual bodies of risk' by means of consumer culture. In the sections that follow, we present findings from a project which was conducted over the period September 2007–September 2012, the broad aim of which was to address the following question: if it is true that modern consumer society brandishes before its members the ideal of fitness, then how is this taken up, incorporated and negotiated into the context of daily life, its commitments and manifold other responsibilities? Findings from semi-structured interviews with experienced gym-goers indicate the importance to participants of an extended, and perhaps more generalised, understanding of fitness; one that emphasises the alignment of intention and action in everyday situations rather than alignment of the body with normative physical ideals. The paper concludes with some discussion of this distinction and the fact that, while commercial logics remain a central feature within the cultural imagery of fitness, the notion that going to the gym and working out is simply a matter of compensatory consumption risks overlooking some of the productive aspects of fitness culture.

The cultural location of fitness

In a footnote in *The Minimal Self*, Lasch (1985, pp. 27–28) makes an interesting point about the politics of displacement central to consumerism that helps us to immediately situate the analysis of fitness. The relative weakness of theories of advanced capitalism, Lasch explains, is that they have too hastily equated consumerism with hedonism: i.e. with an endless pursuit of pleasure and self-indulgence. Against this, Lasch argues that *consumerism* must be understood more fundamentally as a state which induces chronic uneasiness and anxiety within the process of consumption (cf. Bauman 1995, p. 119). Consumerism is a process which actively discourages the individual from confidence in his or her own intellectual resources or better judgement in deciding about what it means to be healthy or happy. How such decisions or judgements are managed, Lasch explains, is the main crux of the consumer society thesis, since it has become increasingly the case that we need commodities to mediate such processes of self-determination for us.

What is true of here of consumerism is also now largely true of the body and of fitness. As Baudrillard (1998) recognises later in his *Consumer Society*: ‘The body is a cultural fact’, which means that, ‘in any culture whatsoever, the mode of organisation of the relation to the body reflects the mode of organisation of the relation to things and of social relations’ (p. 129).⁵ What this means in practice is that, since modern society needs neither the physical-exertive capacities required in earlier modern modes of production, it is the prospects for consumption (and not necessarily value derived from work) that shapes individuals’ relations to their bodies (Bauman 2000, pp. 76–80, 2005, pp. 89–102). The body, Baudrillard explains, is indexed to the code and norms of a society which promotes health and happiness as a process of managed consumption: ‘[O]ne manages one’s body; handles it as one might handle an inheritance; one manipulates it as one of the many signifiers of social status’ (Baudrillard, 1998, p. 131, cf. Bourdieu 1978, pp. 838–839). For centuries, Baudrillard observed, there was a relentless effort to convince people that they had no body of their own: i.e. that they were merely a part of a broader ‘social body’ and shared in an ascribed fate (see Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2002, pp. 30–41); or, worse still, that their bodies were merely ‘appendages’ of labour processes in much the same way as were the other parts of the lifeless capitalist machines (see Harvey 2000, pp. 97–116). Today, however, in late-modern consumer society, there is a relentless effort to convince them of their bodies once again. When it comes to the cultural significance of the body, what was once denigrated as the lowliest of finite things has acquired a new meaning as an object of salvation: ‘It has literally taken over that moral and ideological function from the soul’ (Baudrillard 1998, p. 129, cf. Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2002, pp. 139–150).

This is, in large part, the cultural location of fitness today, visible once we acknowledge with Faurschou (1987) that we are no longer in an age in which bodies merely produce commodities. Rather, today more than ever, commodities produce bodies too: ‘bodies for aerobics, bodies for sports cars, bodies for vacations, bodies for Pepsi, for Coke, and of course, bodies for fashion – total bodies, a total look’ (Faurschou 1987, p. 82).⁶ Over the course of the second half of the twentieth century, fitness became estranged from its original social-political affinities – nation building, national pride, social regeneration, physical readiness. These progressivist convictions simply faded into insignificance as the fitness industry became an operational adjunct for consumer culture (Glassner 1992, Smith Maguire 2008a, Sassatelli 2010). Fitness discourse increasingly emphasised individual improvement over societal improvement. It presented individuals’ bodies as opportunities for consumption. And, within this, it emphasised the market for consumer goods as an appropriate site for the liberation of this new sense of bodily self (Featherstone 1982, 2007, 2010). In fact, such is the extent of this shift in emphasis from social engineering to performativity that scarcely anybody these days seems to associate fitness with what it was once more commonly accepted to mean – continuity between and organism and its environment (cf. Freund and Martin 2004). Rather, as a strong body of empirical literature now attests, it is ‘capital accumulation’ rather than ‘continuity’ which captures the essence of fitness (Frew and McGillivray 2005, Smith Maguire 2008a, Waring 2008, Bailey *et al.* 2013, Hutson 2013, Stewart *et al.* 2013, Harvey *et al.* 2014, Lamb and Hillman 2015). In fact, it has even been widely acknowledged by sociologists that fitness has become a matter of concern quite apart from health (see esp. Bauman 1995, 1998, 2000, 2001, 2005, cf. Glassner

1989, 1990, 1992). As Baudrillard (1998) anticipates, while practising on the body continues to be undertaken in the name of health, this is because health today is 'not so much a biological imperative linked to survival' as 'a social imperative linked to status' (p. 139). Correspondingly, because it is mediated by a representation of the body as a prestige good, the fitness industry has been depicted as a field of practice which fulfils little more than an instrumental social status demand. As Freund and Martin (2004, p. 275) argue, 'fitness has become problematised as it has been disembedded from habitual social practice and reconstituted in a commodity form that is sequestered off from ... daily life'. Or, as Smith Maguire (2008a) has more rather more neatly put it, the fitness industry is not so much a field for the promotion of healthy habitual social practice as it is a commodity forum for producing bodies that are fit for consumption – bodies that are 'fit to consume' and 'fit to be consumed' by others (p. 190).

Research focus

The project on which this paper is based was conducted over the period September 2007–September 2012, the broad rationale for which was our interest in the strategies experienced gym-goers used to negotiate the demands for fitness in daily life, and in the context of its manifold commitments and other responsibilities. In other words, we asked: if it is true that modern consumer society brandishes in front of its members the ideal of fitness, then how is this taken up, incorporated and negotiated into the context of everyday life? Our research sought to build upon a number of empirically-grounded sociological studies which have also explored the gym as something of a functional site *sine qua non* for the production of fitness culture (esp. Duncan 1994, Sassatelli 1999a, 1999b, 2005, 2006a, 2006b, 2007, 2010, 2015, Collins 2002, Crossley 2004, 2006a, 2006b, 2006c, 2008). The gym appealed to us not only because it is something of an internal relation for how knowledge is produced about the fitness industry,⁷ but because gym-going is itself something of a practical corollary for fitness culture – it's most celebrated occasion, as well its most maligned⁸ – an appeal which was helped in no small part by Willis' (1990) claim that its object, 'the workout', 'may well represent the most highly evolved commodity form yet to appear in ... consumer capitalism' (p. 7).

Our empirical focus for the project was based on the realisation that previous work on fitness had focused on asking why people go to the gym – or, even more directly, on asking people why they go to the gym – and that there was scope for extending on this work by focusing, somewhat differently, on what it is like.⁹ In pursuing this latter question, we sought to think beyond some of the claims which have been made about gym-going, both inside and outside of academia: e.g. that it is too much of an encapsulated consumer experience to be taken seriously alongside other practices which aim at increases in health and wellbeing; that it is simply too cut off from the vagaries of everyday life to be sustainable as a means of supporting lifestyles inclusive of physical activity; and, rather more colourfully perhaps, that going to the gym and working out is an ambivalent practice *par excellence* and just another paralysing gesture of the self-reflexivity which is inherent in late modern consumer societies (see e.g. Sassatelli 1999a, pp. 229–233, Bauman and May, 2001, pp. 100–103, Freund and Martin 2004, pp. 280–281, Frew and McGillivray 2005, pp. 170–173, Smith Maguire 2008a, pp. 191–208). In other words, we sought to think beyond what is given in the cultural imagery of fitness as mere compensatory consumption: i.e. recognising that one has to plan for, get ready, and get into the mood to go to the gym; that the process of gym-going extends to, and encompasses, a wider experiential terrain than is given in the analysis of functional sites and bounded social spaces; and embracing the prospects that gym-going can be something which, when done consistently over time, hangs together with the rest of everyday life's commitments and responsibilities.

Research approach

In order to explore fitness in this way, we draw on data generated from a small but diverse sample of experienced fitness participants for whom gym-going had developed into a dominant leisure form. While the broader project in question incorporated both real-time and retrospective data over the

Table 1. Breakdown of participant demographics.

No.	Pseudonym	Sex	Age	Education	Occupation	Experience (years)
1	John	Male	54	Secondary	On disability leave	8
2	Bob	Male	22	College	Full-time student	5
3	Steve	Male	74	Primary	Retired farmer	5
4	Kevin	Male	34	College	Construction worker	7
5	Louise	Female	34	Graduate	Consultant	14
6	Katie	Female	26	Graduate	Clerical worker	3
7	Dermot	Male	28	Graduate	Credit manager	15
8	Patrick	Male	27	Secondary	Clerical worker	10
9	Liam	Male	45	Secondary	Taxi driver	23
10	Joan	Female	22	College	Full-time student	1.5
11	Gail	Female	45	Postgraduate	Academic	20
12	Deirdre	Female	42	Postgraduate	Academic	8

course of two phases, this paper only makes explicit reference to the latter: semi-structured interviews with the experienced participants, undertaken in order to understand how they negotiated gym-going into their everyday lives and how this activity took on an affective structure as experience.

In terms of the profile of research participants, a number of points are worth mentioning. Firstly, they were all members of a private gym. Recruitment largely resulted from a preliminary phase of research undertaken in which the first author undertook a number of participant and non-participant observation roles at a commercial gym in Co. Kildare, rural Ireland. Approximately 1000 h were spent in the gym environment in this participant role (a period of approximately two and a half years, going to the gym on average five times per week and spending on average 90 min per session working out). Secondly, participants all had established a significant level of consistency in relation to their participation. It was reasoned that if we wanted to get an insight into how gym-going is negotiated in the context of everyday life its commitments and responsibilities, we would have to focus people who had actually managed to go to the gym on a regular basis and stick to it over time (cf. Crossley, 2006a, pp. 46–47). Within this project, ‘experienced fitness participants’ were defined as having developed a steady trajectory of participation for a period of greater than one year (working out, on average, three times per week). Thirdly, all participants were active at the time of the interview. By using the gym as the context for this research, considerations with respect to membership, average number of visits per week, length of membership, etc., could be more clearly defined within specific parameters. This data was kindly provided, in confidence, by the management of the aforementioned club. Finally, in relation to reliability considerations, this process was undertaken in conjunction with gatekeepers (cf. Emmel *et al.* 2007). Four of the gatekeepers were fitness instructors that facilitated initial introductions with participants (numbered 1–9 in Table 1); three other gatekeepers were Institutional colleagues and vouched for the ‘experience’ of three additional female participants (numbered 10–12). In addition, three of the participants took on a gatekeeping role by referring us to previously unknown participants (thereby, snowballing the sample). These gatekeepers proved invaluable in verifying participants’ level of experience, facilitating introductions, and limiting potentially sensitive encounters by acting as an intermediary. They helped extend a great deal of rapport and trust that would otherwise have been missing from the research. Save for the final three interviews that were undertaken at various Institutional locations, interviews were undertaken in the first author’s home office (having previously arranged to meet for a prior workout in the gym). Apart from age and sex, participants were diverse in relation to education (primary school education to postgraduate PhD), occupation (being out of work due to disability to being a senior university lecturer), and level of experience (one participant having worked out for longer than the youngest participant has been alive!). A breakdown of participant demographics is outlined in Table 1 overleaf.

The interview protocol was semi-structured and developed in conjunction with the work of Pollio *et al.* (1997). As this followed a lengthy phase of observational fieldwork, it was implemented with the intended purpose of eliciting an elaborative dialogue with the participants. Our guiding objective

was to encourage participants to not only situate gym-going within the passage of daily activities, but describe how daily activities hung together so as to clarify the meaning of fitness as an aspect of their lived experience (Pollio *et al.* 1997, pp. 28–29). In order to facilitate this, each interview followed a general guideline structure framed around three overlapping themes: participants' (i) fitness history, (ii) self-understandings of fitness, and (iii) descriptions of how fitness is negotiated in the context of everyday commitments and responsibilities. Eliciting initial descriptions of participants' fitness history helped to situate them in a reflexive position relative to the research. It got them talking openly about themselves (as opposed to answering questions or responding to 'demands for rationalisation', Thompson *et al.* 1989, p. 138) and appeared to make them feel more comfortable. While guidelines facilitated a modicum of control across interviews, what ensued thereafter was (following Pollio *et al.* 1997) necessarily open-ended: thus enabling participants go beyond the listing of mere activities in drawing out the contours of their everyday lived experience.

Interviews were audio-taped and manually transcribed for analysis and interpretation by the first author. During the initial phase, all transcripts were reviewed individually in order to extract significant statements and break the text down into manageable units. This process was undertaken in conjunction with what von Eckartsberg (1998) referred to as the 'explication-guiding question' (p. 22). Explication-guiding questions included: What is it like for this person to go to the gym and work out? What does one have to do to make this possible? How is this experience rationalised? Does it involve planning? Is this an explicit or implicit process? What is it like when things don't go to plan? Naturally, only statements that were deemed revelatory of the phenomenon under consideration were retained. A second layer of analysis proceeded by considering how these statements resonated across interview transcripts (as opposed to merely within them). Here, the data was analysed on the basis of a part-to-whole approach (Pollio *et al.* 1997, Thompson *et al.* 1989), where significant statements were retained or discarded on the basis of how they stood up to inter-transcript comparisons: i.e. on the basis of whether (or not) they were revelatory of the phenomenon under investigation *and* plausible across participants' lived experiences. In line with the work of Pollio *et al.* (1997), multiple iterations of the final analysis were also presented to the research team for critical reflection (and refinement) and for the purposes of rounding out the final layer of intersubjective analysis.

Findings

Practising fitness

While the cultural location of fitness presented earlier shows how fitness has increasingly, if not exclusively, become a matter of attending to the body as a marker of social status, we found quite an interesting extension of this in our research. Generally speaking, across all interviews, while participants self-identified as 'being fit', their accounts of going to the gym and working out on a daily basis reflected little evidence that they were overly concerned about their appearance, or were overly body-conscious: i.e. that going to the gym and working out was, for them, something that could be easily rationalised in terms of some 'body beautiful complex' (Maguire and Mansfield 1998, p. 109, Frew and McGillivray 2005, p. 173, Featherstone 2010, p. 205), or in terms of what Sassatelli (1999a, p. 227) described as the 'lithe and energetic body, tight and slim, with its firm and toned-up boundaries'. In fact, some of our participants explicitly de-identified with this sort of image of fitness.

For example, like many of our participants, Joan noted how going to the gym and working out quite simply made her feel good: 'It's a feel-good factor'. However, as if having to distance herself immediately from any indications of being overly superficial, or having underlying body pathology, she stated quite emphatically: 'But it's not like an obsession. When I go, I feel better'. Kevin and Liam were also keen to distance themselves from some of the stereotypical connotations which gym-talk inevitably brings with it. Kevin acknowledged that maturity has a significant role to play here: 'Once you get to a certain age, it doesn't become about physique', he acknowledged; 'It's just about staying healthy, I suppose. I

suppose it's a natural progression from being a twenty year old to now'. Similarly, discussing gym-goers in their mid-to-late 20s, Liam argued:

Liam: Let's face it, up until then, you're just poncing around trying to look good ... You're alright; guys in your twenties and thirties. But when you get into your forties, it's a different ballgame ... I'm not going to go in [to the gym] and spend an hour lifting weights and end up pumped up like a gorilla and [get my] heart in a heap.

Rather, for him:

Liam: It's the health side of it you're worried about now. Like, my father died at sixty-one of a massive heart-attack; my grandfather died at sixty-one.

Interviewer: So, you're changing your perspective?

Liam: Yeah, when you get to a certain age you do change it. It's more the health benefits. It's great to be able to run down the road and you're not puffing and panting and the whole lot after it. As I said to you, there's mates of mine that can't walk across the road ... They can't; they're not able to. They'd walk across the road and think they're probably going to drop dead or something.

While our first inclination here was to make age-related assumptions about the relevance of fitness,¹⁰ there was reference here to a more practical understanding of fitness that seemed equally appropriate to pursue.

For example, when asked about what makes him different from those who 'can't even walk across the road', Liam explained: 'I can run down the road or I can pull out the bike and head off for an hour without thinking twice about it ... It's mental. You know you're fit. It's in your head. You know it's there. You know you can do this or you can do that'. This practical sentiment was also expressed by other participants in a similar manner. When asked about what it might mean to say that they were, or somebody else was, fit, others also reflected on fitness as a sort of readiness for, or ability to, mobilise their organisation of attention towards the task of working out. Mental preparedness was similarly emphasised. 'Being fit', for John and Joan for example, implied having something 'in the head', while working out involved 'getting into that frame of mind', 'getting one's head sorted' or 'head around' (Kevin) the idea of going to the gym to work out. For Louise, this idea of mobilising ones organisation of attention towards the task of working out was *essential*:

Louise: It's almost like you do this process. Ye know? You wash your [gym] clothes on the Sunday night and the seed is planted in your head that 'I am going to the gym on Monday night'. And then I'm looking forward to it during the day ... I don't need to motivate myself to go. It's a fact. I'm going.

In fact, even where direct comparisons with other people came up in the discussion, this sense of practising fitness came to the fore as an important distinguishing factor:

Kevin: It takes a lot for a fat person to go to the gym in the first place. Apart from anything else, people will be going 'Fucking hell, look at the size of him'. And that's unfair. It's not easy coming down here [the gym] wearing a pair of shorts and a t-shirt when you can practically see his stomach underneath ... But then it's not just that simple, going down to the gym, especially for those people. They have to really really push themselves a lot harder than you or I because we have already got that in ourselves to do it. You know? The gene, or whatever; or the aptitude to go.

While there are interesting points to be drawn out here about the status-giving effects of both interpersonal comparisons of form and of function,¹¹ a more general point that we feel is worth emphasising *here* is that, in relation to participants' initial self-understandings, fitness seemed to be understood as something of a generalised capacity for action or an agency with respect to bridging intention and action. This was a view perhaps best exemplified by Louise who continued: 'If I go to the gym, then I'm fulfilling what I had on my mind. I'm aligning my actions with what was on my mind'. It is to this notion of alignment that we turn in the following section.

'In' and 'out' of alignment

Out of all the participants involved in this project the notion of 'alignment' emanated most explicitly over the course of dialogue with Louise. Despite being younger than the other participants involved in this research, she was the most 'experienced' (self-reporting as having 'always trained' and, because of this,

pursued formal 'qualifications in health and fitness'). This 'experience' had obviously been productive of a particular kind of subjectivity, as the following excerpt from our dialogue will attest. This excerpt follows on from us talking about times of continuity and discontinuity in her experience and how going to the gym and working out is valued as a means of facilitating an extension of her sporting biography:

Interviewer: What are the things that distinguish Louise as being fit as opposed to Louise as not being fit?

Louise: So, just to be clear, say I'm picturing me now because I'm working out and I'm a member of a gym as opposed to when I wasn't a member of a gym and I wasn't doing anything?

Interviewer: Yes.

Louise: Okay. Em, well I get the usual benefits of training. It definitely gives you more confidence. Em, you feel that you're overcoming challenges because, obviously, there is a certain amount of challenge in terms of motivating yourself to go to the gym four to five times a week. There are times when you don't want to go and you kind of push yourself to go. So it does give you more confidence. It gives you more of a zest for life. You feel better ... And then as opposed to when you're not working out. Because I'm a naturally sporty person, I have always been involved in health and fitness, and have always been surrounded by people that are involved in fitness, when I'm not working out I feel like I'm not being true to myself. So, I feel slightly, without getting into the all the health, mind and body stuff, out of alignment. So there is something not right. And I've often heard people kind of say it to me that I'm happier when I'm actually involved in sport or I'm involved in health and fitness. It's like something I'm meant to be doing. It's just part of who I am. So that's probably the biggest thing for me, rather than even the physical side of things or the confidence side of things. It's that feeling that, ye know? Everything is as it should be; everything is right.

Complementing the representational connotations that 'fitness' commonly brings with it,¹² Louise expresses here a sense of an embodied history which was linked to sport but which is now being extended through health and fitness: so much so that, today, her involvement in these activity domains has an important bearing on whether she is 'in' or 'out of sync' with her 'natural self'. As the subheading for this section indicates, being involved in these activity domains has a fundamental bearing on whether she is 'in' or 'out of alignment'. It is even, as she would go on to explain later, an expression of her character – an expression of virtue perhaps¹³ – something that she links directly to the possibility of practising authentic selfhood: 'It's part of me. If I'm not doing it, I'm missing something'. That going to the gym and working out is to be valued as a means of bringing the mind, body and self into equilibrium seems to us quite a fitting way of expressing and extending upon what is commonly understood by the term 'fitness'.

Not 'unfit', but 'out of fit'

To further emphasise how fitness might be understood in these terms, we would also like to present an instance in which this notion of 'alignment', 'continuity experience' and 'equilibrium' was fundamentally at stake. Over the course of dialogue with Liam about how he had given up the gym and working out for an extended period of time, he described the moment he realised that he had 'really let himself go': 'I was putting the barbeque out the back with a pair of shorts on and, whatever way I spotted myself in the double-doors, I thought to myself "You fat fucking fool. You'd want to sort yourself out"'. This represented a significant event for Liam. It was akin to those 'critical incidents' explored in Stewart and Smith (2014, p. 48). Or, equally, an example of what Crossley (2006a) meant when he said of gym-goers that they are not always 'setting out, pro-actively, to construct a particular body ... narrative' but 'seeking to recover something they had lost' or 'return to former glory' (p. 31). As an event with significant motivating force, Liam indicated that there was no time for extensive rationalising of this critical incident; no time to set out a plan for constructing some master body narrative:

Liam: There was no build-up to it ... no gradual 'Ah yeah, I'll have to go to the gym' None of that.

Interviewer: No putting it off for ages?

Liam: No, nothing. That was on the Saturday. I joined the gym on the next Tuesday.

Interviewer: So, what was it like on the days in between the realisation that action was need and the act of joining the gym?

Liam: That was just it; nothing. The mind was made up.

What is also interesting here are the conditions under which this realisation finally came into prominence:

Interviewer: It just kind of creeps up on you ...

Liam: Well, I drive a taxi for a living ... Up until then I was plodding away and there was no problems. I suppose it's when the weather changes, isn't it? Out come the shorts and the whole lot. Do you know what I mean?

Interviewer: You're not covered up?

Liam: No. You're just looking at yourself and saying 'Fuck me man, I didn't realise I got that bad'.

And when asked about how this realisation had eluded him for so long, Liam explained that:

Liam: Over the course of time you just go out and get bigger clothes, don't you? You're in jeans and they're a size forty inch waist and it doesn't dawn on you. They're just a pair of jeans. It's only when you're standing there in a pair of shorts with your gut hanging down.

Up to a point, however unconsciously, Liam had been living according to various strategies of body-image avoidance. Or, perhaps more accurately, everyday life up until this point had enabled him to go on largely as a 'body without an image' (Featherstone 2010, p. 207). His body was operating beneath the level of direct conscious awareness, as it so often does for us all, having been refused any direct outlets to cohere into a distinctive image. In this incident, however, Liam encountered a discrepancy. He is exposed by the double doors and, for a moment at least, is identical with himself as a distinctive body image. He is more aware of his body than ever: 'You just turn around and say "You can't keep going on like this. Just look at yourself in the mirror and have a good look. And if you don't sort yourself out you're going to die". That's the truth of it'. To borrow a phrase from Dumm (1999, pp. 8, 87), it might even be said that this event tutors Liam (and us) in the very idea of a 'moment of truth'; an elusive moment of becoming which encourages in him a new way of reflecting on his fundamental embodiment. To use Louise's phrase from earlier, Liam discovers that his body and self are somewhat 'out of alignment'. His body is not necessarily 'unfit', but 'out of fit', an indexical marker of excess, and a matter of urgency directing his organisation of attention toward the task of working out.

Feeling good

Further indications that this alignment of intention and action was important to participants' understandings of fitness were given in the fact that there was a 'uniquely qualitative feeling' at stake (to use Leder's 1990, p. 73 phrasing) in their self-descriptions. That there are important qualitative feelings at stake when it comes to physical activity and exercising is hardly a novel insight.¹⁴ However, in addition to standard assumptions about affective beneficence, there was an extended meaning given by participants to this qualitative feeling. It was not merely an effect of current or completed activity but was also understood as affecting future activity thereafter. For example, it was quite clear for some participants that, if it were not for this 'feel-good-factor', they wouldn't go at all: 'Oh, I do be looking forward to it. I like going. And, if I didn't enjoy it, I wouldn't go' (Steve); 'I wouldn't do it if I dreaded it; there's no point. I don't do things I don't like doing' (Deirdre); 'the elevation of mood and endorphins running through you ... is a major motivating factor for going back the next day' (Dermot). In other words, there was a sense that this qualitative feeling was not merely a momentary rush of blood to the head – a reward for 'calculating hedonism' (Featherstone 1982, p. 18), 'made permissible through the disciple of exercise' (Smith Maguire 2008a, p. 70) – but was itself a fixation of energy redirecting attention towards the prospects of further working out.

Feeling bleurgh!

So, while the positive effects of exercise are significant enough in themselves as motivating forces and were no exception in this research,¹⁵ we thought that this broader notion of affectivity – i.e. to influence, produce, move, make happen, have an effect on – was also worth pursuing. Take Joan, for example. In discussing how her fitness has improved and how supplemental activities across the day impact upon her intentions, exercise intensity and activity duration in the gym, the following interchange ensued:

Joan: I definitely think I've improved my fitness, but I do think that I could be fitter.

Interviewer: What would a fitter you be like?

Joan: Oh, better diet. Eat better foods and try to avoid the crappy foods, while exercising more. I used to be such a bugger for sweet things but it's just not the same anymore. I feel better if I have healthy foods. Even when you're going to the gym, you feel like you can do more than if you have been having crap food. Even if it was hours ago you can still feel 'Bleurgh'. With healthy food, you can push yourself more.

Interviewer: So you don't believe that because you exercise you can eat whatever you want?

Joan: You *can* go to the gym and you *can* eat what you want, but then you have to pay for it in the gym. You have to go and work it off. You *can* do that, but then you're struggling more to have to work it off. I enjoy being able to eat healthily. That works for me.

And when the matter arose again later in our dialogue, Joan reiterated that:

Joan: Well, if I know I'm definitely going, I wouldn't be eating a lot of crap food beforehand ... I would be more conscious of what I'm eating compared to a day when I'm not going ... I usually come home and say to my mom 'I'm going to the gym' and tell her to stop pestering me with a big dinner ... [because] I won't be able to move if I eat that.

A similar case also arose for Katie and Gail who both explained that they preferred to go to the gym immediately after work and, importantly, before dinner. As with Joan, Katie explained that she goes straight to the gym from work and avoids eating because it makes her 'feel sluggish' or 'less able'. Similarly, Gail explained that she feels like she has 'more energy' when she doesn't have a 'full stomach'. For Joan, Katie and Gail, eating a certain way prior to working out, or not at all, clearly makes them feel a certain way too. It plays an operative role in aligning intention and action, functioning as an inductive resource that can either positively or negatively determine the course of activity to come. Eating 'healthily', for example, allows Joan to 'push herself more'. Thus, it has a naturally 'expansive' character (Leder 1990, p. 166). It enables her to open up freely to the activity. Eating 'crappy foods', conversely, promotes quite the opposite. It is a restrictive feeling that places an affective halt on her planned activity. She experiences something akin to what Leder (1990, p. 75) meant by 'spatiotemporal constriction' (though without the need for pain or trauma to direct this process). That is to say, her organisation of attention for future planned activity is disrupted: 'I won't be able to move'. She is drawn back to her body by this feeling which congeals right in her gut. 'Bleurgh', indeed!

Feeling healthy

That there was a uniquely qualitatively feeling at stake in relation to the alignment of intention and action was also indicated across a broader temporal perspective. It is also noteworthy that this is where the matter of 'health' arose most prominently. An initial context for this is given, for example, in Kevin and Liam's assertions earlier that their felt sense of embodiment has not gone unaffected by perceived life-cycle position. They recognise that, at a certain point, perhaps people become more concerned with the normal functioning of the body than with its appeal as a consumer object/object for consumption. In concluding our presentation of findings here, however, we would like to briefly set this unique qualitative feeling in the context of our discussions with Gail, who shared with us how a range of health issues (hers and others') impacted, not only the manner of her physical activity, but her broader felt sense of wellbeing:

Gail: In more recent years – I'd say, the last two years – I've focused more on weight training than aerobic training, and that is linked to a health issue because it turned out that I was anaemic. I was very low on iron and I found it difficult in some of the aerobic classes.

And later in our conversation:

Gail: There have been times when I haven't necessarily felt fit ... When I was anaemic, I felt completely unfit. My children would notice that when I walked up the stairs at home that my breathing was very heavy. Just before that period ... both of my parents died in the space of six months and I was looking after them every day ... So I wasn't going to the gym as often as I had previously done. In combination with the anaemia then, that made me feel really unfit ... I didn't feel well in myself ... I was tired ... I was exhausted ... I didn't have the same amount of energy. I was fit for nothing ... physically and emotionally exhausted.

That there is an important 'qualitative feeling' at stake in bodywork practices has also recently featured in research by Coffey (2015, p. 619) who underscored the importance to participants of 'feeling their bodies', as opposed to merely 'showing them'. In her view, this experiential, as opposed to representational, preference was reflected in her participants' preference for forms of bodywork which are not geared solely towards bodily appearance. While this is a significant finding which bears well on the present analysis, the lesson to be learned in our study need not be wholly normative. Rather, for participants in this study, this qualitative feeling had an important pragmatic role in framing their organisation of attention. Positively framed, it made going to the gym and working out feel like an expansive activity, of the sort portrayed in phenomenology, where the body is drawn forward by operative lines of intentionality. Framed negatively, this process was rather more inhibited, with participants feeling like they were engaging in little more than compensatory consumption. In fact, far from being a mere 'feeling' as we typically understand it, in Gail's earnest account, we get a sense of a certain qualitative or affective threshold being breached. She experiences an 'affective call' of anaemia (to use Leder's 1990, p. 73 phase) which, in conjunction with the call of others' embodiment, fundamentally alters her organisation of attention and lived experience. Projects which previously seemed important are relegated to the background of awareness. Bodies (Gail's own and her parents' bodies, for that matter) become estranged from previously unified or identifiable selves. In fact, the gravity of the situation is such that, for Gail, even everyday environments have become a source of increasing resistance. Her body is exposed as a source of rigidity and a matter to be contended with. Not feeling well in herself, it has become an impediment, resistant even to ordinary matters such as lived space and her everyday relationships with others. It is this uniquely qualitative or affective threshold that Joan and Katie are eager to maintain on a daily basis. Perhaps it is even something Kevin and Liam were reorganising their attention toward over time. And, in relation to her experience of illness, and the fundamental embodiment of others, it was something Gail felt she had lost. That the prospects of going to the gym and working out can admit of such feelings is only beginning to be adequately reflected in the literature (cf. Andrews and Silk 2011, Duffy *et al.* 2011, Little 2012, Windram-Geddes 2013, Caudwell and Rinehart 2014, Flanagan 2014, Pavlidis and Fullagar 2015). Perhaps this is the point where we can legitimately speak of fitness as contributing to health: that unique individual-body-environment gestalt which enables openness to human performance (cf. Illich 1976, Gadamer 1996, van Hoof 1997).

Discussion and conclusions

While it is wise to be cautious in concluding and making principled recommendations about research based on limited sample sizes – a point appropriately acknowledged, though never overstated, in this journal – lessons in context, experience, and ordinary language often make up for this by providing valuable accounts that are grounded in everyday life. In this paper, we focused on a number of such lessons in relation to the cultural imagery of fitness; a concept which has come to populate our everyday lives as patterns of collective behaviour require that we must deliberately initiate physical activity and exercise in order to be healthy.¹⁶

Situating our analysis briefly once again, it was our opening contention that the cultural location of fitness had been increasingly, if not exclusively, shaped by the body's proximity to consumer culture:

i.e. that 'fitness' had largely come to imply 'being fit' and, by extension, having a body that is 'fit for consumption' ('fit to consume'; 'fit to be consumed by others'). The approach pursued in this paper sought to extend on this, and ask, if consumer culture brandishes in front of its members this ideal of fitness, then how does this become embedded in everyday lives and how is it negotiated within the context of other commitments and responsibilities. What we found by focusing on experienced gym adherents was that the dominant cultural imagery which links fitness to consumption activity risks overlooking some of its more productive aspects; aspects which Bourdieu (1986), for example, recognised in having said that the 'embodied state' presupposes a 'labour of inculcation and assimilation', 'costs time', and a degree of personal investment which 'cannot be done at second hand' (p. 48). In keeping with this view, our participants tended towards defining fitness on terms which emphasised agency, a concrete capacity for action, and, not inconsequentially, confidence in the ability to mobilise their organisation of attention at appropriate times towards going to the gym and working out. As a practical accomplishment which addresses both the form and function of the body, and which therefore presupposes an active body, or embodiment, our participants recognised that, with fitness, the normal effects of delegation and/or passive lifestyle accommodation which hold for consumer culture are ruled out. They understood this all too well, emphasising the importance of aligning intentions and actions in everyday life situations as opposed to simply aligning the body with normative physical ideals.

Situating our findings within the existing literature, we believe that there is much to be gained by thinking about fitness in a manner that is less focused on bodily representation and superficial embodiment than on the production and maintenance of a felt sense of body-self-environment equilibrium. Such a view resonates, for example, with Crossley's (2004, 2006a, 2006b, 2006c, 2008) observations that, while research addressing the apparent homology between fitness discourse (as it is presented in field texts) and fitness culture (as it is practised in gyms) has been an important forerunner for empirical studies in this area, the link actually turns out to be rather weak when one examines the motivations behind gym-going (especially as these are developed over time). Our findings resonate particularly well with Crossley's (2006a) observations that 'joining a gym is different from sticking at it', that '[m] any more agents manage the former than the latter', and that a 'new set of motives kicks in for regular gym-goers ... on account of the acquisitions that go along with a gym career' (pp. 46–47). And, while his work emphasises support mechanisms – such as gym-based friendships (Crossley 2008), learning experiences (Crossley 2004) and a transformed sense of self (Crossley 2006a) – our findings complement this by showing, too, how the initial social status demands and idealisations of gym culture can recede into the background of participants' awareness. This, we found, is especially the case when considerations about the normal functioning of the body resurface, or, indeed, surface for the first time. Across our research, we were reminded of how the status-giving potential of the body can be coupled with, or can even be effaced entirely by, concerns about the embodied state, which is fundamentally, and as one matures presumably more so, as much matter of vulnerability and precarity as it is a matter of interpersonal comparisons about the body's external form. To subtend Bourdieu's remarks on the embodied state from the previous paragraph: it can often be overlooked that work on the body presupposes that the body works. Future research could say more about this: say, for example, in terms of the occasions of experience which mediate a shifting away from concerns about the body's external form; or, perhaps even more interestingly, in terms of the social status gains that can also be made on the basis of intersubjective comparisons of function.

Our research resonates equally well with Sassatelli's (1999a, 1999b, 2005, 2006a, 2006b, 2007, 2010, 2015) broader observations that, while bodies, identities and social rituals have become increasingly mediated by the wares of consumer culture, they are not reducible to them (an untenable argument, Sassatelli (2010, p. 27) reveals, is implicit within the predominant methodological strategies employed in the field heretofore). That consumer culture pertains to, but does not exhaust, the reality of fitness culture has also been an important feature of our research. For Sassatelli, the issue remains that the predominant methodological strategies employed in fitness research have left significant gaps in our understanding of the 'local organisation of experience' and the importance of 'situated interaction' for the qualification (i.e. reproduction, translation and/or possible filtering out) of this experience (Sassatelli

2010, pp. 25–30). Far from being simply a problem of representation, we believe that our research extends this notion to the problem of fitness *as such*. Our participants were nothing if not actively engaged in this process of reproduction, translation and in filtering out; in other words, nothing if not qualified in the local organisation of experience.

Building on this in more recent publications, Sassatelli (2010, 2015) has also gone as far as to argue that the cultural value of gyms is to be located at an ‘interstice’ (Sassatelli 2010, p. 174) which, on account of the simultaneous over- and under-exposure of the body in advanced modern societies (cf. Braidotti, 2011, pp. 177–181), has resulted in a pervasive ‘body-self-dualism’. However imperfect, Sassatelli (2010) acknowledges that gyms are organised spaces where the body might be ‘woken [back] up to its nature’ (p. 174): i.e. that gyms might serve as an adaptive response to the fact that everyday life in modern society has become a matter of spending (and being rewarded for spending) lengthy periods in recessive spaces (in school, at work, or at home) where embodiment seems more like a distant opportunity than a given. Although research indicates that such a view of gym-going can serve to blur the boundaries between work and leisure (cf. Smith Maguire 2008b, Waring 2008, Rojek 2009), the participants involved in this research did not simply approach the gym as an obligation to undertake self-work. To paraphrase Dewey (1980, pp. 146–158), they did not simply bring their bodies to the gym as one would bring the body to work. Rather, they recognised that, with the gym, there is an opportunity: say, for renewing contact with what various scholars now emphasise in the spirit of Sansone (1988, p. 64) and Durkheim (1995, p. 349) as one’s original energies; or, equally, with what Dewey (1980, p. 147) recognised in experience as an intimate union of doing and undergoing of consequences and the production of value that is tied to the organs of the activity itself.

In summation, for those whose main objective when approaching fitness culture is suspicion of biopolitical discourse, the fact that consumption activity has become such a defining feature here is sure to preoccupy and will provide ample material for furthering their critical theory. To paraphrase Berlant (2007, p. 758), the fitness industry engenders such strong normative data, florid prose in its field texts, and sensational spectacles of bodily reflexive practice *in situ* as to leave some with no reason to ever have to study it on an alternative affective register. For those whose main objective is an understanding fitness culture *as such*, however, there remains a great deal of nuance to be further drawn out of this context, especially when it comes to examining the relationship between biopolitical discourse and everyday practice which, as Berlant (2008, p. 4) has argued, is too often simply mimetic and literalising as opposed to open to a whole host of consequences ... including none at all.

Notes

1. The historical literature indicates that the trajectory for this increased interest in, and institutionalisation of, fitness as strength, vigour, and physical readiness grew throughout the nineteenth century, eventually resulting in something of a fitness craze by the 1890s (Whorton 1982, Green 1986, Grover 1989, Park 1989, Bundgaard 2005, Andreasson and Johansson 2014). Our emphasis on the post-WW2 era simply has to do with our broader interest in the institutionalisation of risk, and tracing how fitness became less a matter of threats to the ‘social body at risk’ than a matter of constructing ‘individual bodies of risk’ (see Castels 1991, Petersen 1997, Boero 2007). We believe that the platform for this shift in the cultural location of fitness away from explicit attempts at social engineering towards a culture of performativity to have been largely sedimented over the second half of the twentieth century (cf. Rader 1991, Smith Maguire 2008a, Bowers and Hunt 2011, Byers 2015).
2. In fact, the following observation from Eisenman and Barnett (1979) seems quaint by today’s commercial standards: ‘Apparently, many people have made fitness development so much a part of their lives that fitness-related business enterprises are becoming economically profitable’ (p. 117).
3. It is worth mentioning that, in 2008, prior to the economic downturn to follow later in the same year, the then Director of IHRSA Europe, Hans Muench, noted how not many people are aware of the fact that, ‘for the last 20+ years, our industry has grown consistently ... proving itself to be recession resilient’ (cited in Amend 2008, p. 16). Choice words perhaps, but they reflect the anecdotal claim at least that times of economic hardship lend themselves particularly well to self-building, body-consciousness, and the need for establishing ontological security (cf. Giddens 1991, pp. 35–69).
4. It is the ‘politics of displacement’ rather than ‘radical politics’ which concerns us in this paper. However, it is worth acknowledging at least the radical politics that are anticipated in the seminal texts of the Frankfurt School of critical

theory. For example, Horkheimer and Adorno exclaimed that the attempt to bring about a renaissance of the body in modern society must fail precisely because of the 'body fascism' that it promotes: 'Those who extolled the body above all else ... always had the closest affinity with killing' (cited in Shusterman 1999, p. 305, cf. Pronger 2002). While this observation might seem like a bit of a stretch, it should be kept in mind that the original ideological context for fitness as physical readiness brought with it connotations of the ultimate willingness to sacrifice oneself for others. For a more recent account of this exercise-military-religious nexus, see Dawson (2015).

5. The body is, as Bourdieu (1978) equally recognised, a 'synthesising agent par excellence, which integrates everything that it incorporates' (p. 834); it is, as Harvey (2000) summarised on more body-economic terms, 'an accumulation strategy' (p. 97), 'an internal relation of the historically and geographically achieved processes of capital circulation' (p. 114).
6. More than this, Berrett (1997) has observed how commodities produce bodies in a far more banal sense too acknowledging how Americans were gradually 'invented' into a state of atrophy as a result of consumer culture: 'The housewife [now] spent a mere fifty calories dumping clothing in the washing machine as opposed to 290 scrubbing it and hauling it to the clothesline; power lawnmowers afforded men similar ease' (p. 808).
7. By this, we mean that the gym – or 'fitness clubs' as they are more often referred to in the industry literature – functions as the primary unit of analysis for knowledge which is produced about and disseminated across the fitness industry. Industry reports tend to discuss the vibrancy or contraction of fitness industry *primarily* in terms of the number of gyms, and then *secondarily* in terms of their distribution, average number of memberships, membership profile, average number of visits, member retention, attrition, etc.
8. Regarding this overtly negative cultural imagery, prior to the initiation of the project, we had come to a place analytically where there was strong justification for having said that:

As consumers pursue physical capital they occupy the consumer role of pseudo-sovereignty, believing in the subjective attainment of capital, yet naïve or ambivalent towards the mechanisms that drive and promote its consumption ... Through their quest, physical capital and its symbolic derivative becomes, not only desirable, but also perpetuates a process of domination that is, essentially, self-imposed. It is this political play of embodied difference that perpetuates the apparently universalizing dream of physical capital and, thus, keeps the treadmills literally and economically turning. (Frew and McGillivray 2005, pp. 173–174)

Or, as Bauman's many forays into the modern consuming body indicate, fitness is:

... a never-to-be-reached horizon looming forever in the future, a spur to unstoppable efforts, none of which can be seen as fully satisfactory, let alone ultimate. Pursuit of fitness, its little triumphs notwithstanding, is shot through with incurable anxiety and is an inexhaustible source of self-reproach and self-indignation (Bauman 1998, p. 23)

9. Attempts at rationalisation, we have acknowledged elsewhere (Neville *et al.* *in press*), have clearly contributed to an important and substantial body of research on reflexive embodiment in contemporary society. However, as Crossley's (2006a, 2006b, 2006c) work has argued:

[G]rand theories of body work which pronounce ... from on high ... typically make no distinction between reasons for starting a form of body work and continuing[,] they often fail to distinguish different meanings ... that attach to the body ... fail to consider the pleasures and purposes of the body at the level of the lived body, the social nature of some forms of bodily doing ... [and] the fact that running around for an hour or pushing weights can restore an agents sense of their self and agency intrinsically, whatever its wider consequences ... For them 'my body' is the body I think about and project discourses onto, not the body I am; the body that feels pleasure and pain. (Crossley 2006a, p. 47)

In other words, while they give us an important initial indication of the cultural location of gym-going, and they often frame it in such a way as to be revelatory of broader social theories or social processes (for example, as regards the body in relation to capitalism, consumerism and consumer culture, critical theory, feminism, modernity, neoliberalism, patriarchy, postmodernism, the risk society, and so on) they are not overly concerned with telling us about what it is actually like to go to the gym.

10. This is entirely appropriate and might be pursued in line with Phoenix and others' (2005) work on ageing and narratives of decline, for example.
11. That Liam's and Kevin's accounts of fitness neatly reflect how the Other can function as a constitutive feature even within the identity formation processes is a matter that we have pursued elsewhere, and will not rehearse here (Neville *et al.* *in press*). Though, as we have indicated in the text, it is worth pointing out here that there is clearly scope here for advancing our understanding of social status in this context beyond interpersonal comparisons of form to consider the role of interpersonal comparisons of function. These points are revisited in conclusion.
12. Louise mentions 'confidence' in this context, but this is clearly something she experiences as an outcome of practical accomplishments as opposed to only interpersonal comparisons.
13. We are thinking here, for example, of MacIntyre's (2007, p. 191) definition of virtue as 'an acquired human quality the possession and exercise of which tends to enable us to achieve those goods which are internal to practices and the lack of which effectively prevents us from achieving such goods'.

14. In line with the general message of exercise beneficence literature since Morgan (1985), all participants self-reported as having positive experiences of going to the gym and working out: of 'feeling good', 'feeling happy', 'feeling great', 'feeling fantastic', 'feeling that you've achieved something', 'feeling as if I have done something good for myself'; of being 'full of energy', 'in a great mood', 'on a high', etc. Expert knowledge of this literature even seemed to feed into participants' self-descriptions: 'Well, obviously there's the biological side of it; those little endorphins flying around your body are quite nice' (Louise); 'It usually sets me up for the day ... in terms of energy and mood ... because [of the] release of serotonin'.
15. For a review, empirical study and typology of pleasure, the 'forgotten dimension of physical activity' research, see Phoenix and Orr (2014).
16. We borrow the phrasing here from an essay by Jerry Morris who was generally regarded as the founder of physical activity epidemiology. The exact quote is as follows: 'We in the West are the first generation in human history in which the mass of the population has to deliberately exercise to be healthy. How can society's collective adaptations match?' (Morris 2009, p. 11, cf. Blair *et al.* 2010).

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

Funding

This work was supported by Dublin Institute of Technology ABBEST Scholarship Programme.

Notes on contributors

Ross D Neville is a research fellow at the School of Sport, Exercise and Rehabilitation Sciences, University of Birmingham. His expertise lies in sociology and in the sociology of the body in particular, with empirical work focusing on the factors that attend to and impact upon gym going as an expression of reflexive embodiment. Ross's research interests lie in understanding the social-cultural location of 'fitness' – a concept which has become part of the very fabric of everyday life in modern societies as patterns of collective behaviour require us to deliberately initiate physical activity and exercise in order to be healthy. Ross's published work on such matters can be found in the following journals: *Medicine Health Care and Philosophy*, *Sociology of Health & Illness*, *Leisure Sciences* and in the *Sociology of Sport Journal*.

Catherine Gorman is a lecturer at the School of Hospitality Management and Tourism, Dublin Institute of Technology, Ireland, where she is coordinator of the Leisure Management Programme. Although her doctorate was completed in the field of human geography, her current research interests include physical activity, sport and fitness, sustainability (particularly from a sociocultural perspective) and the participation of older people in leisure and tourism.

References

- Amend, P., 2008. Hans Muench celebrates his return to IHRSA as the new director, Europe. *Club business Europe*, Jan/Feb, 15–17.
- Andreasson, J. and Johansson, T., 2014. The fitness revolution: historical transformations in the global gym and fitness culture. *Sport science review*, 23 (3–4), 91–111.
- Andrews, D.L. and Silk, M.L., eds., 2011. Physical cultural studies: engendering a productive dialogue. *Sociology of sport journal*, 28 (1), 1–3.
- Bailey, R., Hillman, C., Arent, S., and Petitpas, A., 2013. Physical activity: an underestimated investment in human capital? *Journal of physical activity & health*, 10 (3), 289–308.
- Baudrillard, J., 1998. *The consumer society: myths and structures*. London: Sage.
- Bauman, Z., 1995. *Life in fragments: essays in postmodern morality*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Bauman, Z., 1998. On postmodern uses of sex. *Theory, culture & society*, 15 (3–4), 19–33.
- Bauman, Z., 2000. *Liquid modernity*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Bauman, Z., 2001. *The individualized society*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Bauman, Z., 2005. *Liquid life*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Bauman, Z. and May, T., 2001. *Thinking sociologically*. 2nd ed. Malden, MA: Blackwell.
- Beck, U. and Beck-Gernsheim, E., 2002. *Individualization*. London: Sage.
- Berlant, L., 2007. Slow death (sovereignty, obesity, lateral agency). *Critical inquiry*, 33 (4), 754–780.
- Berlant, L., 2008. Thinking about feeling historical. *Emotion, space and society*, 1, 4–9.

- Berrett, J., 1997. Feeding the organization man: diet and masculinity in postwar America. *Journal of social history*, 30 (4), 805–825.
- Blair, S.N., et al., 2010. A tribute to professor Jeremiah Morris: the man who invented the field of physical activity epidemiology. *Annals of epidemiology*, 20 (9), 651–660.
- Boero, N., 2007. All the news that's fat to print: the American "Obesity Epidemic" and the media. *Qualitative sociology*, 30 (1), 41–60.
- Bourdieu, P., 1978. Sport and social class. *Social science information*, 17 (6), 819–840.
- Bourdieu, P., 1986. The forms of capital. In: J. Richardson, ed. *Handbook of theory and research for the sociology of education*. New York: Greenwood Press, 241–258.
- Bowers, M.T. and Hunt, T.M., 2011. The president's council on physical fitness and the systematisation of children's play in America. *The international journal of the history of sport*, 28 (11), 1496–1511.
- Braidotti, R., 2011. *Nomadic subjects: embodiment and sexual difference in contemporary feminist theory*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Bundgaard, A., 2005. *Muscle and manliness: the rise of sport in American boarding schools*. Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press.
- Byers, A., 2015. American bodies in a time of war: the militarized body as a utopian space and biopolitical project for the state. In: P. Stapleton and A. Byers, eds. *Biopolitics and utopia: an interdisciplinary reader*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 13–40.
- Castels, R., 1991. From dangerousness to risk. In: G. Burchell, C. Gordon, and P. Miller, eds. *The Foucault effect: studies in governmentality*. London: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 291–298.
- Caudwell, J., Rinehart, R.E., eds., 2014. Liminoidal spaces and the moving body: emotional turns. *Emotion, space and society*, 12, 1–3.
- Coffey, J., 2015. As long as I'm fit and a healthy weight, I don't feel bad': exploring body work and health through the concept of 'affect'. *Journal of sociology*, 51 (3), 613–627. doi:10.1177/1440783313518249
- Collins, L.H., 2002. Working out the contradictions: feminism and aerobics. *Journal of sport & social issues*, 26 (1), 85–109.
- Crossley, N., 2004. The circuit trainer's habitus: reflexive body techniques and the sociality of the workout. *Body & society*, 10 (1), 37–69.
- Crossley, N., 2006a. In the gym: motives, meaning and moral careers. *Body & society*, 12 (3), 23–50.
- Crossley, N., 2006b. The networked body and the question of reflexivity. In: D.D. Waskul and P. Vannini, eds. *Body/embodiment: symbolic interaction and the sociology of the body*. Hampshire: Ashgate, 21–34.
- Crossley, N., 2006c. *Reflexive embodiment in embodiment in contemporary society*. Maidenhead: Open University Press.
- Crossley, N., 2008. (Net)Working out: social capital in a private health club. *The British journal of sociology*, 59 (3), 475–500.
- Datamonitor, 2003. *Global leisure facilities: industry profile*. London: Datamonitor Europe.
- Datamonitor, 2011. *Global leisure facilities: industry profile*. London: Datamonitor Europe.
- Dawson, M.C., 2015. CrossFit: fitness cult or reinventive institution? *International review for the sociology of sport*. doi:10.1177/1012690215591793
- Dewey, J., 1980. Democracy and education. In: J.A. Boydston, ed. *John Dewey: the middle works, 1899–1924*. Vol. 9 1925. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1–405.
- Duffy, M., et al., 2011. Bodily rhythms: corporeal capacities to engage with festival spaces. *Emotion, space and society*, 4, 17–24.
- Dumm, T.L., 1999. *A politics of the ordinary*. New York: New York University Press.
- Duncan, M.C., 1994. The politics of women's body images and practice: Foucault, the panopticon, and *Shape* magazine. *Journal of sport & social issues*, 18 (1), 45–65.
- Durkheim, E., 1995. *The elementary forms of religious life*. New York: Free Press.
- Eagleton, T., 1993. It is not quite true that I have a body, and not quite true that I am one either. *London review of books*, 15 (10), 7–8.
- von Eckartsberg, R., 1998. Existential-phenomenological research. In: R.S. Valle, ed. *Phenomenological inquiry in psychology: existential and transpersonal dimensions*. New York: Plenum Press, 21–61.
- Eisenman, P.A. and Barnett, C.R., 1979. Physical fitness in the 1950s and 1970s: why did one fail and the other boom? *Quest*, 31 (1), 114–122.
- Emmel, N., et al., 2007. Accessing socially excluded people: trust and the gatekeeper in the researcher–participant relationship. *Sociological research online*, 12 (2). Available from: <http://www.socresonline.org.uk/12/2/emmel.html>
- Faurschou, G., 1987. Fashion and the cultural logic of postmodernity. In: A. Kroker and M. Kroker, eds. *Body invaders: panix sex in America*. Montreal: New World Perspectives, 78–93.
- Featherstone, M., 1982. The body in consumer culture. *Theory, culture & society*, 1 (2), 18–33.
- Featherstone, M., 2007. *Consumer culture and postmodernism*. 2nd ed. London: Sage.
- Featherstone, M., 2010. Body, image and affect in consumer culture. *Body & society*, 16 (1), 193–221.
- Flanagan, M.K., 2014. Sporting a skort: the biopolitics of materiality. *Cultural studies - critical methodologies*, 14 (5), 506–516.
- Foucault, M., 1983. On the genealogy of ethics: an overview of work in progress. In: H.L. Dreyfus and P. Rainbow, eds. *Michel Foucault: beyond structuralism and hermeneutics*. 2nd ed. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 229–252.
- Foucault, M., 1988. The ethic of care for the self as a practice of freedom. In: J.W. Bernauer and D.M. Rasmussen, eds. *The final Foucault*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1–20.

- Freund, P. and Martin, F., 2004. Walking and motoring: fitness and the social organisation of movement. *Sociology of health & illness*, 26 (3), 273–286.
- Frew, M. and McGillivray, D., 2005. Health clubs and body politics: aesthetics and the quest for physical capital. *Leisure studies*, 24 (2), 161–175.
- Gadamer, H.G., 1996. *The enigma of health: the art of healing in the scientific age*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Giddens, A., 1991. *Modernity and self-identity: self and society in the late modern age*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Glassner, B., 1989. Fitness and the postmodern self. *Journal of health and social behavior*, 30 (2), 180–191.
- Glassner, B., 1990. Fit for postmodern selfhood. In: H.S. Becker and M.M. McCall, eds. *Symbolic interaction and cultural studies*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 215–243.
- Glassner, B., 1992. *Bodies: overcoming the tyranny of perfection*. Los Angeles, CA: Lowell House.
- Goldstein, M.S., 1992. *The health movement: promoting fitness in America*. New York: Twayne Publishers.
- Green, H., 1986. *Fit for America: health, fitness, sport, and American society*. New York: Pantheon Books.
- Grover, K., ed., 1989. *Fitness in American culture: images of health, sport and the body*. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press.
- Harvey, D., 2000. *Spaces of hope*. Berkeley: University of California press.
- Harvey, G., Vachhani, S.J. and Williams, K., 2014. Working out: aesthetic labour, affect and the fitness industry personal trainer. *Leisure studies*, 33 (5), 454–470.
- van Hoof, S., 1997. Health and subjectivity. *Health*, 1 (1), 23–36.
- Hutson, D.J., 2013. “Your body is your business card”: bodily capital and health authority in the fitness industry. *Social science & medicine*, 90, 63–71.
- IHRSA, 2010. *The IHRSA global report 2010*. Boston, MA: IHRSA.
- IHRSA, 2014. *The IHRSA global report 2014*. Boston, MA: IHRSA.
- Illich, I., 1976. *Medical nemesis: the expropriation of health*. New York: Pantheon Books.
- Klein, A.M., 1993. *Little big men: bodybuilding subculture and gender construction*. Albany: State University of New York Press.
- Lamb, M.D. and Hillman, C., 2015. Whiners go home: Tough Mudder, conspicuous consumption, and the rhetorical proof of “fitness”. *Communication & sport*, 3 (1), 81–89.
- Lasch, C., 1985. *The minimal self: psychic survival in troubled times*. New York: W.W. Norton.
- Leder, D., 1990. *The absent body*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Little, J., 2012. Transformational tourism, nature and wellbeing: new perspectives on fitness and the body. *Sociologia ruralis*, 52 (3), 257–271.
- Lupton, D., 1995. *The imperative of health: public health and the regulated body*. London: Sage.
- MacIntyre, A., 2007. *After virtue: a study in moral theory*. 3rd ed. London: Duckworth.
- Maguire, J. and Mansfield, L., 1998. No-body’s perfect: women, aerobics, and the body beautiful. *Sociology of sport journal*, 15 (2), 109–137.
- Markula, P., 2003. The technologies of the self: sport, feminism, and Foucault. *Sociology of sport journal*, 20 (2), 87–107.
- Markula, P., 2004. “Turning into oneself”: Foucault’s technologies of the self and mindful fitness. *Sociology of sport journal*, 20 (2), 87–107.
- Morgan, W.P., 1985. Affective beneficence of vigorous physical activity. *Medicine and science in sports and exercise*, 17 (1), 94–100.
- Morris, J., 2009. Physical activity versus heart attack: a modern epidemic. In: I.-M. Lee, S.N. Blair, J.E. Manson, and R.S. Paffenbarger, eds. *Epidemiologic methods in physical activity studies*. New York: Oxford University Press, 3–12.
- Neville, R.D., Gorman, C., Flanagan, S., and Dimanche, F., in press. Negotiating fitness, from consumption to virtuous production. *Sociology of sport journal*. doi:<http://dx.doi.org/10.1123/ssj.2013-0115>
- Park, R.J., 1989. Healthy, moral, and strong: educational views of exercise and athletics in nineteenth-century America. In: K. Grover, ed. *Fitness in American culture: images of health, sport and the body*. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 123–168.
- Pavlidis, A. and Fullagar, S., 2015. The pain and pleasure of roller derby: thinking through affect and subjectification. *International journal of cultural studies*, 18 (5), 483–499. doi:[10.1177/1367877913519309](https://doi.org/10.1177/1367877913519309)
- Petersen, A., 1997. Risk, governance and the new public health. In: A. Petersen and R. Bunton, eds. *Foucault, health and medicine*. London: Routledge, 189–206.
- Phoenix, C., Faulkner, G., and Sparkes, A.C., 2005. Athletic identity and self-ageing: the dilemma of exclusivity. *Psychology of sport and exercise*, 6 (3), 335–347.
- Phoenix, C. and Orr, N., 2014. Pleasure: a forgotten dimension of physical activity in older age. *Social science & medicine*, 115, 94–102.
- Pollio, H.E., Henley, T., and Thompson, C.J., 1997. *The phenomenology of everyday life*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Pronger, B., 2002. *Body fascism: salvation in the technology of physical fitness*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.
- Rader, B.G., 1991. The quest for self-sufficiency and the new strenuousness: reflections on the strenuous life of the 1970s and the 1980s. *Journal of sport history*, 18 (2), 255–266.
- Rojek, C., 2009. *The labour of leisure: the culture of free time*. London: Sage.
- Sansone, D., 1988. *Greek athletics and the genesis of sport*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

- Sassatelli, R., 1999a. Interaction order and beyond: a field analysis of body culture within fitness gyms. *Body & society*, 5 (2–3), 227–248.
- Sassatelli, R., 1999b. Fitness gyms and the local organization of experience. *Sociological research online*, 4 (3). Available from: <http://www.socresonline.org.uk/4/3/sassatelli/html>
- Sassatelli, R., 2005. The commercialization of discipline: keep-fit culture and its values. In: M. Fraser and M. Greco, eds. *The body: a reader*. New York: Routledge, 283–287.
- Sassatelli, R., 2006a. Beyond health and beauty: a critical perspective on fitness culture. In: G. Boswell and F. Poland, eds. *Women's minds, women's bodies: interdisciplinary approaches to women's health*. Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 77–88.
- Sassatelli, R., 2006b. Fit bodies: fitness culture and the gym. In: F. Bonami, M.L. Frisa, and S. Tonchi, eds. *Human game: winners and losers*. Milan: Fondazione Pitti Discovery, 252–261.
- Sassatelli, R., 2007. *Consumer culture: history, theory and politics*. London: Sage.
- Sassatelli, R., 2010. *Fitness culture: gyms and the commercialization of discipline and fun*. Houndsmills: Palgrave.
- Sassatelli, R., 2015. Healthy cities and instrumental leisure: the paradox of fitness gyms as urban phenomena. *Modern Italy*, 20 (3), 237–249. doi:10.1080/13532944.2015.1065239
- Shusterman, R., 1999. Somaesthetics: a disciplinary proposal. *The journal of aesthetics and art criticism*, 57 (3), 299–313.
- Smith Maguire, J., 2008a. *Fit for consumption: sociology and the business of fitness*. London: Routledge.
- Smith Maguire, J., 2008b. Leisure and the obligation of self-work: an examination of the fitness field. *Leisure studies*, 27 (1), 59–75.
- Stewart, B. and Smith, A.C.T., 2014. The significance of critical incidents in explaining gym use amongst adult populations. *Qualitative research in sport, exercise and health*, 6 (1), 45–61.
- Stewart, B., Smith, A., and Moroney, B., 2013. Capital building through gym work. *Leisure studies*, 32 (5), 542–560.
- Thompson, C.J., Locander, W.B., and Pollio, H.R., 1989. Putting consumer experience back into consumer research: the philosophy and method of existential-phenomenology. *Journal of consumer research*, 16 (2), 133–146.
- Waring, A., 2008. Health club use and 'lifestyle': exploring the boundaries between work and leisure. *Leisure studies*, 27 (3), 295–309.
- Whorton, J.C., 1982. *Crusaders for fitness: the history of American health reformers*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Willis, S., 1990. Work(ing) out. *Cultural studies*, 4 (1), 3–19.
- Windram-Geddes, M., 2013. Fearing fatness and feeling fat: encountering affective spaces of physical activity. *Emotion, space and society*, 9, 42–49.
- Wright, K., 2008. Theorizing therapeutic culture: past influences, future directions. *Journal of sociology*, 44 (4), 321–336.
- Wright, K., 2011. *The rise of the therapeutic society: psychological knowledge and the contradictions of cultural change*. Washington, DC: New Academia Publishers.