

SOCIAL ASPECTS OF HEALTH AND FITNESS

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The Dialectic of Freedom and Discipline: an Examination of the Fitness Field

Abstract: The article aims to examine how fitness centres fall in line with the reflexive project of the self and active policy of choice. Such a perspective makes the gym a contradictory category involved in a number of individual and social processes connected with freedom and discipline, control and pleasure or work and leisure.

Drawing on qualitative research I wanted to see how the interviewees used the term fitness, how it related to their everyday life, what sort of commitments and responsibility it elicited and the implications arising thereof, and to explore the ambivalence based on a complex interplay of tension and release in fitness.

Through the empirical discussion, I show that the reflective attitude is rarely a matter of choice, but rather a result of pressure or social-cultural obligations. Self-discipline as an element of fitness gives the illusion of being causative in the sense that it is strongly entangled with expert knowledge systems.

Keywords: fitness, reflexive project, paradoxes of reflexivity, ambivalent experience, freedom, pleasure, discipline, control, commercialization

Introduction

The phenomenon of popularity of fitness activity should be traced back to the mid-1950s. In the United States, within the context of a broader trend described by Western social researchers as the 'fitness culture.' At the same time, along the increase in prosperity and technology, researchers began to draw attention to the evident decline in physical activity and a growing problem of overweight among the American population. The rise of social campaigns for the promotion of amateur sports resulted in an increase in the popularity of activities called "fitness" (Sassatelli 2010 for: Olko 2015: 3). Fitness clubs became designated spaces for different types of sports.

The arrival of fitness in Europe, as one of the core components of active fitness, took place almost two decades after its American launch—in the early to mid-1980s. Since then, usage of the term 'fitness' in Europe has extended beyond describing the optimal state of bodily performance to include a set of ideas, practices and products geared towards attaining this state (see: Bingle 2005: 240). Fitness centres are now a fast-developing leisure business with well-developed infrastructure, a fitness industry, and a global market featuring annual growth of above 10%¹. The first Polish 'health clubs' opened in the 1980s, and

¹ Internet newspaper: www.biznes.newseria.pl, obtained 2017.04.28.

at the beginning offered mostly aerobics performed to music; local gyms were then identified with workout, building up body mass (so-called muscle men), mass gainers and food supplements. It was not until the middle of the 1990s that fitness centres started to develop a broader and more modern range of services.

The proliferation that began in the 1980s plus global access make fitness one of the most popular areas of leisure, reflecting such features of late modernity as increasing individualisation, commercialization and instrumentalisation (Roberts 1999; Pantzar, Shove 2005). As such, involvement in a fitness club, both by producers and consumers, is not only a certain type of practice (e.g. exercising with a personal trainer or reading fitness magazines) but also, or perhaps mainly, a contribution to the production and reproduction of the fitness club in order to legitimise it as a significant social value. Any attempt at understanding keep-fit culture, that is, the meanings and functions associated with it, must therefore involve a wider context of transition from the reactive to a pro-active life policy, understood as a self-realisation policy, active or reflective shaping of the body, self and lifestyle (Giddens 2001: 296–298; Giddens, Beck, Lasch 2009).

The unquestionable success of fitness centres may be explained by the fact that social imagination has become infected with the imperative of a professional look, a slim and sporty body, and the necessity to accomplish the broad project of self-improvement in the public sphere and to build physical capital in the private sphere. Modern selves no longer merely bear witness to the body-in-itself, but to the body-for-itself, the body-for-others, and what the body can do (Baudrillard 1998). Fitness clubs are also sites where Valentine writes (1999) that bodily boundaries are contested. Bodies are increasingly viewed as nomadic, and the negotiation of bodily space has therefore become an urgent existential pursuit:

An individual may experience multi-faceted, overlapping, and fluid understandings of how they should be producing and regulating the space of their body which may not be completely congruent or consistent, and sets up tensions and conflict between different bodily ideals and sets of regulatory practices in different locations. (Valentine 1999: 348)

Gwen Bingle (2005: 242) indicates in the discussion on the progressive rationalisation and instrumentalization of gym usage that fitness has reinstated movement as a remedy against the stress of everyday life, thus transforming fitness into a fascinating arena for the negotiation of work and leisure, control and pleasure, freedom and discipline. On the one hand, as he writes (*ibid*), the practice of fitness was clearly conceived of as the ideal leisure counterpoint to mind and body, while on the other corporations and health insurers were quick in the uptake of this trend. They realised that providing movement compensation to workers might bring a sizeable return on investments, due to it increasing bodily resilience and performance.

The paper aims to examine how fitness centres fall in line with the above-mentioned reflexive projects of the self and active policy of choice and a lifestyle. According to the ethnographic and interpretative approach in sociology (Angrosino 2010; Kostera, Krzyworzeka 2012), my objectives were: firstly, to observe and access the natural environment of the respondents' activity. Hence, over a period of three months, using the participating observation method (Kostera, Krzyworzeka 2012; Spradley 2012), I accompanied the respondents during the training sessions, observed their exercises, the dynamics of their training, the

way they interacted with the trainer and how they operated within the group and within the fitness space. Secondly, by using semi-structure technique (Gudkova 2014; Kvale 2010) I wanted to see how the interviewees used the term fitness, how it related to their everyday life, what sort of commitments and responsibility it elicited and the implications arising thereof, and to explore the ambivalence based on a complex interplay of tension and release in fitness.

In order to observe the processes more thoroughly, I selected persons involved in body shaping and muscle building exercises (such as: functional training, tabata, callisthenics, ABS, ABT, TBC and shape). The respondents were asked the following questions:

What is fitness to you?

Why do you go to the fitness?

What kind of experiences does a fitness club provide (to you)?

What does it feel like before/after a workout?

What goals do you want to achieve at a fitness club?

I quote extracts from individual in-depth interviews (N=40) that were a part of a broader research project entitled *Perception, adaptation, resistance. Strategies of thinking and acting in planning leisure activities in Poland?* (N116 27464). The interviewees were men (5 persons) and women (10 persons) aged 30–35, inhabitants of Poznan who went to the biggest fitness centres in Poznan at least twice a week, and had been going there for at least one year. The interviewees were recruited from people I had earlier interviewed about leisure time.

Due to formal limitation, this paper presents only a part of the material thus accumulated, and describes the main tendencies that came to light during the interviews.

Fitness as a Changeable Experience

In spite of this performative shift and the widespread adoption of fitness, what exactly is meant by fitness is much less clear. As the evolutionary biologist Stearns (1976: 4) wrote, fitness is “something everyone understands but no one can define precisely.” Some interviewees felt the same way. For others, fitness implied “*the mobilisation of ‘subconscious’ forces so that the ‘seed’ could be ‘planted in your head’*” (F, 34, personal adviser). This woman clearly indicated that *fitness is in your head, it’s a mental phenomenon*. Another interviewee stated: “*When I go to the gym I carry out what I had in mind. I align my actions with what was on my mind*” (M, 35, pet-shop employee). Fitness seemed to be a task that she linked to the process of bridging intention and action.

One of the male interviewees said that there was something internal in relation to the activity, something worth salvaging or feeling good about. He explained that while sometimes he could “feel a little defeated” after a workout, the fact that he “went to the gym and did something” made him “feel good.”

The gym also reflects the inherent procesual and changeable. The understanding is never complete, but is driven by the dynamics of social context, individual reflexivity, activity and readiness to act: *I don’t know, it’s hard to say what it means to me to come here, I guess it is always something different: sometimes I’m here because a friend is coming, another*

day—because I've put on 2 kg and I'm scared there'll be more; yet another day because I want to, I need to relieve all the stress (M, 35, businessman). As previously pointed out, the gym is a category negotiated every day, one that varies depending on time and situation: “I thought of myself in different categories when I weighed 10 kg more; I exercised more and in a different way, it was hard work then while now it is almost a daily ritual and a pleasure” (F, 33, educator).

1. Relaxation and Pleasure

As the majority of the interviewees confirmed, taking advantage of the opportunities a fitness club has to offer is an increasingly popular form of leisure, relaxation, pleasure and improvement of mental well-being, looks, physical fitness and health. For two of them, fitness is mainly a way of driving out thoughts about work:

“I stop thinking of the backlog of work and concentrate on the work of my muscles” (M, 35, pet-shop employee)

“I switch off completely, all I can hear is my pulse and my muscle” (M, 34, surgeon).

For another one fitness relieves work-related tension and is an opportunity for calming down and regaining one's balance:

“I let off all tension from work, it goes away with my sweat” (F, 30 years old, marketer);

“Everyday we take on roles which do not suit us, but which let us make money; here is where I can release it” (F, 34, personal adviser);

“I switch off the phone and I am alone with my exercise schedule (...) first I go to the sauna, then the stepper, back to the sauna, shower. No holiday can help me relieve tension so well” (M, 35, manager);

“I regain balance, first of my body, then of my mind, then the whole of me, all through physical effort” (M, 32, teacher).

Most participants described fitness as a space within which they felt ‘good,’ ‘happy’ and ‘great.’ One of the women (F, 33, instructor) was more explicit about the biological side of this feeling, explaining how “*these little endorphins flying around your body are quite nice.*” Similarly, another woman emphasised that “*going to the gym can set me up for the day in terms of energy and mood because of the release of serotonin*” (F, 30, economist). For a 33-year-old man “*the improvement in mood and endorphins running through you*” after a workout “*is a major motivating factor for going back [to the gym] the next day.*” Therefore, the gym is also a site of relaxation, relief and improvement of both physical and mental well-being, as one of the respondents noted: “*I feel very good after the effort, and I feel so light, I have so much extra energy*” (F, 30, marketer). The majority of respondents indicated that the pleasure resulted from the feeling of having achieved something significant (specifically from completing an exercise):

“It's like a happy feeling, a feeling of accomplishment” (F, 33, broker);

“I feel great that I did it...I always feel great after a workout...I feel that I have achieved something important” (F, 33, instructor);

“It’s at the end of the day when I’m in bed when I feel the best about what I did in the gym that evening, there’s nothing better than the sleep I get after working out” (F, 30, economist).

2. Tiredness and Compulsion

The reflexive and dynamic approach is disproved by those respondents who explicitly emphasise also tiredness and pain as elements of fitness experiences. One can conclude from their statements that experiencing the place and oneself occurs through effort and tiredness, being the values constituting the identity of the place itself and those taking advantage of its offer.

“Tiredness and pain are the preconditions to a real workout. A real workout is when you tire yourself out to such extent that you can hardly walk out of the gym. Muscle sores are good because then I know the muscles got a hard time. There is no workout without tiredness, it’s got to be tough. Otherwise, what’s the point of coming to the gym?” (F, 33, instructor).

For some it provides pleasant tiredness combined with satisfaction and pleasure: *“I feel exhausted, but my mental state is much better”* (F, 30, English teacher). The same respondent also emphasised the pressure accompanying the exercise:

“The emotions and the attitude keeps changing, and suddenly there is pressure. You’ve got to do it, even if you don’t feel like it and it’s a very thin line. In my case everything is mixed up—I feel inner pressure and, at the same, I get so much satisfaction and so much pleasure out of it.”

Another respondent, exercising for two years, said that for long those close to him have been suggesting he is addicted to exercise. He himself has not contradicted it and claims that:

“In a sense, yes, I am addicted, my girlfriend told me so more than once. I’ve got to do it, I keep thinking about it, I buy various supplements, I’ve got friends here, this is my life. I need to tire myself out, need to exercise my body, even if it’s not always easy, it’s not always pleasant.”

The statement of the above 33-year-old fitness club instructor pointed to all the characteristics of muscle dysmorphia, such as: obsessive interest in body-shaping and muscle-building exercise, obsession with weight and supplements enhancing the development of muscle tissue. His daily timetable was based on lengthy and intensive physical activities, which were difficult to skip. Due to his involvement in fitness the respondent lacked time for other activities, did not have a social life and felt lonely. He described his everyday life as follows:

“I exercise every day, I get up at 5.30 a.m. and I go to the gym before work, and after work I also work out for an hour or an hour and a half. I’ve been doing this every day for more than a year (...). I feel there is something wrong with me, I can’t help my own pressure, but I just can’t stop, I can’t imagine life without fitness, my body would die.”

3. Body Discipline

Fitness, as mentioned earlier, is for the respondents both a way of building physical fitness and shaping the body. Thus most interviewees saw sport as a visual and aesthetic category

(which is deeply discussed below), with a goal to improve looks, shape the body and lose weight, and with the benefit of being slim, sporty and attractive:

“I’m sculpting the body. It’s now very important, good appearance is a success” (M, 35, self employed);

“I’m getting back into shape after having twins, there is always something to improve, lose and shape” (F, 34, young mother);

“This is where I want to become slim and attractive, I don’t feel good with myself now, and I want to lose 5–7 kg” (F, 32, nurse).

These statements illustrate the conviction that social attractiveness, life satisfaction and success depend on how a person’s looks, body or style meet the requirement of social adequacy rather than on that person’s personality. According to this belief, a slender, slim and sporty person should be satisfied with life and predestined for success more than someone heavy, plump or overweight.

The variety of experiences, interests, forms and ways of experience make it difficult to provide one clear definition of a fitness club, or to list all of its features. While the fitness club as such was designed to take care of the body by offering it a chance to renew, it is also a place where users are involved in a broader project of self-improvement, taking care of looks, and putting into effect tips from the world of fashion. These contradictions/tendencies can be found in the accounts of fitness club users that I shall present below.

The Dialectic of Freedom and Discipline

In their statements, the interviewees usually related fitness to the idea of freedom by referring to ‘freedom from’ (work, chores, and other people). 33 year old instructor said: *I don’t have to do anything else, I concentrate on myself—I am free from anything else*. Similarly, a 30-year-old woman, an economist, asserted: *I am free from any unnecessary thoughts, I focus on the exercises, and I get the rhythm*. Within their meaning the idea of freedom was also expressed by referring to the process of freeing the body from toxins, fat and backache: *my freedom is when I feel light*, 30-year-old woman said (F, 30, English teacher).

For some of them exercise had become a way of negotiating the area of personal freedom with themselves and others and the right to decide about their life and to express them (*freedom to*): *“My freedom is my strength and my power, it is when I can see the effects of my actions, when my body becomes what I want it to be—strong and clean; when I felt I have control over it”* (F, 32, educator).

In the respondents’ statements one can clearly hear how personal freedom is gained through control and achieved measurable effects. This is often accompanied by a sense of pleasure and satisfaction. The interviewee referred to an interesting aspect of fitness, which is a combination of discipline and pleasure. Pleasure is derived from discipline: *“I exercise because I like it, and it gives me pleasure. The pleasure comes from the control of the body, with sweat and fatigue”* (F, 35, advertising). Other interviewees also experienced this kind of pleasure: *“I feel satisfaction and pleasure only when I’m exhausted; it is only then that*

I'm proud of myself. This is incredible: great pain, great exhaustion and the equally great joy" (M, 34, surgeon). Motivation is usually provided by a personal trainer who encourages the customers to work out and to whom the responsibility for their self-discipline is delegated.

Most exercisers, both women and men, stated that they regained a feeling of control and negotiating their freedom in the context of taking control over their own body; confirming its status as its personal value and making it an important element—and even a subject—of the fight for independence:

"I want my body to be pretty and slim; I want to take care of it. I know it's a great effort and I have to be systematic, but nothing in life is free" (F, 30, beautician);

"I've given birth to two children and my body does not look the same as it did. I will soon get back to work, and I want to look good, I want to enjoy my body's vitality for a long time to come" (F, 34, young mother).

All the interviewees realised that today good looks are considered and are strongly connected with the image of a modern person. They also realised that the body not given to social examination, not prepared for it properly, is a private body that is excluded from the social play—it is a body to which nobody will pay attention, which nobody will appreciate or admire; a body that is prone to stigmatisation and exclusion. Therefore, a fitness centre is a place where the biological becomes social, given to corrective-controlling practices, and a shaped body becomes a manifestation of a certain lifestyle. The interviews revealed ambivalence with regard to body and looks, which are the arena of confrontation between the 'I' aspiring for full subjectivity and the over-regulative social system. Interestingly, there is no proof of clear social-cultural objection, nobody tries to argue this. Such reflexivity performs at least two essential functions. Firstly, it confirms the adequacy of choices: *"this is where the body is built and today good looks is half the battle, no doubt about it"* (F, 30, economist); *"you get down to work, you exercise, slim down, increase your attractiveness and those who appreciate it will probably notice it"* (F, 30, beautician), which helps continue the long process of self-work: *"you can't rebel against it, you just have to work on yourself; it might be shallow, but such are the expectations, such is life"* (F, 35, teacher). Secondly, it minimizes the everyday risk and maintains people's faith in numerous expert systems, from statistics to personal trainers: *"I believe that taking care of yourself—daily exercise—will make my life longer"* (W, 32, paediatrician); *"perhaps when I start thinking of how much money I spend on my exercise I will decide it doesn't make sense..., no, it's better not to think"* (M, 35, businessman).

It would seem that with fitness there is no excuse for anyone: *I also go to the gym because I let myself go a little. When you work all day long you can limit your food, but I'm not sure this is a good idea so I guess it's better to go to the gym. Slim people need that, too. I think even slim people are fit for some reason* (W, 30, marketer). This woman considers a workout important for pragmatic reasons, performance of means rather than the fulfilment of ends. Another interviewee's narration could be defined as 'failed experience,'² which provides a useful counter to the argument that participation in fitness activities is

² For van Alphen (1999: 25), the notion 'failed experience' designates those instances of trauma in which linguistic, reflexive, and conceptual mediation is resisted.

evaluated on an instrumental basis: *“Appearance is very important in my job. If you’re attractive, you’re important. I don’t like fitness—I treat it as a duty. What gives me satisfaction is my appearance and probably the fact that I’m more self-confident at work”* (M, 35, businessman).

1. A New Tiredness

The indicated control and pleasure are strongly related to experiencing tiredness in the fitness club. One can risk saying that in professional fitness centres not only does tiredness undergo a major transformation, but a new type is generated there (Mroczkowska, Chajbos 2016). As indicated by the respondents, in the fitness club there should occur a process of neutralising the mental tiredness induced by stress at work or an overload of responsibility, and the physical activity is to eliminate this tiredness; however, it is not a process of simply eliminating it. It is more about the exchange of the subjective, psychological tiredness with the physical one, of the muscles, that is a process during which the tiredness acquires new characteristics. The respondents attach very positive significance to it and make it an indispensable element of their “fitness existence.” As claimed by one of the respondents, tiredness is closely related to how demanding the workout was. The closer we are to the breaking point, the more muscle soreness the next day, the greater the satisfaction from the undertaken effort.

The new type of tiredness—the one “produced” during exercise, similarly to the so-called beneficial stress—*eustres*, has a stimulating effect on exercisers and, paradoxically, lets them work even more and do so more effectively. It is no coincidence that the fitness club members assure that it is there and through tiredness that they can mobilise themselves better to reach their goals to such extent that will grant them satisfaction and pleasure. The mobilisation occurs owing to rituals producing an emotional mood characteristic of the experience (Collins 2011).

The induced tiredness is also a measure of the implementation of the plan and the extent of approaching the desired objectives, such as: weight loss, improved physical fitness, increased performance etc. Thus, if the level of tiredness brought about by group exercises on their completion is high and clearly felt by an individual, they can experience happiness, self-satisfaction or pride. However, in the case when it is very low and hardly noticeable, the earlier experienced empowerment will evaporate. Both for the interviewees and bloggers a lack of appropriate tiredness equals guilt, shame and disappointment. The latter are common in the culture of high expectations and reflexively-built identities where setting oneself aims is the basis for defining one’s identity, and the degree of their completion—a source of self-esteem.

2. Control and Self-discipline

As we can see, fitness is not spontaneous, there is a strong need to plan and control it. It can be a way to release stress, but certainly not a way to forget oneself. As one of the interviewees observed, *“everything has its goal and meaning: just like in a schedule that lists activities to be done in a certain order, and which is based on repetition and control”* (F, 30,

beautician). Exercise must be well organised in order to bring results. Exceptions and unexpected changes are undesirable. Control is reinforced by expert knowledge/power in the fitness club, e.g. fitness coaching or a personal trainer, whose aim is to help the exerciser to improve his or her performance through reflection of how a particular ability and/or knowledge are used. Control is exercised on several levels. Firstly, it is self-control, i.e. control of the body or eating habits. A member of a fitness club internalises the imposed discipline and an exercise regime, and transforms it into auto-or self-discipline. Doing sport regularly helps to keep self-discipline in the effective use of spare time, daily time management, and in taking care of one's looks: "*I am better organised, my whole day is better managed*" (F, 30, teacher); "*I have more energy and I work better*" (F, 30, economist). A man who usually exercises after work observes: "*endorphins are produced during exercise, and I have more energy for life in spite of being tired*" (M, 35, businessman). They slowly become supervisors of themselves and are aware of the potential and permanent supervision (Foucault 2003: 191–220). Exercise gives individuals the key to understanding themselves and their bodies with their limitations and possibilities. Each exercise lets one discover a new part of the body, particularly when it involves pain and effort, which—paradoxically—confirms that everything is going according to plan. More often than not, the process of making oneself more attractive transforms into a sequence of desperate steps taken to create a certain image:

"2 years ago, I had more time, and I was going to a fitness club every day. I exercised a lot, I lost 12 pounds, and I felt addicted. My friends helped me. Now, it's better, I exercise 2–3 times a week, and I don't feel such a compulsion" (F, 35, English teacher).

A person devoted to perfecting the body slowly loses control over this process or the ability to perceive the body adequately, as well as control over the quality and quantity of food eaten. The power over oneself is manifested in self-discipline.

Secondly, control is an integral part of the expert-knowledge system. Contrary to self-discipline that involves individual ability to achieve goals independently, through one's own efforts, control comes from outside (institutional and expert) sources, or 'others' who offer various kinds of explanations and ways of dealing with the situation.³ The activity of an individual is reduced to the process of decision-making based on trust that certain sources and beliefs are right. Power thus understood is the power of persuasion. It belongs to those who can best explain, describe, and eliminate individual tensions and fears connected with results and the programme.⁴ Influence on others is not direct or immediate, it is realised over time through slow assimilation and internalisation of tips: "*I know I have to trust my trainers and be ready for working with them long-term*" (M, 35, merchant).

³ Contacts with experts are regular, making them more credible, and often involve closeness. Trainers represent expert systems, the individual indirectly trusts particular abstract systems and the guarantees that they give.

⁴ A professional trainer should have the skill to train, from making exercise plans, through anatomy of the human body, to tactic knowledge, as well as skills combining psychology, sociology and interpersonal communication, which facilitate their influence on the trainees.

Commercialization

Consumption plays a pivotal role in the processes referred to above, since it is through the wares of the market place that the production of fitness is most often accomplished. Smith Maguire (2008: 196) explains further:

The prospect of shopping for a newly fit body is a means to reward discipline with pleasure... Reconciling the hedonism of consumer culture with the asceticism of exercising by linking them as cause and effect (work out now; shop later) serves as an engine for consumption, and perpetuates the double bind of indulgence and a restraint characteristic of consumer culture.

Customers of sports centres are basically fashion-aware consumptionists. For some, consumption is almost entirely limited to investing in their looks and body: *“yes, it is a trend, but a good trend, because it lets you take care of yourself, and it’s fashionable and costly, especially if you want to be professional; it suits me”* (F, 33, broker). Investing in new food fashions and new exercise options⁵ is also important, which makes the fitness club environment particularly sensitive to new trends and consumption trends that they immediately follow. The exerciser is expected to be visible to others, therefore the fitness club environment is sensitive to looks and clothes: all new trends are quickly identified and adapted, and equally quickly devaluated when fashion changes or the product becomes old in the market.

Contrary to the quite common criticism of the consumerist attitude, the users of fitness clubs do not see it as wrong or ambivalent. Consumption ambitions are expressed openly, they are not perceived as wrong or unacceptable. Being consumption-oriented does not provoke a feeling of shame or require additional justification: *“I know, different people come here for different things, some want to be seen as having money, others really want to lose weight, but it is a place for all who can afford it”* (M, 35, merchant). Another person remarked: *“It is not cheap entertainment, but I can afford it. I chose fitness because it is more professional, and it motivates me. I need to have a prepared set of exercises, and I have to be sure that they will bring results. I also like good clothes and shoes”* (F, 30, English teacher).

The fitness club is becoming a place that quickly satisfies the needs, wants and whims of the customer (Bauman 2006), or rather gives them the hope that they will be satisfied. Thanks to the equipment and programme selected at the sports centre, one can reduce or eliminate the time and distance between the wish and its realisation, as machines organise their exercise down to the minute. A quick walk compared with a walk on a specialist machine at the gym becomes too slow. A well prepared and planned exercise (often with some support) allows one to burn fat or gain muscle in a much shorter period. Satisfaction increases as one exercises and is the function of quickness and effectiveness of performance: *“everything is faster, more professional and planned here, I know there will be results”* (M, 35, manager). A 35-year-old businessman states: *“I know there’s no adventure, there’s no fresh air, but I like it. I need measurements, good equipment, water and supplements.”* As

⁵ As the interviewees showed, and also as research of ‘bodyLIFE’ magazine confirms (www.bodylife.com.pl), the following activities are currently the most popular: aeroboxing, indoor cycling, belly dancing and various forms of dance, healthy spine activities, and Pilates.

Featherstone (2007: 45) explained, postmodern culture requires a controlled decontrol of emotions in order to balance the instrumental and express dimensions of consumption. Being a good exerciser requires self-discipline, being a good consumer requires self-restraint. In other words, (as mentioned above) the consumption of pleasures is made permissible through the discipline of exercise.

Smith Maguire (2008a) considers the connection between fitness and consumption to be a kind of somatic pragmatism rather than a mere symptom of a narcissistic personality. A similar thought was developed in Waring's (2008: 306) analysis of how fitness and the pursuit of physical capital complement the 'work style' of the urban middle class by demonstrating and reinforcing the virtues of competition, success and professionalism:

...the tacit expectation that individual employees [in a professional context] should engage in health and fitness practices...creates a situation whereby employees can raise their physical capital and demonstrate certain positive traits...In this way, the city workplace can be regarded as a competitive social space and in turn professionals appeared to be drawn to the premier club environment as a means of enhancing their competitive edge, assuming that fitness is some kind of prize, something they can compete for in their quest for social achievement. (Waring 2008: 304)

In this sense, both Smith Maguire's and Waring's analyses of the centrality of fitness (as physical capital) for executive class lifestyles resonate particularly well with the work of Giddens (2001), who argued more generally that reflexive lifestyles and investments are not merely narcissistic defences against socio-political conditions. Rather, they are also positive appropriations of circumstances in which the sign function of the body impinges upon the conduct of everyday life (compare also Neville 2012: 56–58).

Discussion and Conclusion

Fitness is entangled in social and cultural context of on going transformations but, at the same time, it is a result of individual agency. The fitness club is a space through which individuals experience themselves and others. By making choices about fitness activities, not only do individuals satisfy their needs but they also verify who they are or who they would like to be. They experience how their reality is constructed and what rules govern it. In this way, they learn who they are, what their abilities and limitations are, and what needs and expectations they have. The fitness club is more than a temporary experience of the reality surrounding them: it is also a process of changing definitions, reflexion and negotiation.

Firstly, reflexivity that is defined as a process of self-reference or as an act of responding to the environment is of a strictly reactive character (Drozdowski 2009: 274). It is a result of gathering knowledge and systematising it in order to be more effective. Thus it is a vehicle of individual aspirations understood as self-construction. As the interviews demonstrate, although exercising in a fitness club provides intrinsic pleasure or a sense of freedom achieved on personal rules, it is also a strictly controlled process. The analysis shows that the reflective attitude is rarely a matter of choice, but rather a result of pressure or social-cultural obligations. While fitness clubs create a space to express one and to shape and confirm one's self-image they are also a sign-function of wealth and prestige as they follow certain social fashions and patterns. The body, on the other hand, becomes an object

of new negotiations and imprinting new meanings, and the achieved looks justify one's choices.

Secondly, the interviewees believe that the ability to self-discipline the body with modern technologies of power is the most important test of both individual agency and physical capacity. Therefore, the measure of freedom is the ability to manage one's body and act reflexively in a defined situation although reflective submission to a top-down defined situation, in spite of choice being an autonomous value. As Bellah noted (2007), more effort an individual makes to enjoy their freedom, and to make choices, the higher the probability of becoming expert-dependent and conformist, less intrinsic and more rational and calculating. It is clear that more work on autonomy is accompanied by more work on self-discipline and by the pluralization of the techniques of self-creation or self-control. Self-discipline as an element of fitness gives the illusion of being causative in the sense that it is strongly entangled with expert knowledge systems.

Thirdly, the multitude and variety of individual policies regarding the body makes one's presence in a fitness club more subjective and difficult to interpret, since all the reflective effort remains within the private sphere of the individual. In-depth analysis of the interviews demonstrates that membership in a fitness club implies social profits of a certain kind, understood as a new dimension of inter-subjectivity. This is created and sustained by co-presence rather than by conversation; by sharing a space and participating in a sequence of events. The users of fitness clubs do not expect others to have a similar worldview or be good debaters, but need them to confirm that their choices are good and socially functional. In other words, they are needed to justify choices or evaluate achievements. Individuals act like double-agents: they guarantee a sense of safety but also remind one of obligations to oneself.

Finally, fitness exists in an uneasy relationship with freedom, control, discipline and pleasure. Smith Maguire (2008) writes that the representations of fitness are constructed as a means of inserting the virtues of discipline and productivity into spaces typically associated with free time and freedom from obligation:

Exercise is not itself pleasurable, but is a matter of discipline; pleasure comes from the effect one's fitter body has upon others, the satisfaction in having made 'good' use of one's leisure time...Even when fitness activities are represented as enjoyable, they are rarely constructed as ends in themselves. Exercise is instrumentally rationalized as the means to other ends (Smith Maguire 2008: 196).

Sassatelli (2007: 168–169) explains that time spent at the gym is not time spent free of all rules. Instead it is rather like work, based on shared rules and, at times, rigidly codified practices, e.g. it requires planning, organisation, time-management, evaluation and re-evaluation, and so on. The implication of these analyses is that the cultural imagery of leisure, recast through the lens of fitness practices, is constructed as a sphere in which freedom is increasingly being replaced by the obligation of self-work. Additionally, the reversal in the roles of production and consumption has also played an important role in this process. Since it is the desire for consumption that plays a formative role in shaping individuals' relations to their bodies, the production of modern consuming bodies always presupposes that their conversion and consumption of pleasure is made permissible through the discipline of exercise.

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