

## Young Women's Fitness Practices: A Critical View

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The aim of this paper is to show how young Norwegian women's fitness practices are interwoven with cultural ideals about how the body should look and be exercised (Young 1980; Bordo 1990; Markula 1995). Specifically, we discuss how young women at a Norwegian fitness centre deal with current societal demands for doing exercise. A central theme is how young women's performance is embedded in continuous *negotiations* between doing fitness exercise or "staying home on the sofa." Currently, exercising seems to be regarded as an important activity for perceiving women as "clever and good." The expression "to be in shape" has high value, in contrast to the negative associations attached to being lazy or bad when they "stay on the sofa." We found that women's negotiations about exercising or not exercising are closely connected to their own categories of *being good* (i.e. of moral worth) or lazy. Exercising thus plays a central part in women's self-acceptance and self-esteem. Borrowing the categories, "pure" and "impure" from Douglas (1984) and Solheim (1998) we understand the performance of regular fitness exercise as a modern ritual that keeps the universe of established meanings in order (Sassatelli 1999 and 2001). In so doing, we hope to shed further light on fitness performances and their consequences.

In recent national, as well as international, health strategies there is an increasing interest in physical activity and fitness practices.<sup>1</sup> To achieve balance between activity and rest is regarded as important to maintain health and a good life (Grimsbø 2003). Today, fitness praxis and physical activity have achieved high status in Western societies especially, but also in other affluent, industrialized, urban modernities, and are regarded as tools for achieving better health and quality of life. The importance of "good physical fitness" is portrayed in popular fitness magazines as well as in European Union documents, for example, Sassatelli (2001). According to Oja and Tuxworth (1995), good physical fitness is regarded as an indispensable component of overall well-being, since physical activity leads to more energy, better health and the ability to manage everyday life. To a certain extent, current research confirms this (see Sassatelli 2001; Hjelmeland Grimsbø 2003).

On the other hand, research has also shown that over-doing exercise can harm and damage the body, leading to deteriorated health (Kernttä 2001). Getting rid of 'stress' and finding a balance between activity and rest seems to represent a significant problem for people in Western societies (Wainwright and Calnan 2002). In this paper we draw upon current research which maintains that modernity requires people to process unpredictable and rapid changes in society. The body is regarded as a site where such changes are made manifest and expressed (Johannisson 1996 and 2001). In order to meet such rapid social change, a strong and hardened body is seen as more resistant than a weak and soft body (Young 1980; Bordo 1990; Markula 1995).

Today, in Norway, commercial fitness centers are institutional marketplaces that offer intensive training to achieve such stronger, harder bodies and — it is assumed — better health. In fitness center advertising, their self-presentation is built on promising results from participating in praxis. For example, “we guarantee a better shape, you will definitely have results, and your quality of life will increase” (<http://www.elixia.no/>). Offering solutions to problems in life and health are central to the self-presentation of commercial fitness businesses (Sassatelli 2001; Steen-Johnson 2002).

### Material and Method

The data for this essay was collected at a fitness centre during a period of four months in autumn of 2002 (see Hjelmeland Grimsbø 2003) through participant-observation and qualitative research interviews. The literature on interviews as a research method presents a large variety of approaches (Atkinson, Coffey and Delamont 2001). Here, we understand the interview according to Rapley as “dependent on the local interactional contingencies in which the speakers draw from, and co-construct, broader social norms” (2002: 303). According to Denzin (2001) (who also provided guidelines for our interviews) mutual constructions and reflexive processes are at work between interviewer and subject interviewed. The researcher herself is also situated within a communicative context involving the field site and the informants (Engelsrud 2005; Bengtsson 1999).

Our informants are not seen as isolated subjects, as mechanical bodies, or as rational actors, but as *complex subjects*. We chose six women, aged between twenty-five and thirty-five to participate in the qualitative interviews. None of them had been practicing fitness exercise less than half a year, or more than six years. The reason for choosing this age category is that young women represent 70% of the members at Norwegian fitness centers (Bakken-Ulseth 2003; Lloyd 1996). Young women are regarded as being concerned about and occupied with their body shape, health and appearance. In fitness discourse generally, there exists a general expectation that they will be directed towards young women (Markula 1995). The data we collected from the interviews was taped, transcribed and analyzed in detail (Hjelmeland Grimsbø 2003).

Our results showed that the exercising women often felt training to be a lonely and vulnerable project. During training they had limited contact with other participants and suffered from this lack of personal contact. Ambivalent emotions arose during the training. The women presented fitness exercise as exhausting during practice, but pleasant afterwards. They all spoke about struggles going through with a training regime, as well as the struggle just to get *to* the fitness centre. The worst case scenario was staying at home lying on the sofa. Even when a decision to go to the centre was taken and the membership paid, all the women spoke of their wavering commitment, of how they feared they might change their minds.

Finally, in this article we have chosen to construct a composite person whom we have named “Linda,” whose collective voice represents the group of young woman we interviewed.<sup>2</sup> Linda says: “I was going to go to the fitness

centre, but changed my mind on the way home, I can go tomorrow instead." For Linda, *not* doing exercises and being stuck on the sofa represents an overwhelming threat of losing control.

### The Specific Norwegian Context

In Norway, people use the word 'sofa' to make statements about a person's behaviour. A person who stays on the sofa, refers to a "lazy" or "bad" person, often referred to as a "sofa drudge" or a "sofa pig," something not desirable. In commercials, articles in newspapers, Norwegian health discourse, and in conversations between people, speakers constantly use the word "sofa" to refer to an undesirable place or state of inaction. For example, a serious Norwegian paper requested that Norwegian people use the bicycle for travel to work, because this could save the society for a large amount of money: "A sofa pig" being a biker in the city can save about \$5000 each year." (Furdal 2003). In another newspaper, a well-known Norwegian actor was reported as saying "I am not a sofa pig. Now I can relax without feeling guilty after a lot of hard work for a long period. For me, it's important to give 150% in each effort." (Maaland 2004).

A commercial text at a fitness centre named "Trimclub," gives an account of an offer to potential members like this: "We inherit modern equipment and exercising programs for all levels of ambition. Whether you are a 'sofa drudge' or an athlete, you will find something suitable." Finally, an example from an internet site that focuses on women, the body and health. The author discusses how women constantly inherit bad guilt:

Do you let bad guilt overshadow joy of life? That's a typical 'women's-syndrome' we have to get rid of. Men focus more on the 'here and now' and the duties they are involved in. They can do whatever they have decided, and relax on the sofa with the TV remote with the world's best conscience (Sundene 2004).

Since "the sofa" is so often mentioned by the women subjects in our research group we hope to shed further light upon this phenomenon by looking at Linda's statements. We believe this to be of special interest because we think it has the potential to deepen our understanding of how young women's fitness practices can be interpreted as a project that keeps established cultural meanings in order.

### Doing Well

Linda says:

After training I feel I have done so well. Then I can come home and do lots of stuff I wouldn't have had the energy to do if I hadn't been training. I would probably have just ended up on the sofa and stayed there ... so I get more energy and I'm in a better mood, definitely ... you feel better about yourself too, because I can eat lots of sweets without feeling guilty.

Linda's reasoning, connected to her accomplishment of practice, is spoken of in moral as well as physical terms as something that makes her feel good. It is training that gives her energy to do other things in life. In contrast, to end up

on the sofa and stay there presents a negative self image. She emphasizes how being stuck on the sofa leaves her feeling guilty. Linda thus reflects on the contrasting positive/negative aspects that are connected to exercise practices. She says,

If I do not go to practice, then everything becomes an effort in the end, and I have not got strength to go anywhere at all, so I just stay at home and watch TV and lay on the sofa maybe. I know this for a fact; I get really tired and disinclined. I lose all energy. On the way back from work I often change my mind about going to practice. I'd rather go tomorrow. I can always go tomorrow.

Linda here expresses her experiences of being tired and not in the mood for exercise. Her statement can, however, also be interpreted in a broader cultural context where the lazy and/or tired person has low social status. Being a responsible and good person is connected to deciding to go to fitness practice. Even if this decision is made, however, Linda speaks about how she can easily change her mind.

It seems difficult to hold onto the decision. Linda needs to pull herself together to be able to maintain her decision. She longs for rest and calmness, even if this feeling is less permissible in her view. In other words, to *deserve* to rest, Linda *has to exercise*. During practice, different emotions arise in Linda. She says:

It feels good and it is exhausting, but it is so good to feel that you are able to, that perhaps you are in a better shape, or that you are able to keep going longer and with more effort. That is such a good feeling. I have such a clear conscience — no, not "conscience," but I feel I have done really well afterwards.

Here Linda's statements contain descriptions of her own bodily feeling (sensations) of fitness/wellness, as well as ideas of being morally acceptable to herself. Training provides special values connected to being "good." She continues, "Yes, if I'm not good at much else, at least I'm good at training well." Here, Linda seems to rescue her own self-worth being a good practitioner, even if she thinks she can't cope with other parts of life. But this is a fragile balance. If Linda is tired she might also be tempted to stay on the sofa:

If you're tired after work, it is easy to lay down on the sofa ... you really get vitality if you go to training instead ... and it is also a fact that you are getting older, so you have to keep the body a little bit fit, so that's kind of a motivational factor too.

Staying on the sofa might be tempting, but it is also a morally ambiguous choice. Even if she is a relatively young woman, Linda mentions aging as a concern. Her statement is influenced by the idea that to keep the body fit affords a high social value. Linda connects the motivational factor both to keeping her the bodily appearance "in shape," and to increased vitality and sensation. After having completed training, Linda speaks of how she can again relax. She says:

Today I've kind of done well, and it is good that you feel kind of a pleasant sensation in the body. Even if you feel a bit heavy, there is kind of a pleasant feeling of having worked hard. Then I can lay down on the sofa with a clear conscience.

Only when the practice is completed does Linda permit herself to relax without feeling guilty. Activity and rest are therefore continuously negotiated. The sofa is regularly mentioned as furniture that plays a central part in these negotiations. To relax has no legitimate place in their lives unless it takes place *after* exercising. Linda speaks about the sofa as something forbidden, and spending time on the sofa is in contrast to exercise practice. Before doing exercise Linda consistently speaks about the danger of loosing the shape and borders of her body.

### The Fragile Decision

Choosing to be a member of a fitness centre permits access to unlimited practice. Training is always available, and choosing to attend rests on the women's shoulders alone. Situations where the women change their minds about when they want to attend practice are common. To change one's mind about going to practice and be stuck on the sofa instead, is described in connection with characterizing oneself as useless, lazy and judgemental of self. Normative discourse on the connection between exercising and better health speaks through the women in a more tacit manner. The apparently 'rational' choice about going to practice might be influenced by the actual body feeling of the moment. Even if the good bodily feeling that is obtained after practice is described as valuable and attractive, the decision to practice might be dependent on having a good feeling *before* entering the fitness centre.

Another explanation for the negative evaluation of changing one's mind is that the women feel *obliged* — that they *should* practice. Finding acceptable reasons for *not* practicing seems unavailable to the women themselves. One reason might be that physical training in Norway is regarded as valuable, having high priority as a public health medicine.

In the negotiations about going to practice or not going, Linda presents 'lying on the sofa' as something in total opposition. Borrowing the categories "pure" and "impure" from Douglas (1984) and Solheim (1998), we will now examine the contrast, but also the ambiguity that exists between exercise and relaxation.

### A Further Interpretation of the Danger of Loosing Shape

*Purity and Danger* (Douglas 1984) is a classical anthropological contribution to theories of culture and symbols. According to Douglas every culture is based on an ordered patterning of values which the culture strives to establish and maintain. She examines how different societies perform rituals that keep bodily control, get rid of dirt, and avoid disorder. Control of the body plays a central part in differentiating between inclusion, exclusion and the processes of separation and creation of meaning. Every society establishes what Douglas (1984: 3) calls "danger-beliefs." Certain moral values are upheld though ideas of danger that can threaten the borders of the body. The symbolism of the body's boundaries is used in different ways to express danger to community boundaries. Beliefs about *purity* and *impurity* refer to established symbolic

borders. The category 'impurity' refers to what is forbidden, dangerous and threatening. What is 'impure' does not fit in the social pattern. In our context, being 'stuck on the sofa' can be interpreted as the young women's "danger-belief." Being attached to the sofa for a longer period is associated with a body that might be without borders and float out into space.

In all cultures order is created and maintained through distinctions and demarcations to sort and separate phenomena that belong together from phenomena that do not belong together. A Norwegian anthropologist Jorunn Solheim (1998) has developed theories in line with Douglas. She specifically points to the close and invisible cultural bonds that connect the impure to women. According to Solheim, bonds exist between the wife/woman and the house, a space where the husband/man is welcomed but never takes full responsibility. Crossing these established borders may result in chaos and the dissolution of established norms. Solheim observes: "these activities to sort and separate imply producing and maintaining a set of symbolic borders, where crossing the borders calls upon notions of purity and impurity" (1998: 42). This concept becomes relevant to our essay if we compile a table of words found in the women's statements about doing exercise, as follows:

<u>PURITY</u>	<u>DANGER</u>
pure	impure
exercises	the sofa
action	inaction
exercise	relaxation
vitality	cosiness
hardness	softness
clear conscience	guilt
punishment	reward
clean	dirty
clever	stupid
volition	surrender

### **The Ambiguity of Softness**

Softness appears to be a specific "danger," but also a desired sensation for the young women. Softness thus seems to be interwoven with ambiguity. In the context of modern commercial fitness, women's weight, shape, and soft body curves are often presented as problem areas (Bordo 1993; Markula 1995; Hjelmeland Grimsbø 2003). Softness and vagueness in body shape is described as undesirable and threatening for a woman's image and value. Exercising can be seen as a tool to cope with this potential vagueness or lack of definition. To exercise thus represents a pure activity or a ritual to achieve purity.

The sofa before training also carries connotations of danger; it is a bad place to be stuck, something undesirable and corrupting. The sofa can be understood as a static contrast to the action of doing practice. Spending a lot of time on the sofa can suggest or threaten that the body itself might acquire the

quality of the sofa and the body itself might become soft and indefinite, a quality that is undesirable. The body might then become *one with the sofa*, dissolving distinctions available to the subject. This undifferentiated state of oneness threatens the cultural codes and bodily order. The sensation and lust to relax thus represents a social as well as personal danger.

The surrender into the sofa is insecure in the sense that the borders established through the exercises could again become unclear. Opening up to the sofa's softness threatens the boundaries of the body. If the softness of the sofa transcends the body's borders and the difference between the sofa's softness and the body's borders are erased, the sofa's status changes into a threat. This threat can be understood as the frightening side of the experience of being embedded in a situation of sensation and relaxation. It might be overwhelming with no possible escape into order and control. In our data, the women speak of being stuck on the sofa as a threat, and as an expression that indicates that they will not be capable of exercising and making a "come back" into shape.

On the other hand a longing for *oneness* also expresses something desirable. A longing to be embraced is perhaps met by the sofa with its appealing curves. When women give into the softness they could also perhaps embody the sofa and float into the sofa's material. We interpret this as a giving and receiving bodily state for the subject, connected to fundamental being. Lying on the sofa invites women to enjoy an embracing state without obligation. It claims nothing but surrender into the softness. Being surrounded by the sofa's softness can be interpreted as a desirable place where one can be sheltered from the demands of fitness practice. The "danger" might be tempting and sheds a critical light back on the rationality of exercising.

To attend to exercise claims an upright and strong physical and moral position. Lying on the sofa is the opposite. We will interpret this more closely in relation to gender.

### Ambiguity and Gender

The shapelessness and floating quality can be seen as cultural distinctions that separate order and cleanness from ambiguity and impurity. These are cultural concepts widely associated with the feminine. According to Solheim (1998) this symbolic association seems to be close to a universal and fundamental structure that suggests a cultural unconscious. Solheim points to a cultural connection between women, house and housekeeping. The 'pure' then becomes everything that is symbolically separated and defined — not infected through contact with everything that exceeds the borders, everything that doesn't stay within the limits of its category. This contrasts with everything that is vague, shapeless and ambiguous. The role of the sofa can now be understood within the symbolic relationship that Solheim defines. "Lying on the sofa" instead of "going to training" is forced into a dichotomous relationship. The sofa represents the impure and training the pure. Through training the women are able to cleanse themselves before they allow themselves to be tarnished by the impurity of the sofa. It also illustrates how

training represents “being in control” and strengthens the ability to resist temptations.

We have interpreted fitness practice as a modern ritual that keeps the universe of established gender categories in order. “Softness” *does* tie in with commonly perceived gender differences. Exercising is a praxis that cleans the female body. The idea of cleaning the body through exercising can be seen as a ritual. The exercises also provide bodily shape and moral direction as *male* symbols. The ritual of exercises keeps the body hard and shaped, but at what cost? Not to perform the practises on a regular basis is associated with the threat of being unclean, dirty, immoral and not clever. The subjective body is not regarded as valuable as it is; *the body has to be exercised to be valued*. Susan Bordo (1993: 189) points to the toned, tight and slender body as the modern feminine ideal, and confers upon it a moral bearing and a role as a status bearing flag. Training and workouts are regarded as important tools for achieving the desirable body (Steen-Johnsen 2004). We see the choice of participating in such an activity as geared towards this kind of an aesthetic.

We would say that to achieve this cultural ideal of cleanness and purity the young women “pay” with their lived bodies. They appear to relate to rest and relaxation as forbidden, dirty and unclean (Solheim 1998; Douglas 1984). They also alienate themselves from, or lose contact with, their own desire to move and thereby express themselves.

### Conclusions and Further Questions

Linda’s statements in the text illustrate that the dilemma of “practice” versus “no practice” is a recurring and intensely personal issue to these young Norwegian women. To participate in fitness practice, or not, is embedded in subjective negotiations. The presence of cultural symbols and the performance of gender are ubiquitous.

The essay attempts to focus on the question of how young woman in modern western societies can cope with a strong normative discourse that tells them that they can achieve a better life when they exercise and take part in physical training. We think there are two different meanings associated with “the sofa” that depend upon the women’s bodily awareness and state of mind. If the body is loose, indefinite and listless and the women choose *not* to practice, then the sofa becomes a threat. When the body feels hard and defined after exercise, the softness of the sofa acquires positive (and “deserved”) meanings. We find that the expected “good life” having a basis in rigorous physical training is a far more vulnerable and complex notion than the current discourse suggests, and we question how it is that women feel *bad and lazy* when they aren’t able to attend practices.

The results of our analyses raise new questions; (1) Aren’t women positioned between socially acceptable values about physical training and their own self judgment? (2) Why do they feel guilty? While it is true that the status of “the sofa” changes before and after practice, why are relaxation, softness, cosiness, etc. only available if they are “deserved”— i.e. after a hard



practice? (3) Why is the body conceived as if it actually reflects qualities of the sofa (softness, curved, etc.) such that the body itself might become soft, loose, and without boundaries?

From our perspective, the tension inherent in the women's experience is a recognizable part of our subjects' kinaesthetic and bodily awareness. We are led to ask whether negative feelings, poor self-evaluation and the like are compatible with good health? If "health" is regarded as including kinaesthetic feelings, one could ask if the objectification of the body that is involved in fitness practices might create more tension and problems than they solve.

We thus point to the possible deleterious effects that all the hype, advertising, and image-building values associated with physical fitness can have on young women. There is little doubt that current ideas of fitness play a dominant role in young women's lives, but we doubt that physical fitness alone will produce "the perfect woman." On the contrary, it may create problems with self-acceptance that cannot be solved with fitness exercises or what the commercial field offers. Through this kind of analysis, we hope to bring new insights into current discussions about the role physical training plays in achieving good health.

#### Endnotes:

<sup>1</sup> We doubt that similar concerns would be found in the literature, say, fifty or seventy-five years ago.

<sup>2</sup> The six informants in the main project (Hjelmeland Grimsbø 2003) were called, Oda, Astrid, Hege, Guro, Bente and Liv. For this article, where we have chosen one theme for further examination, we have organized the presentation through "Linda."

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