Firm but Shapely, Fit but Sexy, Strong but Thin: The Postmodern Aerobicizing Female Bodies

Pirkko Markula  
University of Waikato

This paper aims to reconstruct the cultural dialogue surrounding the female body image in aerobics. To do this I have used several methods: ethnographic fieldwork, interviews, and media analysis. I found that the media ideal is a contradiction: firm but shapely, fit but sexy, strong but thin. Likewise, women’s relationships with the media image are contradictory: They struggle to obtain the ideal body, but they also find their battles ridiculous. I interpret my findings from a Foucaultian perspective to show how the discourse surrounding the female body image is part of a complex use of power over women in postmodern consumer society. In addition, I assume a feminist perspective that assigns an active role to the individual aerobicizers to question the power arrangement.

Introduction: The Feminine Beauty Ideal

She is fit . . . she’s got an incredible body, she is completely tight, she has no fat on her body. (Anna)

Popular women’s magazines are saturated with images of beautiful, thin, and tight models. These polished images are often accompanied with advice on how we readers can achieve a body that resembles these images. When the

Pirkko Markula is with the Department of Leisure Studies, University of Waikato, Private Bag 3105, Hamilton, New Zealand.
magazines motivate us to work toward the model look, they provide us with an opportunity for a positive change: to obtain our best body ever. Many feminist scholars, however, consider this glossy festival of feminine beauty a disservice to women. They point out that women’s bodies come in a variety of shapes and weights. Paradoxically, the media portray only thin and tight models. Therefore, these scholars conclude, this fashion ideal is oppressive precisely because of its singularity: If only slim and toned women are attractive, most women with normal figures are classified as unattractive (e.g., Bartky, 1988; Bordo, 1990; Coward, 1985; Martin, 1987; Spitzack, 1990; Wolf, 1990). Consequently, to look attractive in this society, the majority of us have to engage in activities—like dressing, applying makeup, dieting, exercising, or, most drastically, reconstructive surgery—to mask or alter our body shapes. Because the sole purpose of these practices is to change our bodies to resemble the narrowly defined beauty ideal, many feminists deem them as vehicles of oppression (e.g., Bartky, 1988; Bordo, 1989; Cole, 1993; Martin, 1989; Wolf, 1990).

Regardless of the feminist opposition to such practices, many women still engage in these potentially degrading activities. For example, they continue to read women’s magazines for beauty tips or exercise to lose weight. Can one simply assume that most women are unaware of how they contribute to their own suppression through their everyday behavior? Or is a woman’s everyday life a more complex phenomenon? Perhaps one’s behavior is not purely a function of ignorance or lack of education. Although several researchers have examined the discourses surrounding feminine practices, few studies examine how individual women experience their bodies in everyday life. In this paper, therefore, I plan to investigate how women encounter and sense the body ideal in one potentially oppressive female activity, aerobics. I map women’s body experiences within aerobics through an ethnographic study. Similar to other feminist scholars, I examine the body ideal, but I limit myself to the exercise context. Furthermore, I am interested in how women react to this body ideal. Are women single-mindedly occupied with improving their bodies in aerobics classes? Or do they celebrate their own figures ignoring the ideal imposed on them by the mass media? Or do they struggle to disregard the image but, at the same time, exercise to reshape their bodies?

First, however, I survey the literature examining women’s need to become thinner by dieting and to become tighter by exercising. This journey will lead to my analysis of what kind of body ideal aerobics promotes and an interpretation of what some aerobicizing women think of this ideal.

“No Fat on Her Body”

Several writers have examined women’s dieting in today’s society (Arveda, 1991; Bordo, 1989, 1990; Chernin, 1981; Imm, 1989; Spitzack, 1990). Their findings suggest that women in general are more obsessed with dieting, body weight, and slimness than men are and that women’s ideal slenderness also seems to be more narrowly defined than men’s (Arveda, 1991; Bordo, 1990; Cole, 1993). Women diet to obtain the desired extremely slender body rather than accept the natural dimensions of their own bodies. Pamela Imm (1989) suggests that many women participate in aerobics because they are unhappy with their body shape and feel fat. She points out that particularly women who exercise
She is Completely Right

...
to traditional femininity. This observation of such coexisting, disparate images characterizes many so-called postmodern studies examining the women’s body ideal. If the women’s body ideal simultaneously expands and limits the notions of femininity, it is no longer enough to label women’s body practices only as disciplining or as empowering. Rather, in Helen Lenskyj’s (1994) words, “a particular social practice cannot be understood purely as conformity or rebellion: rather, the ambiguities and contradictions need to be considered” (p. 258). Women’s bodybuilding lends itself well to an analysis in which the disciplined exercise routine is interpreted both as oppressive and liberating (Lenskyj, 1994).

**The Bodybuilding Body**

Women’s bodybuilding has captured many researchers’ attention, because the bulging muscles of these competitors so clearly oppose the traditional frail feminine body ideal. These women lift weights to become visibly big. Hence, bodybuilding has clear potential to challenge the traditional notion of femininity. However, some research demonstrates that this emergent resistance has turned to serve the dominant power by sexualizing and objectifying the transgressive female bodybuilder body (Balsamo, 1994; MacNeill, 1988). Particularly, filmed or televised bodybuilding competitions that closely resemble beauty contests contribute to such an oppressive practice.

Other scholars have disengaged from debating whether bodybuilding is liberating or oppressing women. Rather, they argue that women’s bodybuilding is a contradiction in itself: It simultaneously complies with and resists the dominant powers in the society (Bolin, 1992a, 1992b, 1992c; Daniels, 1992; Guthrie & Castelnuovo, 1992; Miller & Penz, 1991). Sharon Guthrie and Shirley Castelnuovo (1992) observe that women bodybuilders are compliant with the dominant discourse of feminine beauty in that they worry about their body shapes and invest tremendous energy to body care. In addition, their pink posing costumes, their blond, fluffy hair styles, and their feminine posing routines and music choices are in line with the traditional femininity. However, women bodybuilders resist the same femininity by actively creating a new female body shape. As a result, they do not feel compelled to model themselves after the more traditional feminine body form.

Anne Bolin (1992a, 1992b, 1992c) expands this analysis by locating the more compliant practices on the public—front stage—arena and the more resistant practices on the private—backstage—arena. When on the front stage during a competition, the women bodybuilders use the feminine accessories to comply with the judges’ requirements of proper femininity. This, Bolin (1992a) demonstrates, is necessary if one wants to win the competition, and bodybuilders are there to win. Therefore, enforced notions of femininity for them are simply a necessary means to a higher goal: a victory. On the backstage, outside of the competition, women bodybuilders do not worry about looking feminine. They train seriously to build more muscle mass in the hard-core gyms devoted only to bodybuilding. They wear training gear far from skimpy posing outfits: sweat pants, sweat shirts, baggy tee shirts, and shorts. Bolin (1992b) concludes,

Theirs is a transformative experience.... The presentation of an appearance that the judges will regard as feminine is just a matter of strategizing one’s
training, diet, and accessorizing with insignias of femininity. This exposes femininity as a cultural construction with boundaries, while femininity as a lived attribute knows no such limits. (p. 395)

What about the aerobicizing body? Some bodybuilders consider that aerobics supports the dominant oppressive beauty ideal. For example, they regard “the aerobics instructor body” as a derogatory term when they discuss women bodybuilders like Cory Everson, who deliberately keeps her muscles smaller and softer to comply with the traditional femininity required by the media (Bolin, 1992a). Nevertheless, some scholars argue that aerobics, similar to bodybuilding, creates a double image that embodies traditional conceptions of both feminine and masculine characteristics.

**The Aerobicizing Body**

Margaret MacNeill (1988) observes that although aerobics helps to uphold a feminine look, it also promotes healthy life and vitality that assumes a tight, thin, and muscular body. Regina Kenen (1987) characterizes such an aerobics image as a “hybrid” of a patriarchal image (the feminine look) and a feminist image (strong, muscular look). Interestingly, Kenen (1987) argues that women need to obtain the feminine look to successfully manipulate the power source—the men. This form of resistance has provoked lively discussion among feminist scholars. They observe that instead of initiating open resistance women effectively obtain power through similar manipulation of the traditional channels (e.g., Abu-Lughod, 1990; Bolin, 1992a; Dubisch, 1986; Gottlieb, 1989; Strathern, 1981). Therefore, what looks like oppression to the researcher’s eye might serve as a means for power for the women involved. Kenen (1987) also points out that the media equate the feminist image with sex appeal and turn it to serve the patriarchal powers. Here the aerobics image is truly ambiguous: The traditional feminine image is resistant, but the strong “feminist” image sexualizes women.

In their approach to the double image, Elizabeth Kagan and Margaret Morse (1988) place the aerobicizing body in the postmodern context. They concentrate on the images in Jane Fonda’s exercise videotapes. Like Kenen (1987), they contend that Fonda’s body incorporates the slender femininity with a new powerful self-determining subject in motion. However, these writers assume that women participate in aerobics basically to fight against their aging and sagging bodies. This preoccupation results in a compromising aerobics body image: The subjectivity and its will are delegated to shape the body to a commercially supported ideal of femininity. Like those who studied women’s bodybuilding (Balsamo, 1994; MacNeill, 1988), Kagan and Morse (1988) conclude that the emergent potential for liberation is revisited to serve the purposes of patriarchy by linking women’s physical activity to attractiveness.

Kagan and Morse (1988) like MacNeill (1988) focus on the body discourse transmitted through media. What about the everyday practice in aerobics classes? Do the aerobicizers there struggle to confront a contradictory body image? To find answers to these questions I set myself to listen to the voices of the aerobicizing women.
Method

Like Kagan and Morse (1988), I locate my research of aerobics within the postmodern cultural condition. Central to my study is the view that this culture is communication between different voices. Michael Bakhtin’s (1981) examination of the dynamics of cultural dialogue serves as a foundation for my analysis.

In every dialogue, Bakhtin (1981) argues, several voices, some more dominant than others, struggle over each other to give meanings to cultural phenomena. Cultural dialogue, therefore, implies a certain authority and assumes certain power relations in its exchange. Bakhtin (1981) locates dominant voices in the public, official sphere, from where they claim the rights for the correct interpretation of the phenomenon at hand. For example, the magazines and aerobics videotapes are claiming the rights for public representation of the perfect female body image. The private voices, like the aerobicizers’, must use other channels available to them to replace the official interpretation with their own meaning. I believe, therefore, that the meaning of aerobics in this culture is created by many voices that contradict with each other and work to replace each other. All these meanings, the public as well as the private, are produced within cultural discourses.

For example, our understanding of the body is formed within such discourses as health, medicine, and femininity. However, I believe it is insufficient to examine the discursive construction of the body ideal at the public arena. Like Spitzack (1990), I aim to examine how the discursive dialogue of the public arena materializes in the women’s everyday experiences. To find out, I have to listen to the voices of the individual women. I assume, along with many other feminists, that women actively make sense out of their social world and construct different meanings in different social contexts. In this paper, individual women engage in a dialogue with the discursive representations: They strive to make sense of the “fit body ideal.” Here I focus on the ambiguities and contradictions in women’s body experience (Lenskyj, 1994), as I do not believe that any experience can be classified as purely empowering or purely oppressive. However, I believe, following Spitzack (1990), that aerobicizers’ critical voices have the potential to alter the course of dominant practices.

I also assign an active role for myself when I aim to uncover women’s meanings about the aerobicizing body. The reported meanings are my subjective interpretations based on my fieldwork within aerobics. In this study, therefore, the aerobicizers and I have negotiated a shared understanding of the aerobicizing body in American culture. I also acknowledge that I am a human observer whose personal, social, and historical background structures research considerably (e.g., Bruner, 1993; Clifford & Marcus, 1986; Denzin, 1992; Rosaldo, 1989).

Fieldwork

I used several methods to reconstruct the dialogue surrounding the body image in aerobics: fieldwork, interviews, and media analysis. My research derives predominantly from my ethnographic fieldwork among aerobicizers from 1990 to 1992. Although ethnography is most often associated with anthropology, today its methods have been increasingly used to study the state of Western society as the minutiae of everyday life (de Certeau, 1984) have attracted researchers across
the social sciences. Many taken-for-granted, commonplace phenomena like aerobics are now considered especially fruitful topics, because they, in their popularity, unveil central aspects of our culture to a critical inquiry (Dunn, 1991; Featherstone, 1988; Foley, 1992; Johnston, 1986; McRobbie, 1994).

Aerobics handed itself quite easily to ethnographic fieldwork because aerobizers gather regularly together in a public, yet well-defined place—the gymnasium. My field was mainly the university community in a small Midwestern town: Most aerobics classes were organized by the university and the participants were in some way associated with the university. This is only one context for aerobics classes. Kenen (1987) has found that the setting influences the aerobics praxis. For example, commercial health clubs exacerbate the negative, oppressive practices more than do public-sector classes like the YMCA. I do not intend to generalize my findings over the private aerobics sector (the health clubs) or different geographical regions of the U.S., although I attended private health clubs in the community and in other parts of the country to complete my ethnography. In this study I focus on women’s experiences within a university community. On average, I participated in seven 1-hour classes weekly.

In addition to my field observations, I conducted both informal and formal interviews to closely trace the individual experiences. I interviewed the aerobizers informally whenever possible: before and after classes, in the locker rooms, in the street, in coffee shops, in the classes, or any other time I met one of the participants. The formal interviewing technique used in this study can be characterized after Michael Quinn Patton (1980) as open-ended topical interviews. I had prepared a list of topics instead of setting up detailed questions. I selected the topics—the structure and nature of an aerobics class, the body image, health, and nutrition—based on findings in the literature (Kagan & Morse, 1988; Kenen, 1987; MacNeill, 1988; Martin, 1987), an earlier pilot study, and my ongoing participant observation. Therefore, the discussion regarding the body was only one part of my larger research project on aerobics (Markula, 1993b). I wanted to adopt a conversational model (e.g., Spitzack, 1990) in which both the researcher and respondent assume equal responsibility for the discussion. Basically, we discussed the above-mentioned topics during each interview, but the conversation could also follow a particular concern of the interviewee. Body matters were such a concern for many of the aerobizers, and we usually discussed body image extensively. The length of each interview varied from 30 minutes to 2 hours. I interviewed most participants once, but certain “informative” or verbal participants were interviewed twice. All the interviewees assumed anonymity, and I refer to them here by their pseudonyms. I interviewed 35 exercisers (33 women and 2 men). This imbalanced gender ratio was common in the aerobics classes I participated in; the vast majority of the participants were women. Consequently, in this paper I focus on women’s views. The exercisers in my study were mostly students but also were secretaries, staff members, and researchers. This research, therefore, is based on the experiences of a select group. The typical aerobizer in my study was a white, well-educated, 18- to 45-year-old female, a description which—according to nationwide surveys—also characterizes an average aerobics exerciser around the U.S. (Rothlein, 1988).

In addition to recording the aerobizers’ private voices, I wanted to record the public voices constructing the aerobics body. Therefore, to support my investigation, I analyzed how aerobics was presented in the media. My research drew
from images in aerobics videotapes but mainly I examined exercise images in such magazines as *Health*, *Women's Sport and Fitness*, *Shape*, and *Self*. I selected *Health* and *Women's Sport and Fitness* because they were likely to contain frequent articles on women’s exercise. In addition, because they were available since 1979 I had a chance to examine the change in media representation of the female body through these magazines. I selected the other two monthly magazines, *Shape* and *Self*, because of their self-proclaimed specialization in women’s fitness matters. For example, *Shape*, published by bodybuilding tycoon Joe Weider, promised to provide “mind and body fitness for women” (*Shape*, March 1994, p. 2). Moreover, individual aerobicizers I spoke with recommended these two magazines for me. I investigated issues of both magazines starting from 1986. In these magazines I focused specifically on articles about aerobics or women’s exercise. Their topics varied from aerobics shoe and video guides to articles advising strength and toning exercises. I read the text of each article and examined the accompanying pictures, which I also compared to the text.

Several of the women I interviewed also exercised using videotapes. I have, therefore, included the women’s views about the video bodies in my study. Among the numerous exercise tapes available the women talked most about Jane Fonda’s “Workout” series and Kathy Smith’s exercise videos.

To analyze how the contradictory body image evolves in aerobics, I first look at the meanings the magazines construct around the female body image. I then proceed to identify how these meanings materialize in aerobicizers’ everyday experiences: How do the media discourses structure women’s ideas about their bodies? In addition, I am interested in women’s responses to the dominant media discourses: Do women question the media representation of the body? To conclude, I will explain why the media portray a certain female image and why women react to this ideal the way they do. I will start by sketching the ideal body of the exercising female in the media.

**Shapely, Slender, and Softly Curvy**

Since the early days of aerobics, women’s bodies seem to occupy a central space in the fitness discourse. For example, in the 1960s the father of the aerobics running program, Kenneth Cooper, felt that women’s exercise should primarily improve bodily appearance: “The way it works out, women earn a double payoff from aerobics; they go to the program to improve their looks and they get fitness and health as fringe benefits” (Cooper, 1970, p. 134).

In the 1970s and early 1980s women were increasingly urged to exercise to take care of their bodies. In addition to light aerobic activities such as jogging, swimming, or tennis, calisthenics, light strengthening exercises, and stretching were often recommended. The ideal feminine body was described as shapely, slender, and softly curvy (Fairclough, 1980; Hoover, 1980; Lenskyj, 1986). Muscles did not fit with this image: Muscle bulk was seen as masculine and unsuitable for the “proper” feminine look. Fear of visible muscle growth and the fear of lost femininity due to physical activity were commonly addressed in the exercise articles. One way of countering the muscle bulk was to exercise correctly: Magazines advised slow, controlled repetitions. Women were also blessed with another way of avoiding bulging muscles. Magazines comforted
their readers that female hormones prevented any extensive muscle development despite engagement in physical activity. It was, therefore, a physiological fact that women had soft, small muscles and curvy bodies. Conversely, it was naturally unfeminine to display well-defined muscles. The following quote summarizes the sentiment that surrounded women’s conditioning:

Today, the leg to strive for embodies the virtues of predecessors—it should be shapely, smooth and supple—but it also must be strong. . . . No, we are not talking about big, muscular legs like Richard Gere’s. A woman’s legs can have power without having bulk. . . . The way to strength without mass is to exercise against low resistance, but with a higher number of repetitions. . . . Muscles will increase a bit in size, but combining the resistance/repetition formula with your body’s female hormones will prevent your legs from becoming locker room curiosities. (Farah, 1984, p. 38)

The whole concept of a muscular woman was redefined when Jane Fonda published *Jane Fonda’s Workout Book* in 1981. Jane Fonda aimed for a fit, trim, and muscular body, and a new ideal stepped into the aerobics movement. If the idea of women having muscles was “just abhorrent” (Tucker, 1990, p. 97) earlier, muscles now became acceptable, even a desired part of the ideal female body. Starting from the 1980s “fashion magazines were abuzz with the news that muscles were chic” (Tucker, 1990, p. 97). Muscles are still a central feature of the ideal female body. Exercise reserves, therefore, a prominent place in women’s lives: The only way to obtain the desired, trim muscles is to exercise. The magazines sensed a need for exercise advice. Special workout articles, which encouraged women to develop their muscle tone, started to appear in the magazines. For example, in 1990 *Shape* began its “Spot Training” columns, which focused on training for muscle tone with free weights or machines. Muscle tone is also a prominent part of aerobicizers’ everyday exercise experience. In what follows, I discuss the discourses surrounding women’s toning exercises.

**Toned and Trim**

When toned muscles became an important part of the ideal feminine body, special shaping exercises became an integral part of the aerobics class. Some aerobicizers call these exercises “toning”; others refer to them as “floorwork” (most of the training is done while lying on the floor). This muscle work resembles the spot training exercises depicted in *Shape* and *Self*. The most important principle underlining these exercises is to focus on one muscle group—or body “spot”—at a time. This focus ensures that the participant effectively tones the intended, isolated body part. This is how one gets the best results: The particular muscle is toned without wasting time and energy to condition the unintended muscles. Aerobicizers’ comments reflect this philosophy:

I don’t see how you can really work the abs and do a good job if you are doing something else. (Sheila)
When you are toning, you concentrate on one muscular area; I think it’s the best way to do it, because . . . it’s kind of hard to the mind to do two things at once. (Trisha)

You can concentrate more in one area, if you are only working one area, that makes sense. (Anna)

Aerobicizers have faith in toning exercises: These workouts do, indeed, effectively tone the body. At the same time, many of them view toning as hard, repetitious, and boring:

Toning is boring to me, period. I hate toning, the worst part of the class. (Trisha)

Boring, body toning is intensely boring . . . with these little boring ah, ah, ah, sit-up aerobics . . . they are doing body toning grimacing and looking unhappy. (Antoinette)

Although it is torturous, hard, and horrible, most exercisers would incorporate toning into their class. They find it a necessary yet uncomfortable and difficult way to achieve muscle tone. Some of the exercises are particularly difficult as they are aimed for muscles infrequently used in everyday life. These muscles have to be trained in strange positions, which adds to the discomfort. Sheila talks about the so-called “doggy lifts,” also referred to as “elbows and knees”:

I really don’t like the elbows and knees, I don’t know why it is . . . we always do it, maybe it’s just a strange way to do it . . . I think people don’t like it because it’s just an abnormal way to do things, we don’t sit like that or do anything like that. I feel like I’m walking around like a dog; it’s just not very comfortable feeling.

Sheila points out a contradiction: “elbows and knees” (which is designed to train the gluteus maximus) is frequently done in her class although it’s an abnormal move. The whole exercise makes her feel uneasy and she wonders why it is included in her class. Kagan and Morse (1988) explain this contradiction. They argue that exercises like “elbows and knees” do not improve functionality: We do not need these movement patterns to perform everyday chores. Rather, these exercises are designed to improve our appearance. Thus, toning in aerobics class dissociates body parts from their functional roles. Sheila was right when she pointed out that doggy lifts are abnormal because she never does such a movement in “real” life. The meaning of such exercises, Kagan and Morse (1988) believe, is to change the body to look like the ideal, toned body. In this way women are assigned to manipulate their body parts for the sake of appearance. Apparently, not all the exercisers are prepared to work only for their “looks”: Sheila questioned the rationale for performing “elbows and knees” because that exercise did not have a functional meaning for her. In addition, many aerobicizers lined at the water fountain to avoid this uncomfortable exercise. Paradoxically, in the line we complained about our problematic body parts that needed more tone.
Magazines deepen the fragmented image when they assign special parts of our bodies as problem spots. Problem areas—abdomen, thighs, underarms, and the “butt”—are particularly resistant to manipulative toning, albeit they need it the most. Already in 1980, one article pointed out that “the main areas of concern for most women are the upper arms (batwings), abdomen (stretch marks and flab) and outer thighs (saddlebags)” (Stallings, 1980, p. 49). Fifteen years later these particular parts still trouble women. Jane Fonda, for example, advertised her 1992 video “Lower Body Solution” as “designed especially for the #1 problem areas for women; abs, buns, and thighs” (e.g., Self, March 1992, p. 178). In every issue magazines introduce workouts to “hit” one or more of these parts. A myriad of special exercises such as abdominal tighteners, waist cinchers, lower belly flatteners, back-of-the-thigh hardeners, seat shapers, bottom lifters, fanny firmers, hip slimmers, and front-of-the-thigh definers are designed to firm women’s problematic body parts. These movements are promoted as simple, effective, and easy to perform. Therefore, even the busiest women can manage to fit exercise into her daily schedule.

Magazines advocate these workouts based on one assumption: Women need to look good. They assume further that their readers presently find their bodies imperfect. This imbalance results in great anxiety, which only their workout program can cure. In this sense, the magazines see themselves contributing to women’s well-being.

If you balk at pool-party invitations; if you lie awake at night wondering how to cover your thighs while keeping cool and looking great; if you seriously consider moving to Antarctica as soon as the hot weather sets in—this workout is for you. (Sternlicht, 1990c, p. 34)

Weak triceps can make wearing a sleeveless shirt or evening dress an embarrassment. By adding triceps exercises to your workout, you can make the back of your arms shapely and strong. (Sternlicht, 1990a, p. 46)

Both women and men alike are self-conscious of their derrieres, whether their buttocks are large or flat, high or low, round or saggy. But relax. It’s fairly easy either to develop this area and give it more roundness or to firm it up and give it more sleekness. (Sternlicht, 1990b, p. 38)

One participant in my study also confirms that women exercise because their bodies are flawed:

I think everyone there has a certain area that they want to work on; it’s obvious to them or it’s obvious to you, they wouldn’t be there if they hadn’t a complex about [some area]. They don’t like something . . . like a stereotype, we don’t like our arms, that’s why we signed up . . . we are trying to get rid of our arms. (Sarah)

In the magazine texts, the problem spots cause the biggest anxieties; the thighs, the triceps (underarms), and the butts are what women are most embarrassed about. Are their predictions well placed? When I asked the aerobicizers
to identify any problematic parts of their bodies, their answers resonate with the magazine discourse. The problem spots trouble the aerobicizers the most. For example, Jane, Cecilia, and Laura quickly identified their problem parts:

Pirkko: Do you feel that you have certain problem areas in your bodies?
Jane: My lower half, I sit all day.
Cecilia: My stomach, that’s the hardest part.
Laura: After having a baby, stomach muscles are the worst.

Many aerobics classes I participated in included exercises for these particular parts. The instructors, like the magazines, presumed that women want to tackle those particular areas. I asked Becky, an aerobics instructor, to describe a typical toning session. She found that “a lot of them [the participants] want to work on their sides, the outer thighs or . . . the seats more. . . . I think stomachs are probably one [problem area], hips, outer thighs, those are the main ones.” When questioned why these areas are so problematic, she explained, “That’s where we have most of our fat cells, that’s where we store most of the fat.” Obviously, storing fat is a highly undesirable, yet natural, process. The storage places are the problem spots whose fat levels women carefully monitor. These areas require special toning as they appear especially prone to excess fat and flab.

As other scholars, I contend that these spots “where we store most of the fat” are the very parts of our bodies that identify us as females: the rounded bellies, the larger hips, the thighs, the softer underarms. These “female parts” are also the ones we hate the most and fight the hardest to diminish. Logically then, we hate looking like women. Bordo (1990) argues that women grow up despising their feminine form, because the ideal feminine shape in this society resembles that of a young boy: wide shoulders, tight muscles, narrow hips (also Bartky, 1988; Chernin, 1981; Coward, 1985). The majority of women, regardless how hard they try, can never achieve this type of body. Most women simply are not born with male bodies. Kim Chernin (1981) adds that the unattainable boyish ideal is one of the major causes for women’s anxieties with their bodies. The dissatisfaction with one’s feminine shape can lead to an extreme fear of fat and, consequently, a distorted body image. Ronda Gates (1991) reports that devoted aerobicizers and fitness professionals, more than anyone, have a distorted understanding of their bodies. They are afraid of fat: “If 22 percent of fat is optimum, 18 percent is better” (Gates, 1991, p. 28), these exercisers conclude (see also Imm, 1989). According to Chernin (1981), this attitude generates desperate attempts to control one’s body weight that precede serious eating disorders like anorexia nervosa and bulimia nervosa.

Magazines advocate muscle tone as a vital feature of an ideal female body, and the aerobicizers seem to accept this model. Paradoxically, although they work hard to “sculpt” their trouble spots into the desired tone, they also question the meaning of the uncomfortable toning exercises. I examine next what is meant by toned muscles: What kind of muscle definition is desirable?

Sleek and Sexy

Although a “good female body” is a muscular body, the magazines discourage extreme muscularity. Exercise articles primarily promote a toned and shapely
look. Magazine workouts, thus, aim to "tone" one's muscles, not to build muscles. One article puts a clear limit on female muscle size: "Strong muscles mean more shape in arms and shoulders, definition in the legs and a flat, but not concave middle" (Kaufman, 1989, p. 124). The ideal body is layered with long, sleek, unbulky muscles. Such muscles are also defined as "sexy." For example, workouts are advertised with such slogans as "The Ultimate Guide to Sexy Muscles" (Self, March 1991, cover), "Three Easy Ways to a Strong and Sexy Stomach" (Self, February 1991, cover), "Sculpted and Sexy" (Rover, 1992, p. 48), "Shoulders are Sexy" (Laurence, 1992, p. 103).

"Is It All Right for Women to Have Muscular Arms?"

Evidently, muscles—particularly the problem spots—need to be toned, tight, and firm. Most problem spots are located in the lower body. Toning the upper body in general and arms in particular is a more complex enterprise. Magazines encourage upper body workouts: "Firm Triceps and Shapely Biceps are in Vogue" (Sternlicht, 1991, p. 48) and "It's all right for women to have muscular arms" (Sternlicht, 1991, p. 48). For women in aerobics classes, however, muscular arms are not "all right." Many women fear large arm muscles if they do upper body workouts in their classes. Arm toning is complicated, because one of the problem areas is the triceps region, under the upper arm. Aerobicizers want firm triceps without bulking up. Sarah, for example, trains her arm muscles, but says, "I am afraid that I bulk up when I do arms. . . . I used to swim and I was huge, like bulky and I hated it." Sarah continues to explain why women hate "big arms":

Girls don't really work out their arms, because if you work your arms, you get big arms, you look like a guy. It seems to be okay if you have strong legs, but if you are athletic and you have big arms, it's like she looks like a guy. It's more socially acceptable to have big legs than the arms.

Women do not want to look masculine, Sarah explains, and that is what muscular arms do to you: You end up looking like a guy. Considering that the ideal female body nowadays "looks like a young guy" more than a woman, this distaste of big arms seems unjustified. Apparently, although women should possess broad shoulders, they should not be muscular.

Not only muscle size but also the location of the muscles defines the exerciser's femininity. Sarah in her earlier quote points out that muscular legs—firm thighs—are socially acceptable, unlike muscular arms. Kathy adds that tight legs are not only acceptable but desirable:

I personally would like to work on my arms more, but it seems that a lot of girls would rather work on their thighs, their outer, inner thighs and their butt, but they don't feel that they need their arms built up. . . . The thing that guys look at or a lot of women are concerned, tends to be your butt or their thighs. They don't say, "I have fat arms" . . . and you don't have guys going by and saying, "Look at those sexy arms."

Well-toned legs are sought after because men notice them. Women do not urgently shape their arms because men do not care about seeing them. Obviously,
Although women do not want fine muscles, every bodybuilder knows that women—

I like Kampo's. The women can do 100 slaps on their legs and their stomachs look

If you like the exercises, you can see the difference. I think women

This is an illusion, and I think there are too many people who think

And model specialists still would look like that.

If I were a woman, I would look like that. (Kelli)

I was the first woman, and I didn't think of exercise, because I didn't have the hormones (Collen),

My body is not muscular, because they just don't have the hormones.

I don't think women should worry about doing a biological experiment.

I think women cannot become too muscular even with the help of weights.

If I were a woman in my mid thirties, I would have fine muscles, but now I go to the gym,

I would like to build muscles and this is just a temporary sport.

Instead of the add., "within reason", of course. I don't want to look like

I would like to do bodybuilding myself and we've (she) and bodybuilder

I was the first woman, and I didn't think of exercise, because I didn't have the hormones.

People mistakenly think women are..." other things.

People mistakenly think women are..." other things.

Standing on my head, I can balance on my head.

The conventional exercises usually involved women in the program.

We shape our bodies to please that egotistical Kandy Bentley,...

Women are not visual, an active woman is more at.

Aesthetically pleasing. Female bodies.

437
Some women, like Antoinette, Becky, Colleen, or Christy, do not want appear muscular but still want to be strong. Antoinette reasons that it is good to be strong,

because if I’m physically strong, I can do things that I want to do: I can unscrew jam jars—I don’t have to ask some guys to do it for me—I can put the trash out; I can lift things. I don’t like feeling weak and helpless and end up asking other people to do things for me.

Maria and Molly want to be strong to excel in the sports they love. For these women, it’s not the appearance, the muscle size, that matters but the actual functionality of the muscles. Christy, a former competitive swimmer, likes to be strong and to have strong arms but believes that ‘‘you don’t have to have muscle definition to have good strong muscles.’’ Therefore, the aerobicizers might conform with the toned look of the ideal body, but for functionality, not only for looks.

“I Was Bulky and I Hated It!”

The aerobicizers admire other participants or instructors with tight and firm muscles, but built, big muscles are disliked. The muscle size, therefore, is an intricate matter. The women I interviewed define toned muscles quite differently from built muscles. For example, Kelly points out that “when you are toning you are just keeping the muscle firm and when you are bodybuilding you are actually enlarging the muscle and building what they call definition, when you can see one muscle from the other.” To the aerobicizers, toned muscles can be visible but not big and massive. Toned muscles are lean, in use, and tight. But when exactly does the tone turn into bulk? This, apparently, is a hard question to answer. Trisha considers that “there is a real fine line between looking good and being too muscular.” Many women are perplexed: They begin to work out their muscles but end up feeling ashamed of their bodies. Andrea tells a story of a confused friend who started weight training but is not sure about the results:

Andrea: We were going to go out and she was wearing a dress and she was like ‘‘I can’t take off my jacket’’ . . . they [the arms] were definitely tight, but I don’t think they were that unattractive, but she said she is always used to having great, thin arms, not the actual muscle, so I guess for some girls, maybe for the majority, it just is not very attractive.

Pirkko: Why did she start lifting weights?

Andrea: I’m not sure. I think she did it because she was working on her upper body more, she just tried to get rid of her arm fat. I think eventually she started to work more on the arms, so she wouldn’t overwork her legs.

Andrea’s friend felt that she was unattractive; the never-resting eyes of society glanced at her arms disapprovingly. Some of the exercisers sense a contradiction here: They recognize that they want to be strong—it is good to be strong—but concurrently they feel bad about it. For example, Melissa is struggling with her feelings about being strong:
It is really contradictory, because the very things that I do in aerobics, like my class always has this long session of push-ups, I'm strong and I feel uncomfortable with that, but at the same time I'm proud of that, not proud, that makes me feel good about myself to be strong, but I don't know. . . . I'm not satisfied and I don't know what I want to look better; it doesn't make sense.

Feeling simultaneous pride and shame does not make sense to Melissa. Many of these women can, thus, see the unfair expectation placed on them. It is, however, almost impossible to resist the societal pressure to conform. Aerobics does not seem to help women to expand the boundaries of the ideal feminine body to the same extent as, for example, women's bodybuilding does. However, Helen and Sarah compare aerobics to ice skating and ballet, physical activities they have been involved in earlier. They prefer aerobics because, unlike ice skaters or ballet dancers, aerobicizers can be proud of their muscles:

I've been in ballet forever, and I prefer aerobics to it, because in ballet you are supposed to be skinny and have no muscles. I mean, muscles are not valued, just flexibility. In aerobics muscles are valued, because it shows that you've been doing aerobics for a while and if you have big calves . . . [they think], "Oh, she is dedicated." (Sarah)

For these women, aerobics has been a liberating experience, because they no longer feel ashamed of their well-defined leg muscles. Both, however, express an added desire "to look thinner" (Helen). Therefore, along with the refined regulations regarding ideal tone, the perfect female body is also required to be thin.

"I Like to Be Sort of Petite"

The connection between women's exercise and slimness dates back to the advent of aerobics. When aerobics began, its initial purpose was to facilitate weight loss (Cooper, 1968, 1970; Sorensen, 1979). Presently, weight loss is always listed as an advantage of a regular exercise program. Occasionally strength training is also sold to the audience by linking it with weight loss. Theoretically, increased muscle mass burns calories even at rest. Therefore, a muscular person will consume more calories in everyday life than her or his weaker counterpart (e.g., Barrett, 1991). This logic implies that women should build muscles to assist weight loss, not to increase strength.

Weight loss is important for the exercisers in my study, more so than the firm muscles. For example, one should first worry about being thin; once sufficiently thin, one can work on muscle tone. Cari's comment illustrates this sentiment:

I'm trying to burn out some fat and just stay in shape, maybe if I got down to when I was satisfied [with my weight], maybe then I worked on shaping, but I'm a long way from there; right now, I'm just trying . . . to burn out some of those fat cells.
Cari supposes that shaped muscles are something slim exercisers work on; for her the ideal body is thin, and tone is a fringe benefit. The present body ideal is definitely slim. However, slimness does not mean soft, meatless flesh but requires firm, tight, and sleek muscle tone. Bordo (1990) confirms that “unless one goes the route of muscle building, it is virtually impossible to achieve a flab-less, excess-less body unless one trims very near to the bone” (p. 90). Consequently, Cari could not achieve a fashionably small body by only losing weight. Jiggling flesh, even on a thin body, feels loose—like fat. Hence, without toning one will always feel big. Magazine texts appeal to similar reasoning: They construct their strengthening exercises to reduce women’s bodies like their diet regimens are designed to downsize their female readers. For example, Laurence (1992) reasons,

Broad shoulders, squared and relaxed, create a regal, imposing carriage that signifies power and presence. They can also make your waist seem smaller, more delicate, and the sight of silk sliding over a creamy shoulder carries its own potency. (p. 103)

Although broad shoulders signify “power and presence,” above all, they make one’s waist appear smaller. Some aerobicizers complete their toning exercises based on this rationale: Toned muscles actually will make one smaller. Even the much-feared arm exercises become acceptable when they, instead of strengthening, diminish women’s arms. Eileen defends the arm exercises done in her aerobics class: “It’s not that their arms are going to get bigger [by doing toning], they are just going to be tighter, they actually will look smaller, because they’ll be tighter and not flabby.”

Apparently, women do not want to be associated with big anything: Big muscles, big bones, and big bodies are generally feared. Somehow, we ought to fight the big body. This struggle to reduce the body is problematic. Sheila discusses a dilemma she has faced:

Sheila: I tend to build muscle pretty fast, especially when I do biking. . . . I like to slim down my legs, most slim down the muscle. I do have a lot of muscle I could slim down.

Pirkko: By doing what?

Sheila: I don’t know, it’s hard. When I was a freshman, I managed to do it. I have a slow metabolism; I have to not eat, and I have to do more exercising. When I did I was only eating dinner as a meal, and I was trying to make it light and have a few snacks during the day.

Pirkko: It didn’t bother you to get more muscles by doing all those exercises?

Sheila: You have to eat enough less, so that you are using more calories. It’s hard to do for me. You have 50 pounds of equipment [when you play ice hockey] and you go skating around, it’s going to build up my muscles unless I don’t eat anything, so, I try to keep a balance so that I don’t gain weight but it’s hard, it’s a battle. . . . I mean, I have a petite frame, I just don’t have petite muscles.

Sheila tries to control her rebellious body—prevent it from becoming any bigger—by dieting and exercising, which creates a predicament: Her muscles tend to
develop due to her workout. She is trapped in a vicious cycle where only a strict diet, as she believes, can free her. An ascetic diet regime is the only way to reveal her petite frame. Her hobby, however, is ice hockey, which is not a sport for small and frail females. A hockey player, like Sheila, needs strong muscles. She, therefore, has to be strong and delicate, big and small all at the same time.

It is evident that aerobicizers’ lived experiences reflect the double body image detailed by the scholars studying the aerobics image in the media (Kagan & Morse, 1988; MacNeill, 1988). Earlier studies also debated whether this image resists or complies with those in power. I believe that, like the bodybuilding body, it is an ambiguous image: It embraces potential for both empowerment and oppression. Similar to the women bodybuilders (Bolin, 1992a, 1992b), the aerobicizers aim to challenge the traditional beauty ideal by toning their muscles, but they also engage in oppressive feminine practices like dieting. Unlike bodybuilders, however, the aerobicizers dislike big muscles, especially in the upper body. Moreover, the aerobicizers aim to become smaller: They tone their muscles to look smaller when bodybuilders even diet to appear more muscular (Bolin, 1992b). Many aerobicizers think bodybuilders are disgusting:

I’ve seen women’s bodies that I find repulsive, because they are so muscular. (Cari)

They have this huge bulging muscle that I think is really unattractive. (Molly)

Women bodybuilders, that looks bad. (Eileen)

I don’t like . . . the women bodybuilders, to lift weights to become big, I personally don’t like that. (Daedra)

The magazines support the aerobicizers’ views regarding bodybuilding. For example, although the fitness articles promote upper body work, they clarify that their weight training will not result in bulging arm muscles (Barrett, 1991; Brick, 1990). Why this fear of big muscles?

Feminist research explains that such rejection of big muscles serves women’s oppression in society. Namely, patriarchal domination over women is based on the assumption that men are naturally—biologically—stronger and bigger than women. Physically stronger males are also alleged to be naturally determined, intellectual, active leaders who should dominate the weak, passive, and small women. To retain this power arrangement in patriarchal society, it is necessary, thus, to define the female body differently from the male body: ideally, the weak female’s muscles are sleek and firm, whereas the powerful male’s muscles are visible and big. The aerobics body fits in this scheme nicely, whereas the bodybuilding body challenges this gender dichotomy, because it resembles the big, muscular male body and minimizes the biological gap separating the sexes (Holmlund, 1989). A simple conclusion would be that aerobics supports the patriarchal ideology but bodybuilding resists it. However, Bolin (1992b) adds an interesting dimension to this discussion.

She points out that not only bodybuilding but other sporting lifestyles can challenge and minimize the biological differences between the sexes. She uses triathlon, long-distance running, and rock climbing as examples in which there
is a considerable overlap in the contours of male and female physiques. It is noticeable that these athletic male bodies are small. Therefore, the resistant female body does not have to be bulky to challenge the patriarchal, dualistic definitions of gender. In this light, a well-toned aerobicizer's body could be seen to resemble a male athlete's body and defy the dominant patriarchy over the female body.

In addition to having toned muscles, the aerobicized body is thin. The aerobicizers accordingly are afraid of fat, more than they are afraid of big muscles. For example, Becky explains that she appreciates muscles, because they make "the person look very fit." However, when asked why she exercises, she answered, "I was once fat. I don't ever want to be fat again." Being overweight was a bigger concern for more of the aerobicizers than extensive muscles. As we know, bodybuilders also need to be unnaturally thin to show their muscle development. Therefore, even women bodybuilders, although challenging femininity through developing big muscles, do not aim to overcome the requirement of feminine thinness. Being fat is still probably the furthest from the ideal feminine body of the 90s. A strong, overweight woman, theoretically, would offer the most direct resistance to the patriarchal notions of femininity in this society, as her body would directly oppose the toned and thin ideal. If we define resistance only through clear binary oppositions like this, aerobics—or any other physical activity—would never offer an avenue for true resistance. I believe that instead of classifying women's practices exclusively into resistance or oppression, it is more fruitful to concentrate on the richness of everyday experiences.

Women in aerobics classes keep struggling to make sense of the contradictory requirements of the female body. There is an additional element in the ideal female body that needs to be analyzed. This ideal implies that besides being thin and toned, our bodies must stay young. This adds another component to our bodywork load.

"I Am Not Sure if It's Too Late"

The ideal female body is also a youthful body. Women over 30 seldom appear in fitness magazines. The flabless, firm muscles do not cover an old, wrinkly, bent, gray-haired body. Nevertheless, everyone will grow older, and the natural signs of aging are opposite to the requirements of the beautiful body. Some women in my study have turned to aerobics to specifically fight the effects of age: "I have this cellulite and these fat cells. I'm not sure if it's too late; at least I'm attempting to do something" (Cari). Cari feels somewhat optimistic about the power of exercise to overcome her aging body, although her late start worries her. Others feel that age exacerbates the problems they have with their body shapes. Some exercisers become desperate when their bodies show signs of old age. When the aging progresses, women have to work incredibly hard to obtain the ideal figure. Particularly, the problem areas—underarms, thighs, hips, and abdomen—seem to get flabbier and more resistant to shaping. This experience is tangible for some aerobicizers. Colleen, Ann, and Rosi describe their bodies:

When you get older . . . your muscles aren't that dividing any more. . . .
It seems relatively easy when you are a young person to have toned muscles. (Colleen)
My body is getting older, it's harder to keep my weight in control, and I get really fat if I don't exercise. (Ann)

You gain so much weight, you don't know how to get rid of it. (Rosi)

Why do we have to fight the naturally aging body so hard? To explain our urge to remain youthful, Mike Featherstone (1991) locates the body in the context of so-called consumer culture. He argues that in present consumerism the perfect body—youthful, physically beautiful, and healthy—makes its owner more marketable. For example, "good looks" increase a person's exchange value in the job market: A physically attractive person gets hired before someone else. Like the aerobicizers, Featherstone (1991) observes that the desired body shape can be achieved only with effort and body work. Cosmetic, beauty, fitness, and leisure industries have emerged to guide people in their quest for perfection. Sagging flesh, for example, should be treated in exercise programs provided by the fitness industry. But even with the help of specific programs, the consumer has to work hard for the results. Video queen and marketing master Jane Fonda (1981) emphasizes individual hard work as a means to a better body:

Notice I've said "vigorous" and "exercise hard." I don't use these words idly. Namby-pamby little routines that don't speed up your heart beat and make you sweat aren't really worth your while. (p. 49)

If you are serious about wanting to lose weight once and for all, about changing the shape of your body, about improving your self-image and your morale, you must get over being soggy. There are not short cuts. No sweatless quickies. You must be committed to working hard, sweating hard and getting sore. . . . You have to work for it. (pp. 55-56)

Fonda's own body demonstrates how effective vigorous work is. She, although over 50, displays the ideal young boyish body discussed earlier: broad shoulders, narrow hips, long legs. Her body is "reminiscent of adolescence" (Coward, 1985, p. 41) in late middle age; it is a "version of an immature body" (Coward, 1985, p. 41) possessed by a mature woman. Spitzack (1990) reads two meanings in Fonda's fantastic teenager body. First, many women view Fonda in hopeful terms: Her body suggests that women over 50 can be viewed as attractive and can have a "good body." Consequently, older women are still attractive and maintain their marketability in consumer society. But second, women fear that this means an ongoing attention to appearance. Some had looked forward to middle age because of less focus on "looks," but now women need to continue monitoring their bodies to maintain an adolescent body, like Fonda's body, to a mature age.

In consumer society, we need to invest in body care to secure our positions in the market. Featherstone (1991) adds that this creates an expanding market for commodities that aid body work. Looking after one's body, he illustrates, is like looking after a car. As a car needs a whole array of things to function, the body needs products from soaps to diet teas to keep its shape. Such products as cosmetic surgery, diet pills, or cosmetic devices (Coward, 1985; Spitzack, 1990) are marketed particularly at women. I would place aerobics in this line of products: It is advertised to help women battle their aging, bulging, and sagging bodies in
a manner similar to other body industry products. Evidently, if women start worrying about their bodies growing old at 20, and aerobics is one of the solutions to discipline such a body, aerobics classes will be securely filled with customers, because we all will age and our bodies will need more and more work to resemble the ideal body.

Featherstone (1991) also points out that good looks are promoted by the media. Fitness magazines, TV programs, and exercise videos portray a stylized image of the body in consumer culture. Feminist research (Kagan & Morse, 1988; MacNeill, 1988) has found that these media images sexualize and objectify women as they emphasize appearance rather than fitness. The aerobicizers have obviously come face to face with the perfect media bodies in these sources. How do they find the media representation of the exercising women?

"You Don’t See Them Sweating"

Women’s ideas about exercise often resonate with the fitness discourse in the media: They work on their problem spots; they long for a toned body, but not for visible muscle definition; they struggle to fight fat and age, exactly as urged by the media texts. However, the same aerobicizers criticize the portrayal of exercisers in the media. Many women are consciously suspicious of this representation. To illustrate, Eileen, Anna, and Andrea consider the media exercisers unreal, even irritating:

TV doesn’t seem realistic; it’s like they go out and get models to do it, because they are all tall and very skinny, in shape and kind of disgusting in a way; they have their hair perfectly done and their make-up is perfect; you don’t see them sweating. It’s the same image they project, very thin, lean . . . they are just generally thin, they are just models.

This portrayal makes the exercisers doubt the expertise of the demonstrators. They suspect that these “models” are there because of their looks, not because they know something about exercise. Christy verbalizes her skepticism: “They [the demonstrators] don’t have to be necessarily fit, they could just be someone who looks good in a leotard and who are told, ‘Put your body in this position.’” Christy refers to the way many exercises are presented in the magazine pictures: The demonstrator is in a still pose waiting for the camera to capture the moment. Often a series of these pictures is arranged on the page to illustrate a continuous exercise routine. The real-life aerobicizers feel, therefore, that even unfit, thin models can pose a couple of seconds for a beautiful picture, but they would not be able to follow a continuous aerobics class.

If my interviewees are skeptical of the magazine representations, they view exercise videotapes with an even stronger suspicion. Unlike the static pictures, a video shows a continuous aerobics class lasting 30 to 60 minutes. The video exercisers should, thus, demonstrate a good fitness level. The aerobicizers I interviewed are distrustful: The videotapes are a media trick because the video exercisers appear too perfect to be real. Sarah, for example, is annoyed with the exercise videos:
It kind of makes me mad because I keep hearing that they stop, put on more make-up and jump another five minutes and then come back, wipe off the sweat, and you never see them really ugly; there is something wrong.

While being disturbed, women have also accepted that the media display only perfect bodies. For example, Daedra explains,

I expect that anyone demonstrating any exercise in any magazine is going to have to be close to that ideal body. I don’t think I expect anything but that.

Flawless models do not irritate all the aerobicizers. For some women, the perfect media exercisers are a positive incentive that keeps them exercising.

Regardless, many women in this study like to see “normal people” demonstrating the exercises. Or they prefer to follow a fitness expert who knows what she or he is doing. The body size is not as important as fitness level and professional instruction. These exercisers welcome a larger-size leader or participant in exercise class. Actually, a little “chunkiness” makes the person more human and easier to relate to. Therefore, the media class should resemble more closely the “real-life” classes they participate in. Sarah summarizes her requirements for an instructor:

You can be an aerobics teacher and not have a body. My only requirements for an aerobics teacher are that they can do the routines with us and that they’ve got energy doing that. . . . I don’t care if they are like 200 pounds, but if they can jump as high and are energetic. . . . There is this picture in our minds like Jane Fonda, perfect body, [but] like [our teachers], they’ve got nice bodies, but are not beautiful, but as long as they can keep up with us, lead us, that’s fine.

Sarah notices the discrepancy between the media images of an aerobicizer (“there is this picture in our minds like Jane Fonda, perfect body”) and her instructors. She still prefers her instructors. Some exercisers have discovered that the recent exercise videos include different types of people in their model classes. For example, Fonda instructs some “overweight” exercisers in one of her latest tapes; in Kathy Smith’s video class exercisers in different fitness levels aerobicize together. However, my interviewees regard these tapes as exceptional.

The interviewees do not like the thin and toned media ideal: It is too perfect, it is no longer real. This conscious rejection seems odd as the women keep working toward the same ideal in their aerobics classes. Therefore, women’s relationship with the contradictory body ideal is ambiguous: Against their own judgment, many aerobicizers still desire to look like the flawless models. It seems a lot easier to judge the body image at the intellectual level than engage in the resistant action in real life. Recall how aerobicizers like Melissa or Sheila struggle to keep weight training. They choose to be strong, but when their bodies grow more muscular and less feminine, they find it hard to face the judgment of the policing gaze without shame. Likewise I, a feminist researcher, am petrified that
I will become fat regardless of my knowledge that the ideal thinness is an unrealistic goal designed to keep women dieting. One has to be extremely secure to be able to confront the everyday challenges put forward by the dominant discourses and even more confident to engage in an openly resistant action. We struggle to resist the body ideal but are not able to ignore it or achieve it. Our bodies remain imperfect.

Many of my interviewees feel that they are continuously required to improve some part of their bodies. Occasionally—like Antoinette here—they reflect their unhappiness with a touch of irony: "We talk about it [the body] a lot. My roommates and I sit around all the time, which is hilarious, because we are all in pretty good shape . . . but we think we are overweight or out of shape or we have too much fat." Antoinette and her friends realize that they actually look acceptable, but they still want to work on their bodies. Considering that the same women criticize the present body ideal for being unrealistically thin, their desire for change appears quite contradictory. Daedra is aware of her problematic relationship with the ideal body:

I think it’s [the body ideal] really unhealthy, but . . . the ideal body is the perfect woman . . . with no fat, a beautifully shaped body. . . . You have to work your butt off for that type of body . . . and a lot of people can just never look that way because of the way they are. I think a lot of girls have fallen into a trap that they have to look certain way. . . . I’m falling into that trap.

She recognizes how "unhealthy" and unrealistic the body ideal is but admits, at the same time, that she longs to have such a body herself. She is trapped into a false fight with her body. Why do we fall into the illusionary body ideal? Why do we need to change our bodies that really do not need a change? Why do women drive themselves for the image they find fallacious? In her discussion of dieting practices Spitzack (1990) connects the present beauty ideal to health. This connection provides a starting point for my discussion of women’s antagonistic relationships with their bodies.

The Panoptic Power: Be Positive and You Can Change!

Spitzack (1990) first locates the body image in patriarchal consumer society. Her discussion confirms my notions that the present image of the perfect female body jointly serves visions of traditional femininity—women’s muscles are toned and firm but not "hulkish," visible, or big—and the economic interest of consumer society. However, Spitzack (1990) argues further that the influence of these powerful agencies on the female body becomes more obvious when discussed in connection with the discourse of health.

Spitzack’s key to understanding women’s situation in society is the “aesthetics of health.” Women’s present beauty standard is defined through health: The “healthy look” and “natural beauty” are now fashionable, albeit culturally constructed, descriptions of a good-looking woman. Basically, a beautiful body in this society is a healthy body, not only a slender body as 10 years ago. This shift away from thinness should provide more diverse models for women, but
most descriptions of the healthy look still center on the requirements of physical attractiveness. In reality, the healthy body “mandates even greater restrictions on female bodies” (Spitzack, 1990, p. 37). For example, toned muscles now cast the required healthy glow on the slender women. Bradley Block’s (1988) article in Health magazine can serve as a case in point. He proclaims that the great body today is a healthy body and, therefore, there is no single great body “look.” The article introduces six women who demonstrate the growing diversity. However, when we take a closer look at these women, we find that they are all thin, young, and toned. The only variable is their height. Therefore, the healthy body is only a new, fashionable rubric for the physically attractive body.

Spitzack (1990) adds high self-esteem, self-confidence, and increased assertiveness to the measures of “the healthy look.” This connection is evident in aerobics. Many women in aerobics classes assert that exercise makes them feel better not only about their physique but also about “themselves,” much like the Shape “Success Story” heroines in Duncan’s (1994) study. For example, Eileen tells how aerobics boosts her self-confidence:

When I do aerobics, I feel toned; if I’m not even any more toned, at least I feel my muscles are tighter and I feel better about myself.

In this sense, aerobics indirectly makes the participants’ self-confidence grow, which at first glance seems to empower the exercisers. Eileen, however, connects positive feelings about herself to her looks: When one looks better, one feels better. Here a conversation by Sarah and Helen further reveals how good looks and positive self-image are inevitably linked with each other:

_Helen:_ It feels better, when the jeans fit looser.
_Sarah:_ You can loosen your belt buckle . . . and you feel more confident . . . you can look better, you feel better . . . you look skinnier, you feel more confident about your body.

_Helen:_ The reason [to go to aerobics] is to look better, not just for a better body, but for self-image . . . you definitely see a difference in your body, maybe other people don’t but you feel a lot better.

_Sarah:_ You just feel like you are doing your best for the body; this is straining, but it’s also good for us, so you feel better.

Helen obviously believes that good looks consist not only of a “skinny” body but also of a good self-image, which again is a result of the improved body. Therefore, better self-confidence derives from an attractive body.

Similar to the aerobicizers, magazine texts connect self-confidence with good looks. Many articles claim that a better body ignites positive self-esteem. Magazines describe confidence and self-esteem to characterize the beauty ideal of the 90s. Now women who have confidence and a positive attitude look good. Furthermore, the new beauty reflects our growth and self-acceptance; women now “want to look and feel good” (Lazarus, 1991, p. 62). In one article Rita Freedman (1991), a psychologist, points out the unquestionable link between a woman’s self-esteem and her body image: “Improving your body image is quite likely to improve your self-esteem—so, working on self-esteem will usually
improve your body image also. Body-loathing leads to self-loathing, while body-love leads to self-love” (p. 98). Consequently, women should not try to turn themselves into something they are not. Instead, magazines encourage readers to find their normal, healthy body weights and accept their current measurements. For example, magazines advise women to focus on the positive points of their mirror reflections, not the flawed parts (Freedman, 1991; Wise, 1990). In addition, exercise clothing—although quite revealing—can be designed to accentuate the positives about one’s body: “Magicians do it with smoke and mirrors, but bodywear designers use lines, stitching, nips and cuts to improve upon reality. These exercise pieces perform their own magic to accentuate your positives” (p. 92) writes Kathleen Riquelme (1994) in *Shape* to introduce “the latest and greatest in figure-flattering bodywear” (p. 92). The article is named ironically “Grand Illusions” as if to acknowledge that women have to trick themselves to feel positive with bodywear magic. Women need magic to mask the real body like magicians need to create an illusion by hiding the traces of their tricks.

Partly, such a discourse sounds quite strange after readers are advised to accept themselves as they are. Why do we need illusions if we are to accept our “real” bodies? Is it something to do with the models wearing these clothes that create “larger-than-life” illusions? Their perfectly thin bodies are not imaginary; they are real. We readers know we don’t look like them, but with the right clothing we can at least make the best of our “bottom-heavy-figures” (Riquelme, 1994, p. 92).

Partly, this discourse is very encouraging: Every woman should accept her body, feel confident about it, and derive increased self-esteem from her appearance even if it is achieved through clothing magic. These positive feelings and increased powerfulness can free women from the regulative mechanism of the masculine ideology and consumerism. Spitzack (1990) argues, however, that this seemingly liberating discourse is in itself an illusion.

Illusions surrounding the women’s fitness movement have been tackled previously by other feminist researchers (Kagan & Morse, 1988; Lenskyj, 1986; MacNeill, 1988; Theberge, 1987). According to these scholars, as pointed out earlier, the potentially liberating impulses in aerobics have been turned to serve the masculine ideology by cementing the effects of exercise with an improved appearance. Spitzack (1990) agrees that such claims of liberation only “mask increasing control with a rhetoric of freedom” (p. 42). For example, to maintain a healthy body, women are required to detect their bodily flaws more carefully. While constantly scrutinizing, one has to appear assertive and confident about one’s body. Rather than being free, women are prisoners of more detailed regulations of beauty. Why do women accept this controlling discipline?

Spitzack (1990) believes that this control is implemented over women through a confession that women have secret problems. As I demonstrated earlier, the magazine texts were indeed convinced that their readers all possessed hidden body anxieties. Similar to Duncan’s (1994) and Spitzack’s (1990) dieters, exercisers were urged to admit that their bodies are imperfect and then take action to change for the better. One article advises the reader to follow these exact steps: “The most important thing I have learned is that you have to accept the way you look now in order to make a change . . . you have to think positively about yourself, your appearance and your ability to accomplish your goals” (Glenn, 1992, p. 13). Another article assures us that we women are not helping ourselves by self-disgust, which
only "creates a feeling of punishment" (Weaver & Ruther, 1991, p. 81) and defeats our attempts to change through exercise or weight loss programs. To successfully change our female bodies, we have to enjoy the process.

In sum, self-acceptance in exercise discourse promotes only bodily change; feeling positive about oneself is a necessary precondition for a model body. One is to accept one’s body shape only to reform it. Focus on women’s psychological well-being disguises increased attention to women’s appearance and makes a deeper obsession with the body possible. This practice, Spitzack (1990) observes, is analagous to the treatment of another obsession, alcoholism. For instance, similar to Alcoholics Anonymous (AA), Overeaters Anonymous (OA) is patterned to help overeaters overcome their addiction. Exercise discourse advocates similar logic. Curiously, unlike other addictions, the confession of body problems does not free one from the obsessive behavior. On the contrary, it precedes a more thorough internalization of the addiction. To further implement the logic of confession, magazines, as I interpret them, urge women to take responsibility for their change. The Foucauldian concept of panoptic power explains some meanings embedded in this discourse.

In his analysis of contemporary society, Foucault (1979) argues that the body is a target of subtle disciplinary practices that seek to regulate its existence. Different disciplinary practices—which Foucault ties to modern forms of the army, the school, the hospital, the prison, and the manufactory—produce "docile bodies" ready to obey the regimes of power in society. Each person has internalized the control mechanisms through the body discipline. Individual citizens are, therefore, governed not by visible and openly repressive power sources, but by themselves. Foucault (1979) illustrates this power arrangement with an analogy to the Panopticon, a model prison whose circular design leaves all inmates in their individual cells permanently visible for the invisible supervisor in the center tower. Each prisoner is disciplined through his or her awareness of the supervisor rather than the supervisor’s actual presence. The inmates are controlled by their own awareness of power. Spitzack (1990) finds dieting practices effectively disciplining women’s bodies. She adds that the power over them is the most effective and captivating when the dieting discourse persuades the individual women to control their bodies on account of society. This logic is evident in aerobics.

Individual aerobicizers have taken the responsibility to control their bodies. They, sometimes questioningly, aim to change to resemble the ideal body. In addition, women feel good when their body shapes begin to approximate the ideal. However, societal standards, not women’s own standards, define this ideal. Therefore, even the heightened self-esteem derived from a better body ultimately serves the purposes of the powerful to continue the oppression of women in society. Aerobics, like dieting, is part of a complex use of power over women in postmodern consumer society. The panoptic power arrangement, whereby the individuals control themselves on behalf of the powerful while the power source itself remains invisible, ensures that women are so occupied with obtaining the healthy look that they do not have time to wonder why they are doing it. Such a conclusion sounds quite depressing. Is the power over us so extensive and does it penetrate so deeply into our lives that whatever we think we are doing for our own benefit is actually harnessed to serve the purposes of an invisible power?
The invisible discursive power seems to effectively shape our thoughts and our behavior regarding our bodies. But if this grip were complete, women would passively follow the confessional logic without ever questioning it. Aerobicizers in this study have an active voice. They do not quietly dedicate their lives to body reconstruction, but they question the body ideal and are particularly skeptical about the media presentation of exercising women. This questioning leaves many women puzzled: They want to conform with the ideal, but they also find the whole process ridiculous. As a result, women’s relationship with the body ideal is contradictory. This awareness, nevertheless, demonstrates that women have not internalized the panoptic power arrangement entirely. Aerobicizers do not, however, visibly resist the patriarchal body ideal by actively aiming to build transgressive bodies like the women bodybuilders. Aerobics does not offer an avenue for a large-scale revolution, at least not in the public arena. Nevertheless, in aerobics, much like women’s bodybuilding (Bolin, 1992a), the private setting is quite different from the official discourse and does not necessarily follow the practices set by the dominant powers.

Although many aerobics classes revolve around body shaping (e.g., the toning moves are designed to improve appearance rather than functionality; the muscles are built to increase the caloric expenditure, not to gain strength), many aerobicizers participate for reasons other than improving their bodies. For example, aerobics is a source of enjoyment and not only because of the improved body (Markula, 1993a, 1993b, in press); it provides a safe environment for being physically active (Markula, in press); it supplies women with increased energy to carry on with their work (Markula, 1993b); it allows women to spend time on themselves (Markula, 1993b); and it is an opportunity to meet and make friends (Markula, 1993b). All these reasons, whose resistant potential I have discussed in detail in other contexts, demonstrate that aerobics does not entirely serve as a vehicle for the oppressive dominant body discourses. Furthermore, the real-life aerobics class does not appear similar to the video classes. For instance, the instructors are not all picture-perfect (recall Sarah’s earlier comment about her instructor); the aerobicizers themselves do not wear skimpy clothes like the video or magazine exercisers (Markula, 1992); and not all classes include nonfunctional moves geared around body shaping (Markula, 1993b).

Central to my examination of the body in aerobics has been the view that culture consists of communication between different voices. In this paper, individual aerobicizers’ voices engage in a dialogue with the media voices of aerobics. Following Bakhtin (1981) I assume that cultural dialogue implies certain power relations: Some voices are public and more dominant than other, private, voices. For example, the voices of the magazines and aerobics videotapes can dominate the public representations of the perfect aerobics body. It seems obvious that this public discourse around the aerobics body is a voice of oppression. However, individual aerobicizers struggle to give different meanings to the ideal aerobicizing body. Like Spitzack’s (1990) dieters, aerobicizers privately question the logic of this discourse whose contradictory beauty requirements leave many of these women confused. This leads me to ask, if the public voice authoritatively shapes the meaning of women’s exercising bodies, are women’s private voices heard? Bakhtin (1981) believes that individual voices can use alternative channels to replace the official meanings with their own meanings. I believe this study is one attempt to bring women’s private
voices to a public stage and give them the lines in the body dialogue they deserve. I hope these voices are loud enough to ignite a change.

References


Arveda, K.E. (1991). One size does not fit all, or how I learned to stop dieting and love the body. *Quest, 43*, 135-147.


Aerobicizing Female Bodies


Sternlicht, E. (1990c, July). Try this for thighs. Shape, p. 34.


Acknowledgments

I would like to thank Jim Denison and the two anonymous reviewers for their helpful comments and suggestions. I am also grateful for the support of M.K. Howard and K.S.W. Davidson during the preparation of this paper.