
During the interviews for my dissertation research, which dealt with aerobics, I frequently confronted women’s all encompassing need to lose weight regardless of what their actual size was. This obsession depressed me, but at the same time filled me with questions such as: Why do we need to torture ourselves with crazy diets? Why do we need to be thinner? Why do we judge ourselves so hard? And do we merely exercise to control our weight?

When I was struggling to find answers to these questions, I discovered Carol Spitzack’s (1990) book *Confessing Excess: Women and the Politics of Body Reduction*. Her theorizing concerning women’s dieting practices was very helpful to me in terms of understanding aerobics’ notions of weight control. Although Spitzack does not directly examine exercise, I believe that her book can be an important resource for anyone studying women and physical activity. For whenever we deal with women’s physical activity—sport, exercise or dance—we must address such issues as body, physicality, female beauty, and health.

I find myself referring back to Spitzack’s text over and over again as I try to come to terms with such themes as female sexuality in physical activity, health as promoted through exercise, or exercise clothing. Although published in 1990, Spitzack’s book is still timely and pertinent, therefore, I would like to share it with the other readers of this journal.

Spitzack grounds her book in large part on Foucaultian theory of power. Michel Foucault is not interested in pointing out a particular source of power. Rather, he believes that power is unidentified in origin and has a ubiquitous presence. In addition, this power is not openly oppressive, but works through persuasion. Discourses are the means to these persuasions. Discourses dictate what we know about our cultural practices. For example, different discourses tell us about diet, health or beauty. Our knowledge of these particular, mainly feminine practices, is learned through the discourses and we learn the "proper" ways of behaving and the proper ways of being a female. These proper ways are defined by the dominant powers in society. Spitzack points out, for example, that our understanding of health is defined through a discourse of health, which itself is a combination of the political, economic, and historical forces in society. Through this definition she also aligns herself with feminist perspectives as she assumes that, in part, such discourses are defined by the masculine ideology; one dominant power in this society. In her book she aims to explain how the narrative of dieting
is connected to the discourse of health and consequently, how dieting practices are used by the dominant powers in society as a means to control women.

Spitzack begins her analysis by tracing the path of persuasion. She links the dieting practices and the discourse of health in her concept of the “aesthetics of health.” Under this aesthetics we are told to stop dieting if we really want to lose weight. Instead, we should worry about being healthy. Health equals beauty. However, the concept of beauty still assumes a thin body. When we look good, i.e., thin, we feel good and gain self-confidence and self-assurance. In this way, we are persuaded that looking thin and dieting is for our own good: it is liberating and empowering as we become confident and capable citizens. In this sense, we voluntarily worry about our weight and diet in order to feel better about ourselves. However, what makes us think that we need to diet?

To explain women’s obsession with dieting, Spitzack, following Foucault again, introduces the disciplinary gaze which controls our bodily existence in society and makes sure that we construct our bodies in the image desired by the dominant powers. These powers, therefore, aim to dominate us through our bodies. This disciplinary gaze is omnipresent and makes us feel that we are under constant scrutiny. Under this scrutiny we will confess that there is something wrong with our bodies; we will confess the excess—hence the title of her book: confessing excess. Spitzack explains that as we confess our excess we will believe that naturally healthy—or beautiful—women do not exist. Rather, beauty requires constant effort and constant self-surveillance. Spitzack discusses how others around us, our family, our female friends, our partners, can deepen the need for critical self-surveillance as they gaze and comment on our bodies. Therefore, dieting is an endless and impossible task which we, however, should engage in to become healthy and beautiful—a desired goal for every woman in this society.

Spitzack proposes that, through the practice of dieting and its connection to health, women’s oppression is masked under seemingly liberating practices. She supports her argument through interviews with 50 women. As she develops her theoretical logic she blends in quotes from these women. Therefore, besides her voice, she uses other women’s voices to build her analysis of the dieting practices. Foucault has often been criticized for not giving any space for individual resistance, because he believes that power is so “totalizing” and so penetrating that there is no chance for individual agency to operate. Spitzack, however, sees critical value in considering the voices of women who have lived the paradoxes in the domain of women’s health (p. 4). Furthermore, she believes that power operates materially, not from a position of transcendence or as a foundation, but she is not prepared to abandon the subjects’ mediation of representations (p. 4). Without privileging or sacrificing the