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Within the realm of women’s health, exercise is one obvious kind of ‘preventive care’ that depends both on an individual’s decision about whether to participate and on larger cultural imaginaries and meanings of the benefits and drawbacks of exercise on women’s bodies (Abou-Rizk & Rail, 2012). According to mainstream medicine, exercise can help women build muscles, increase cardiovascular endurance, and prevent osteoporosis (Karinkanta et al., 2009; Oja et al., 2011; Vogel et al., 2009). Even the cognitive benefits of exercise have been identified, such as an improved ability to think clearly, make quick decisions, possibly even the prevention of dementia (Ahlskog et al., 2011). However, when taken to extremes, exercise can also have a negative impact on women’s health: it can lead to osteoporosis, amenorrhea, dysmorphic body image, and eating disorders (Golden, 2011).

While exercise may have downsides, including the risk of injury, government policies, public health officials, and researchers alike encourage women to engage in exercise on a regular basis because overall it is deemed good for health. The nuances of what physical activity means to different stakeholders and in different places are lost on some researchers and politicians. Few researchers have explored 1) the validity of research about physical activity, 2) government-based physical activity guidelines, and 3) how neoliberal discourses about monitoring and regulating one’s body to be a productive citizen help to shape the exercise messaging for the general public. Some scholars have also suggested that research examining the benefits of exercise do not take into account important intervening/conflating factors such as gender, race, and socioeconomic status (Gard & Wright, 2005).

Women and Exercise: The Body, Health & Consumerism opens a welcome space for discussion of these issues by examining women and exercise from various theoretical perspectives and geographic locales, locating the book within a feminist comparative sociology of sport. The

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content reflects Eileen Kennedy’s own interest in exploring the intersections of race, class, and gender, along with Pirkko Markula’s work in qualitative research methods. *Women and Exercise* is organized thematically, with each of the 14 chapters engaging with the underlying theme: how the business of fitness is intertwined with the embodiment of health by women through exercise experiences and life circumstances.

The book is divided into four sections focusing on the business of exercise, the experiences of fat women, women’s exercise and public health, and lived body experiences. Sport sociology scholars from settings as diverse as Canada, New Zealand, United States, Finland, the United Kingdom, and various other European countries contributed chapters to the book, drawing from insights of feminist sport sociologists such as Mary Jo Kane, Margaret Duncan, and Jennifer Hagreaves, along with those of classic sociological theorists including Michel Foucault and Erving Goffman. Many, but not all of the sociocultural issues raised, especially those around gendered meanings, are similar across the different countries represented, suggesting a commonality of gendered norms and how they actually impede the realization of health through exercise. However, in part because the research was conducted primarily in Western, high-income settings, the book includes little discussion about accessibility (including financial and the existence, or lack thereof, of safe spaces for exercise) or certain cultural mores, which may affect women’s involvement in exercise. Of course these factors are also relevant in industrialized countries and merit more prominence in this volume.

The book opens with a section entitled “The Business of Exercise: Selling and Consuming Fitness,” which explores the feminine subjectivities that are formed in the media and consumer exercise culture. The authors, all from Europe and North America, argue that the fitness industry can actually constrain individuals’ exercise by portraying appropriate ‘feminine’ activities, and can mislead consumers to think that new products and services provided within the fitness industry ‘empower’ women by providing alternative types of exercise that support a woman’s femininity instead of inhibiting it. Several of the chapters in this section focus on the contradictory messages within the new dominant fitness paradigm: for example, women are exposed to magazine images that convey the idea that exercise is simple and pleasurable, while the accompanying text suggests that the female body is flawed and needs to be punished and altered through exercise. The chapters in this section acknowledge the gendered health behaviours that are expected of women, such as engaging in exercise to burn calories, while also dieting to limit calories.

The second section, “Body Trouble: Fat Women and Exercise,” investigates the cultural biases and anxieties that surround the
intersection of femininity, fatness, and exercise. Health and fitness professionals promote exercise as a requirement to re-shape the body and regain control of health by controlling girth. However, in most Western cultures, women of all ages who are deemed visibly overweight are currently stigmatized for failing to attain the desired body shape, making it harder for them to display their bodies as they exercise. The chapters in this section explore the ‘selling’ of exercise as a weight-loss strategy, the perceived ‘failings’ of overweight women in the exercise domain, and how women who do not achieve the cultural ideal of a thin and toned body feel like ‘outsiders’ in the fitness industry, further alienating them.

The third section, “In the Name of Health: Women’s Exercise and Public Health,” considers the construal of exercise as an individual responsibility: within the public health discourse, it has become a moral imperative for women to participate in exercise as the personal obligation of a responsible citizen. The authors of these chapters use research from the United Kingdom and Canada to argue that there has been a homogenization of exercise prescriptions for different kinds of women, with a lack of consideration for the diversity of women in terms of age or ethnicity. For example, one study explored the different reasons why participants in a fitness class in the United Kingdom engaged in exercise. The instructor often referenced the appearance benefits of participating in the class, which appealed to the participants of British ancestry – whereas (immigrant) African Caribbean, Pakistani, and Muslim women were more concerned with the health benefits the class provided. Women who do not meet cultural body standards of a toned, young-looking, and thin body may feel constrained by and disengaged from the public health discourse about exercise unless they are able to resist or reinterpret the health messages to suit their own aging, ‘overweight’ or ethnic bodies: women in one study referred to choosing ‘appropriate’ activities for their aging bodies, and the emphasis on youth by the fitness industry kept many women from going to a gym. Ultimately, this section demonstrates that treating the category of women as unitary in health discourse (a longstanding problem, see e.g., Lock, 1998) actually alienates women from the healthy habits they are being exhorted to embrace.

The fourth and final section, “Lived Body Experiences: Exercise, Embodiment and Performance,” examines the changing subjectivities of femininity in relation to exercise. The chapters herein explore how changes in cultural expectations of women, along with changes in women’s economic standing worldwide, have transformed how women manage their bodies and exercise. These chapters provide striking examples of women challenging and questioning gendered patterns of exercise through new forms such as running, striptease aerobics, and
self-defense: striptease aerobics, for instance, exemplifies a mixture of objectification, power, negotiation of femininity, exercise, and pleasure.

The book is accessible to advanced undergraduate and graduate students, and the editors have ensured that individual chapters, as well as the book as a whole, may be adopted for classroom use. The range of qualitative methodologies employed throughout the book, including interviews, textual analysis, and ethnography, also make it useful for methodological training. Through its use of autophenomenography (a researcher studying his/her own experiences of phenomena) and ethnography, the book provides an insider perspective of women’s consumption of the fitness industry and its underlying health discourses. Although the reliability and validity of these methodological approaches are sometimes questioned, their application here yields rich contributions to the sociology of sport and women’s health. Most importantly, the topics and concepts covered in this book vividly demonstrate how women’s exercise choices and patterns are embodied (shaping a woman’s identity, consciousness, and very being) and influenced by the cultural imaginary and the business context surrounding women’s health and fitness/exercise discourses.

In sume, the book offers an effective critique of women’s consumption of the fitness industry. Various discourses rippling through the fitness industry may influence a woman’s decision to exercise: exercise for women is often conflated with appearance or weightloss, rather than health benefits. Women are often treated by the fitness industry as a single category regardless of age, ethnicity, class, or other factors. The discourse of exercise consumption focuses on how women’s bodies are flawed and in need of improvement, and encourages women to exercise to monitor and regulate their bodies and appearance.

Though *Women & Exercise* offers a compilation of comparative analyses of how consumer culture frames health, it falls short in several ways. The book does not explore the intersection of exercise, gender, and youth, which would be useful because women are exposed to the interrelation of consumerism, body image, exercise, and health at a young age and this continues throughout the life course. Furthermore, the research presented in the book was conducted entirely in Western countries, so it does not offer a generalized, global representation of women’s experiences with exercise and the fitness industry. These weaknesses notwithstanding *Women & Exercise, by highlighting exercise as a concrete example of the cultural and economic embodiment of gender, deftly demonstrates how consumerist gendering can get in the way of women’s health.*
REFERENCES


