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Neville, Ross; Gorman, Catherine; Flanagan, Sheila; Dimanche, Frédéric

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Article Title: Negotiating Fitness, From Consumption to Virtuous Production

Authors: Ross D. Neville¹, Catherine Gorman¹, Sheila Flanagan¹, and Frédéric Dimanche²

Affiliations: ¹College of Arts and Tourism, Dublin Institute of Technology, Dublin, Ireland.
²Department of Marketing, SKEMA Business School, Nice, France.

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Abstract

By shifting our attention towards everyday life, its manifold commitments and responsibilities, this paper examines the potential for “fitness” to take on an extended meaning beyond consumption activity. In the opening sections, Robert Nozick’s (1974) “Experience Machine” thought experiment is presented as an alternative analytic frame for interpreting the problem of fitness in terms of a tension between mere activity and experience. In relation to this tension, the paper presents findings from a study of experienced participants and emphasizes the possibilities of a virtuous production through fitness. In particular, we emphasize that there is much work to be done in sedimenting (and maintaining) an appropriate frame of reference for “doing fitness” and that “being someone through fitness” might operate as an indexical marker of virtue.

Despite its relevance in the fight against inactivity, obesity, and the prevalence of noncommunicable diseases in the developed West, the notion of fitness (in general, and in the fitness industry in particular) has also been held to account for its role in re-appropriating modern bodies to meet increasingly superficial social norms of self-presentation (Bordo, 1993; Duncan, 1994; Lloyd, 1996; Maguire & Mansfield, 1998; Markula, 1995; Pronger, 2002; Vertinsky, 1994). Of particular significance, and related to this production and manipulation of social signifiers, is the role that fitness plays in reproducing the ideology of “healthism” (Crawford, 1980; White, Young & Gillett, 1995). For example, the broader discourse on fitness has been subject to critical analysis for legitimizing a conflation of public and private health concerns, thus, privatizing socially borne risks into the sphere of individual leisure time (Smith Maguire, 2008a; see also Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2002; Petersen, 1996; Petersen & Lupton, 1996). In addition to this, the discourse on fitness has also been lamented for sequestering matters of concern such as the self, embodiment and identity into the sphere of individual consumption activity, tending towards the championing of market virtues (such as personal accountability and the maximization of self-interest), and towards the treatment of bodies as objects with utility functions and commodity status (Baudrillard, 1998; Bourdieu, 1984; Frew & McGillivray, 2005; Smith Maguire, 2008b; Waring, 2008). To wit, fitness has been roundly (and rightly) criticized for having lost many of its modernist illusions – i.e. its emphasis on the social body, social regeneration, public health reform, collective self-improvement – and, worse yet, for never adequately servicing them in the first place. Such criticisms are especially fitting and timely since what we typically come to associate with fitness nowadays – lithe, energetic, toned, fat-free, overly sexualized bodies – has become quite apart from health. As Smith Maguire (2008a) argued, fitness is much less about health than it is about “being fit for consumption”; about being “fit to consume” and “fit to be consumed” by others (p. 190).

Despite the important contribution to our understanding of the modern body, one can hardly but lament this degeneration of fitness to a mere gesture of the self-reflexivity inherent in late modern consumer society. One cannot help but lament how the fitness industries – the construction of idealized body images to fit commercial logics – have become a surrogate for the concept of fitness in general. The purpose of this paper is to explore some possibilities for fitness on the basis of a reorganization of attention away from this consumption emphasis. In exploring some possible avenues for retrieval, we do three things. Firstly, through the use of Robert Nozick’s (1974) “Experience Machine” thought experiment, we offer an alternative analytic frame for interpreting the problem of fitness. Secondly, in relation to this problem, we present a sample of findings from a study which examined the everyday factors that encourage and nurture development in fitness activities.¹ We emphasize that fitness goes beyond mere physical activity, that there is much work to be done in sedimenting an appropriate frame of reference for “doing fitness” and that “being someone through fitness” might operate as an indexical marker of virtue. Finally, we conclude with some general considerations about how to talk about the fit body in the future and outline some pertinent practical implications.

Fitness and “The Experience Machine”

In order to reinterpret the problem of fitness in a manner that is also sensitive to existing work in the field, this research employed Robert Nozick’s (1974) thought experiment, “The Experience Machine”, as an analytic frame.² Nozick deploys this thought experiment in order to counter the hedonic thesis that an action’s value can be equated with the sum total happiness effectively produced thereafter. He asks the reader to imagine that there exists an “Experience Machine” that could give you any experience you desired. Neuroscientists, Nozick explains, have the ability to stimulate the brain in ways that enable people to think and feel like they are writing an epic novel, making friends, or reading an

interesting book, and all the while they would be floating in a tank with electrodes attached to their brains. Taking all of this into consideration, the question then (according to Nozick) is whether or not people should plug into the machine, pre-programming their life on desirable experiences.

Nozick’s thought experiment is useful here for a number of reasons and invites reflection upon a number of important themes. For example, it obviously resonates with the now contested notion of “the experience society” (*Erlebnisgesellschaft*) in which nothing seems to count as a fulfilment save for self-fulfilment (Schulze, 1992; Taylor, 1991). Related to this, it also provides an interesting analogue for understanding the violently productive inner workings of the “Capitalist Machine”. Although Nozick’s work is typically considered in relation to political philosophy and, hence, is *prescriptive*, the “Experience Machine” thought experiment might also be read as a *description* of how the capitalist machine is reenergized every time somebody “plugs in”. More generally, it invites reflection upon such things as technology, modernization, mechanization, reproduction, commodification, individualization, pacification, free-will, body-self dualism, simulation, post-humanism, cyborgs, hybrids, the Virtual, the Real, and so on. In fact, it invites discussion on broader matters of concern across the social sciences and humanities that are very topical today such as vicarious-causation, substances and relations, realism-materialism, bodies, affect and embodiment (Bryant, Srnicek & Harman, 2011; Clough & Halley, 2007).

While these themes are only tangential to the focus of this paper, the “Experience Machine” also provides a useful lens for understanding the problem of fitness and various strands of fitness-related research. For example, one might equally grant that neuroscientists could stimulate the brain so that people would think and feel like they were the bearers of the fit body. In fact, this is something we already see to some extent through the mass dissemination of accessible online content, lifestyle media, fitness texts, self-help books,

exercise manuals, magazines, DVDs, mobile and social media applications, self-tracking technologies, etc. (Glassner, 1989, 1990; Kennedy & Markula, 2010; MacNeill, 1998; Mansfield, 2011; Markula, 2001; Pronger, 2002; Smith Maguire, 2002). All of the disciplines of communication – to use Deleuze and Guattari’s (1994, p. 10) hostile phrase – quite clearly already thrive on this stimulation effect in the present day by making people think and feel like they can be the bearers of the fit body. Although the fit body is framed here as a possibility and not a given, it is still a possibility given through the wares of consumption. The electrodes of which Nozick spoke have, as it were, become increasingly diffused into everyday life, having extended beyond the realm of neuroscience and into the field of consumption at large.

In fact, it is difficult to overstate the relevance of this thought experiment, especially since one of the primary lessons of late modern consumer society is that hedonic investments in the body are made in order to re-evaluate it beyond its functional- or use-value. A number of connections with exemplary research might be drawn out here for further effect.

The instrumental-hedonic lesson of the “Experience Machine” thought experiment clearly resonates with Smith Maguire’s (2008a) analysis of being “fit for consumption” (p. 190). The task of attaining fitness in the modern age, Smith Maguire argues, is not merely framed as an individual problem. Rather, given that “self-production” (p. 19; Smith Maguire, 2008b, p. 59) has become the leitmotif of late modern consumer society, fitness has turned into a problem of consumption activity – of being fit for something (other than health, presumably) and being fit for someone (other than oneself). The idea that value, meaning, and affect are to be located primarily in acts of consumption is perhaps best expressed in the following excerpt:

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

indulgence and restraint characteristic of consumer culture (Smith Maguire, 2008a, p. 196).

Since fitness does not lend itself immediately (or easily) to intrinsic rewards, “material self-reward” (Smith Maguire, 2008b, p. 70) has become a standard technique in which to foster the habituation of healthy behaviors. Smith Maguire (2008a) explains: “exercise is not itself pleasurable, but is a matter of discipline...instrumentally rationalized as the means to other ends” (p. 196). For Smith Maguire then, the problem of fitness has been translated into a kind of somatic pragmatism since value is to be located in the prospects of subsequent consumption and shopping for the newly fit body. As Smith Maguire (2008b) noted elsewhere: “the indulgence of shopping is thus made permissible through the discipline of exercise, providing consumers with a formula for negotiating the larger tension in consumer culture between hedonism and discipline...do two more sit-ups now, buy the wristwatch later” (p. 70). In fact, although the implied meaning is being stretched a bit here, the extent to which Smith Maguire’s (2008a) analyses resonate with Nozick’s thought experiment is evidenced in her description of how technological devices further facilitate the individualization of physical culture; how, through the use of earphones, exercisers are now encouraged to “plug in and tune out of the social milieu” (p. 79).

The language of the “Experience Machine” is also evident in Bauman’s (1998) account of fitness in relation to liquid modernity. It is notable that Bauman is one of the few modern theorists who makes a sharp distinction between health and fitness: “It is not ‘health’, with its connotation of a steady state, of an immobile target on which all properly trained bodies converge – but ‘fitness’, which implies being always on the move (or ready to move)...that grasps the quality expected from the experience-collector” (p. 23). For Bauman (1998), however, there is a problem here because fitness is “solely about *Erlebnis*” and, hence, “subjectively lived-through sensations” (p. 24). This connection is important. For one, *Erlebnis* indicates something that is immediate, interior, isolated, momentary, and detached;

this even implies detachment to the point of being conceived as non-bodily. Like Benjamin’s (1968, 1999) account of the modern experience (in which he makes a distinction between *Erlebnis* and *Erfahrung*), Bauman argues that fitness-as-*Erlebnis* is largely incapable of being translated into “interpersonally meaningful terms” (i.e. into *Erfahrung*), appealing only to the “sensation-seekers and gatherers” and to “the experience collector”. To this challenge of interpersonal comparison then, Bauman turns to Wittgenstein and says that we would need nothing less than a private language to come to terms with this *Erlebnis*. In relation to the present analysis, we think that he could have equally (if not more appropriately) said that we need nothing less than an “Experience Machine” for coming to terms with fitness. For what is this *Erlebnis* if not the isolated, non-bodily detachment sought by plugging into the Experience Machine? Moreover, what is this “sensation-seeker” or “experience collector” if the very subject of Nozick’s thought experiment?

Related to this, and finally, the language of Nozick’s thought experiment is also evident in Baudrillard’s (1998) body of *The Consumer Society*:

The body is not reappropriated for the autonomous ends of the subject, but in terms of a normative principle of enjoyment and hedonistic profitability, in terms of an enforced instrumentality that is indexed to the code and the norms of a society of production and consumption. In other words, one manages one’s body...one manipulates it as one of the many signifiers of social status...‘Recuperated’ as an instrument of enjoyment and an indicator of prestige, the body is then subjected to a labour of investment. (pp. 131-2)

What is the “Experience Machine” if not an opportunity to index to the code and norms of our society of production and consumption? And what makes this indexing – this re-appropriation and enforced instrumentality, this management and manipulation, this recuperation of the body – possible? “Plugging in” does. In keeping with the machinic metaphor then, Baudrillard argues that the fit body has become partial to gadgetry, upheld only by an endless sequence of machines each new one deployed in order to deal with the void left by their predecessors. Like “health” and its close correlate “beauty”, for Baudrillard,

“fitness” can now only be thought of as an elusive node receding endlessly into a machinery of consumer objects.

If it is true that the fit body only has value in an instrumental sense as yet another commodity to be invested in – if it represents nothing more than mere “sign material being exchanged”, “*Erlebnis*”, or the “reconciling of asceticism and aestheticization” – then one would surely be inclined to plug into the “Experience Machine”.³ Since the prospects of attaining fitness have aligned with the project of consumption (as opposed to mere individual) activity, there is little doubting that the answer to Nozick’s question here would be “Yes”. Even the dominant cultural imagery of fitness-as-negation – as disease prevention, risk management, calorie deficit, negative energy balance, compensatory consumption, etc. – would appear to lead to this conclusion. So why, when Nozick addresses the general question as to whether or not plugging in is desirable, does he so emphatically say “No”? Is it really only the consumption of external ends that matters to fitness participants?

The Research Context

In order to explore these questions more concretely, in this research the possibilities for fitness were examined in the context of the following proposition: *fitness is something we negotiate, despite it being something we never really achieve*. Although this question of “negotiation” has been addressed in previous research, we got the feeling that the tendency has been to frame this proposition in the opposite direction: fitness is something we never really achieve, so why do people bother?!⁴ This has been an important question for much previous research⁵ in this area and, as we indicated in the introduction, it has led to a substantial account of how modern reflexive practices are subtended by mechanisms of regulation which reach into, and act upon the body. In Nozick’s terms, the lesson from previous research might be phrased thusly: people are already plugged into some “Experience Machine”, some generative principle of action which produces homogeneity at the level of

individual subjectivity. Given the extent of this explanation, the account of fitness presented in this research did not emerge from asking *why* people engage in fitness practices. Research relating to capitalism, consumerism and consumer culture, critical theory, feminism, modernity, neoliberalism, patriarchy, postmodernism, risk, etc., already has significant purchase on this question. The account of fitness presented in this research, rather, focused more on the prospects for plugging out by asking *what it is like*. What is it like to go to the gym⁶ and work out? What is it like to negotiate one’s fitness in the context of everyday life, its manifold *other* commitments, and responsibilities?⁷

Description of Fieldwork

The methodological approach for this research employed both real-time and retrospective data. As this paper will only make explicit reference to the latter, it will suffice to make a few remarks concerning the overall approach. During the first phase of research, material was ascertained through both participant and non-participant roles at a commercial gym in Co. Kildare, rural Ireland. Fieldwork involved a non-participant shadowing of members of the fitness team as well as a more direct immersion within the activities undertaken by participants. The lead researcher participated in both individual and group exercise sessions at various times and on various days. All participatory fieldwork was undertaken on weekdays. Informal reviews of the study format with management and staff at the club confirmed our initial belief that the weekend was not a key time for gym use (save for the use of wet facilities) and would be less suitable for the purposes of this research. This participatory fieldwork not only helped in fostering a close working(-out) relationship with participants (discussed in more detail in the following paragraphs) but in meliorating the existence of an explicit power relation between the researcher and the researched. It also allowed for an immersion into the experiential aspects of fitness at an inter-personal level. The time spent in the gym space by the lead researcher in a direct participant role amounted

to approximately 1000hrs (a period of approximately two and a half years, going to the gym on average 5 times per week and spending on average 90 minutes per session).

Although this initial fieldwork phase provided a contextualized insight, material elicited often turned out to be rather perfunctory, scarcely offering more than mere listings of interactions and activities observed and undertaken (of what Bauman referred to as mere *Erlebnis*). In order to explore some of the more practical aspects of gym-going thereafter, we sought an elaborative dialogue with participants about how fitness activities fit into their everyday life and how this activity takes on a broader affective structure as experience (what Benjamin designated as *Erfahrung*). As you will see in the latter sections of this paper, our use of this fitness-experience-as-*Erfahrung* is very much in the style that Nozick would expect of those who refuse to “plug in” (what we mean to imply in this research in having emphasized the term “negotiation” and seek to underscore in conclusion in our use of the phrase “virtuous production through fitness”).

In terms of selecting research participants, a number of requirements should be clarified. Firstly, the person had to have been an active participant at the time of interviewing. Secondly, active participants had to have some predefined level of experience and consistency in relation to participation. For the purposes of this research, “experienced fitness participants” were defined as having developed a steady trajectory of participation for a period of greater than one year (where steady implied working out, on average, three times per week). Thirdly, experienced fitness participants were also defined as those who were members of private gyms. By using the private gym as the primary site for this research, considerations with respect to membership, average number of visits per week, length of membership, etc., could be more clearly defined within specific parameters. The use of the private gym also allowed for juxtaposition with previous research conducted in similar settings. Finally, in relation to participant reliability, the selection of research participants was

undertaken in conjunction with gatekeepers. In this study, four gatekeepers were fitness instructors working within the initial fieldwork site, who vouched for the “experience” of nine participants (numbered 1-9 in the table below). Three other gatekeepers were Institutional colleagues and vouched for the “experience” of three additional female participants (numbered 10-12). Gatekeepers proved invaluable in verifying predefined levels of experience, facilitating introductions and ongoing interactions, and in helping to limit potentially sensitive encounters. The use of gatekeepers also ensured that a great deal of rapport which had been previously established was extended to the research. Save for the final three interviews that were undertaken at various Institutional locations, all other interviews were undertaken in the lead researcher’s home office (having previously arranged to meet for a workout in the gym prior to this). A description of participant demographics is outlined in the following table:

Apart from age and gender, the participant profile was also diverse in a number of other respects: varying levels of education (primary school education to postgraduate and PhD), occupations (from being out of work due to disability to being a senior university lecturer), and levels of “experience” participating in fitness activities (one participant had been working out for longer than the youngest participant had been alive!).

The subsequent elaborative dialogue was largely undertaken in line with the interviewing method developed in Pollio, Locander and Thompson (1997). However, whereas Pollio *et al.* suggested an exclusively open-ended approach – eliciting discussion only on the basis of an opening statement or question – each interview in this study followed a more general thematic structure in which participants were asked about (i) their fitness history, (ii) understandings of fitness, and (iii) how fitness activities are managed in the context of other day-to-day commitments and responsibilities. There were two primary reasons for following an explicit thematic structure. Firstly, it was thought that eliciting a

description of participants’ history of undertaking fitness activities would enable them to adopt a reflexive position without them even realising it. It was reasoned that getting them to talk a little bit about themselves (as opposed to merely answering questions) would make them feel more comfortable. The second reason was to facilitate some modicum of control across interviews. While the interview protocol facilitated a thematic structure for each interview, the ensuing dialogue was necessarily open-ended.

Each interview was audio-taped and manually transcribed for analysis and interpretation by the lead researcher. During the initial phase, all transcripts were reviewed individually in order to extract significant statements and break the text down into manageable units. This process was undertaken in conjunction with what von Eckartsberg (1998) referred to as an “explication-guiding question” (p. 22). In other words, significant statements were extracted on the basis of their relevance to how the individual negotiated fitness into their everyday lives. Explication-guiding questions included: What is it like for this person to go to the gym and work out? What does one have to do to make this possible? How is this experience rationalized? Does it involve planning? Is this an explicit or implicit process? What is it like when things don’t go to plan? Naturally, only statements that were deemed revelatory of the phenomenon under consideration were retained. A second layer of analysis proceeded by considering how these statements resonated across interview transcripts (as opposed to merely within them). Here, the data was analyzed on the basis of a part-to-whole approach (Pollio *et al.*, 1997; Thompson, Locander & Pollio, 1989), where significant statements were retained or discarded on the basis of how they stood up to inter-transcript comparisons. Themes for the final analysis were considered in relation to what Pollio *et al.* (1997) referred to as “experiential commonalities” (p. 52): i.e. whether they were revelatory of the phenomenon under investigation *and* plausible across participants’ lived experiences. In line with the work of Pollio *et al.* (1997), the findings were also presented to

the research team on multiple occasions for further critical reflection and refinement and for the purposes of rounding out the final layer of intersubjective analysis.

Doing Fitness

Returning to Nozick (1974), his first reason for saying “No” to plugging into the “Experience Machine” is that people “want to *do* certain things, and not just have the experience of doing them” (p. 43, original emphasis). For most of the participants involved in the present study, this practical orientation was also emphasized. Going to the gym and working out was something they “just do”. “It’s something to be done and I do it”, Steve (74 male) explained. Similarly, Liam (45, male) explained that going to the gym and working out is “something I know I have to do and I just get on and do it.” In fact, Liam explained how he “wouldn’t be thinking about not going”; “It wouldn’t even dawn on me”, he followed. For others, this was not an entirely conscious process at all. Instead, going to the gym and working out had become such a routine aspect of daily life that it was not really reflexively mobilized at all. They never really thought about it (“I didn’t actually realize it until I was saying it...I didn’t see it like that before” Louise, 34, female; “It’s only talking about it now that I actually realize it” Gail, 45, female). And, even if they did think about, it was often only in the context of “not doing it” or “overdoing it” (Steve, 54, male; Bob, 22, male). The importance of this practical orientation is further exemplified in the following responses:

Louise: I actually really look forward to going to the gym because my job is quite monotonous (34, female).

Steve: Oh, I do be looking forward to it. I like going. And if I didn’t enjoy it, I wouldn’t go (74, male).

Patrick: I usually look forward to the gym and working out. Some days I could be more tired than others...but once I start training... I’m usually good to go for sixty to ninety minutes or so of training (29, male).

Dermot: On the way to the gym I’m always on a high knowing that the workout it just about to happen...Immediately before the workout I’m excited by the prospects of lifting more weight than last time...[and] looking forward to the pump...of the muscles (28, male).

At a superficial level, it is evident that participants want to go to the gym because they like doing going. It provides a break from the monotony of work; it is enjoyable; it wakes them up; it is exciting; they experience a “high” or a “pump”. As Joan (22, female) acknowledged quite frankly in relation to this matter, “It’s not like an obsession. When I go I feel better”. To borrow from Ryle (1949), doing fitness is depicted here a “propensity-fulfilment” (p. 105). That is, something that is *looked forward to* rather than merely *looked back upon*; something participants do not wanting to do anything else at that time; something that is *itself pleasurable* and not merely *a vehicle of subsequent pleasures* (Ryle, 1949, pp. 103-106).

Getting in the Mood to “Gym It”

Perhaps the best example of what we mean by “doing fitness” was an expression used by Deirdre (42, female) to explain the extent of her activity undertaken outside of the gym over the course of a week. “I don’t just gym”, she explained, as if to say “Sure, I go to the gym. But it is not all I do”. Were it to be accepted into the dictionary, the usage here might be extended as follows:

gym n. (Sports) **1** a gymnasium. **2** a course in physical education. **3** a metal frame supporting equipment in outdoor play. • v. (gym·ming, gyms, gym it) **1** to attend a gymnasium. **2** to engage in physical activity in order to keep fit. **3** to exercise. ■ **gymer** n.

Deirdre clearly uses “gym” as a verb in order to designate the doing or practical aspects of working out. Moreover, the use of the term “gym” in this manner also makes an important reference to mutual support between the individual, activity and the environment. It is revelatory of what Ryle (1949) meant when he referred to propensity-fulfilments as “moods” and not “feelings” (pp. 98-104). Unlike feelings which are depicted as internal episodes, moods are environmental frames that typically exhaust the limits of our perceptual field at any given time: “In saying that [s]he is in a certain mood we are saying...that [s]he is

in the frame of mind to say, do and feel a wide variety of loosely affiliated things” (p. 99).

One might go as far as to say that “gymming it” not only means attending a gym in order to engage in physical activity and exercise, but implies having established a specific relation to ones social-material activity-environment such that one might be referred to as a credible “gymmer”. In other words, credible gymmers have an ability to get into the mood to do fitness and are able to establish an intimate relation with their social-material activity-environment; something proposed in our use of the term “relation of fit” in subsequent sections and in conclusion. This usage also invites reflection upon the larger issues that are at stake in “doing fitness” and how this process extends beyond the physical boundaries of the gym environment. It takes a lot of preparation to “get in the mood”, “do fitness”, “gym it”, “be a credible gymmer” or “establish relations of fit”. These are possibilities that require a lot of build-up and stage-setting over the course of the day, as the excerpts in the following sections will attest.

Establishing “Relations of Fit”

In the following sequence of dialogue Joan (22, female) outlines some of the factors taken into consideration prior to a workout if she is to bridge intention (“I’m definitely going to the gym tonight”) and action (“I was zonked and I still went. And I was glad to have broken through it”):

Joan: Well, if I know I’m definitely going, I wouldn’t be eating a lot of crap food beforehand...I would be more conscious of what I’m eating compared to a day when I’m not going...I usually come home and say to my mom “I’m going to the gym” and tell her to stop pestering me with a big dinner...[because] I won’t be able to move if I eat that. I rarely sit down at home beforehand because I’m afraid that I’ll get too comfortable.

Interviewer: It’s interesting that you don’t let yourself get too comfortable.

Joan: I know that if I sit down I will...be like, “This is way too nice; too comfy”...Usually, it’s if I’m really tired when these feelings kick in. On Friday, I have a late lecture so I’m always geared up and ready for the gym. But on Tuesdays, because it has been a long day...it’s the tiredness factor that gets you. I’m just like “Don’t let it hit you yet”.

For Joan, this sequence of events is all about getting geared up and ready for the gym. It allows her to avoid getting too comfortable and literally suspends the nature of how she feels in the situation whilst opening her up to the possibilities of working out. Similar findings emerged for Katie (26, female) and Gail (45, female) who both preferred to go to the gym immediately after work before dinner. When asked whether there was any specific reason for this, Katie explained that she goes straight to the gym from work and avoids eating prior to working out because it makes her feel “sluggish” and “less able”. Because of this, she “immediately change[s] into gyms clothes” once getting home from work and “find[s] it best not to sit down or make dinner” because the longer she “put[s] it off, the harder it will be to go”. Gail also explained how she feels like she has “more energy” when she doesn’t have “a full stomach” and is “less likely to go [to the gym] if I’d had my dinner”.

For Joan, Katie, and Gail, there is a clear management of the sequence of events preceding a workout. They are sedimenting an appropriate “environmental frame” of the kind Ryle spoke about so as to render more probable the chances that they will go to the gym (cf. Crossley, 2004, 2006; Sassatelli, 1999). This pre-workout frame, paraphrasing Ryle, involves the pulling together of a number of affiliated things that make this capacity for action more and more determinate. Importantly, and as we have seen in this section, this process involves “not doing” as well as “doing”. In other words, possible threatening situations can also impact positively upon the pre-workout frame. Certain consumptive impulses are effectively put to the side and participants avoid engaging in activities that would place an affective halt upon proceedings. This is a process akin to what Crossley (2006) meant when he said that gym-goers manage to “reframe” pre-workout feelings so as to “perceive them as signs of a need to exercise” (p. 40). However, in relation to Crossley’s analysis, this perceptual marker need not be thought of as the outcome of some momentary dilemma (though in the less advanced this would seem to be the case). Rather, when it comes to experienced fitness

participants, gym going can also be depicted as the result of a series of seemingly incidental negotiations along a broader trajectory. Here, there is a unique capacity for action that needs to be maintained across the entire day (and not merely be switched on prior to the workout). Of this maintenance, Joan explains that it “comes down to getting there [the gym] in the first place”. For Katie, “once you get warmed up and into what you are doing the workout will go according to plan”. For Gail, “you have to keep on the go”. Indeed, for another participant Deirdre (42, female), this gym-going is “either planned or it’s not going to happen”. Taken together, should Joan, Katie, Gail and Deirdre maintain the trajectory of daily events as planned, when they do finally get to the gym the environment seems to elicit the appropriate affective responses out of them.

Salvaging a Workout

The importance of this rationalizing process was also evident across the participation cycle. In the following excerpt, for example, Louise (34, female) describes the aftermath of a workout that did not go as planned. Reflecting on her failure to complete a workout, she explained how she was:

Louise: ...disappointed initially that I can’t do the run, but I wouldn’t allow it to ruin the fact that I’m happy I’ve done a workout...I should be proud of myself that I’ve gone to the gym so I tend not to harp on about it or beat myself up that I haven’t done the run. I’m like “No. You know what? I’ve gotten up and done the workout”.

Louise’s failed attempts provide a useful juxtaposition to the argument that participation in fitness activities is evaluated solely on an instrumental basis. There is a sense in which something internal to the activity is of significance, worth salvaging or feeling good about. When asked whether or not it is important to remind herself of this, she replied:

Louise: Yeah I think so...I try not to entertain negative thoughts anyway so if the initial reaction is “Ah God, I’m really disappointed”, it’s important for me to go “Louise. Cop on. This is something really silly. Don’t let that annoy you”. But it’s something I’d consciously do; talk to myself and say “Don’t get annoyed over something like this”.

For Louise, it is important that she has done the workout and it is attributed significance largely on pragmatic terms: on the basis of the *performance of means* rather than the *fulfilment of ends*. This was also emphasized by Patrick (29, male) who explained that, while he sometimes “feels a little defeated” after a workout, the fact that he has “gone to the gym and done something” makes him “feel good”. For both Louise and Patrick, there is an acknowledgement that the experience was genuinely worth the undertaking. It was worth the doing and undergoing the consequences (to use a Deweyan turn of phrase) and accompanied by a sort of gratification that something significant had occurred. It wasn’t just about what might accrue *from the activity* but was related *to the activity*. In the context of their ongoing trajectory of participation then, it might be said that their *capacity to commit* outweighed their *(in)ability to achieve* as a measure of significance and value.

“In the case of certain experiences”, Nozick (1974, p. 43) explains, “it is because first we want to do the actions that we want the experiences of doing them or thinking we’ve done them”. Although this point has been borne out in this research and we think it important to reiterate, the notion that going to the gym because people want to go might seem rightly trivial. For us, however, this wanting also helps to express a practical point about physical activity: that is, by severing the brain off from its body in the Experience Machine, one would have severed all ties to the organs of activity. Nozick’s analysis can be helpfully extended here by turning briefly to Ryle (1949, pp. 103-106) account of pleasure (a matter which Smith Maguire aptly noted seems to have been severed off from the organs of physical activity). Ryle explains:

To say that a person has been enjoying digging is not to say that he has been both digging and doing or experiencing something else as a concomitant or effect of the digging; it is to say that he dug with his whole heart in his task, i.e. that he dug, wanting to dig and not wanting to do anything else (or nothing) instead. His digging was a propensity-fulfilment. His digging was his pleasure, and not a vehicle of his pleasure. (p. 104)

We also believe that for participants involved in this study going to the gym and working out was a propensity-fulfilment. Pleasure was not experienced as some separate ingredient added to the active aspects of working out. Rather, *the pleasure was the experience*. We believe that this point can also help in rephrasing an aspect of Smith Maguire’s analysis of affective responses within the fitness field. For example, perhaps it is more accurate to say that, for a great many people, going to the gym is not a propensity-fulfilment. To say that someone would rather be doing something else (i.e. shopping) is very different from saying that an activity is not itself pleasurable.

In addition to this, we also think that there is value in making a more general distinction between what the “Experience Machine” offers, which is merely pragmatic (and hence instrumental), and certain other experiences which are about pragmata (all of those everyday things that contribute in eliciting affects). This distinction was clearly borne out in this research. Going to the gym and doing fitness is not *necessarily* pragmatic or instrumental. It is not merely a want sequestered off from the vagaries of everyday life. Rather, it is intimately tied to life’s other commitments and responsibilities and, in this sense, can be depicted as a series of negotiations. As we have seen from the accounts offered in this section, this thing we call “negotiation” – “doing fitness”, “gymming it”, or what we could come to expect from a “credible gymmer” – demands the ability to resolve tensions between the particularities of daily events with the broader trajectory as planned. Participants who want to go to the gym seem to know this only too well. They know how to orient their organization of attention to what is important and come up with appropriate responses to issues normally encountered in the context of working out. They know only too well that fitness has to be negotiated and cannot merely be outsourced to the wares of consumption activity. Saying something is negotiated often has the effect of making something seem less real (i.e. it is “constructed”). However, we would like to suggest that this emphasis on

negotiation should make fitness all the more real; all the more in need of care and attention as the day turns out to be a series of trials to be overcome, or not.

(Not) Being Someone Through Fitness

In the previous section it was established that coping with the demands of “doing fitness” requires of participants a rational management of behavior across a broader trajectory of activity outside the gym environment. It requires the ability to establish, implement and maintain strategies for dealing with normal as well as potentially disruptive sequences of events. Moreover, it is something that takes place across the entire day to provide conditions for the possibility of working out. Whether anybody can “do fitness”, however, is unclear. The second component of Nozick’s thought experiment offers a useful lens through which we might be able to further explain how people find themselves in situations in which they feel obliged to exercise.

Being Meaningfully Oriented Towards One’s Environment

What else matters to us in addition to our experiences, Nozick (1974) explains, is that “we want to *be* a certain way” (p. 43, original emphasis). For Nozick, saying no to “plugging” in is tantamount to acknowledging that the “Experience Machine” does not allow for genuine, meaningful action to occur but, rather, only for the appearance of it.

For participants involved in this study, going to the gym and working out was also a meaningful endeavor. The following excerpts from Bob (22male) and Joan (22, female) provide some useful examples of how this is the case. Discussing the difference between his training now and when he was younger, Bob explained that:

Bob: When I was younger, I was just lifting weights with...no real technique. Now, with the football team, we have a strength and conditioning coach that looks over us. So, if you’re lifting weights...you’re being watched and, if you’re doing it wrong, you’re corrected...There would also be some guys...who would be poor at lifting and wouldn’t have good technique so they wouldn’t be able to advance to some of the stuff other guys are doing...They can’t progress like others...but she [the strength and conditioning coach] works around this to do

things that can help them...I find it really good because you learn a lot from it...Being able to get feedback is really important...Some other people might not like it but I learn a lot...from the practical side of it.

Joan, who discussed the importance of this practical emphasis in a more general sense, explained that she tries “not to stay there [in the gym] too long”. When asked what was significant about this, she explained how she tries to “get in and get what I have to get done in a time frame that is useful” as opposed to “staying there for two hours and not actually benefitting”. Later, Joan expanded on this pragmatic attitude towards working out:

Joan: You need to be in the right mind-frame to do it [to “do fitness”]. If you’re not, you’re wasting your time. If you think “I don’t want to be here” then you might as well not be there. You’re not going to push yourself. You’re not even going to sweat. You’re just going to walk on the treadmill and not really burn anything [fat or calories, presumably]. You might get your heart-rate going a little bit, but afterwards you will be like “That was pointless”.

Expanding on this point, Joan makes a distinction between her own attitude towards working out, and that of her friends:

Joan: I mean, I have friends who go to the gym and have a [fast food] takeaway afterwards. It’s pointless. They’re like, “It’s grand. I just went to the gym”. They’re just going for the sake of it. They’re not going to benefit in the long term, I don’t think. It’s just like “the thing to do”.

Interviewer: So, what’s the difference between them and you?

Joan: It’s so obvious; some people just go to the gym for the social thing. You can spot it a mile off. You’re like “What are you doing you posers?” Personally, my own opinion is that you have to be there for yourself. I mean, you can tell a mile off when people are just there to be there.

Interviewer: And do you have friends like that?

Joan: Oh yeah, I have friends who definitely do that.

Interviewer: Do you ever work out with them?

Joan: No. Hardly ever. It’d be too much of a distraction.

In these excerpts, Bob and Joan provide a useful distinction between merely going through the motions and a more involved orientation within the gym. A practical commitment is evident here, as is an openness and receptivity to the gym as a meaningfully-infused activity-environment. Bob spoke explicitly about this in the context of his exposure to elite-

level sports. However, this meaningful orientation is not exclusive to this context. Rather, like Bob, Joan also reflected on the fact that, as a novice, she often “wasted time” and did not “get the most out of it”. Reflecting back on Nozick’s thought experiment, we might say here that the “Experience Machine” obscures important pedagogical aspects and the importance to experience of cumulative growth. To borrow from Dewey (2005) who is close to Nozick on these issues, with the “Experience Machine”, there is no cumulative growth over time that would make “an experience” in the vital sense of the term (p. 36). Indeed, it has occurred to us that one of the great ironies of the Experience Machine is that, without this sensitivity to cumulative growth, it does not even deserve its name. At best, it becomes a mere activity machine for the inputting of disconnected capricious impulses that, as Dewey (2009) remarked in his philosophy of education, are called experiences only out of “courtesy” (p. 154). Far from being some abstract pedagogic observation, this is clearly a lesson borne out in practice when Joan remarked of others that their mere activity was “pointless” and that they were “just going for the sake of it”, and that they “might as well not be there”. Indeed, this is one of the great problems of the sector at large that we can only make a cursory reference to here: that the problem of fitness is not necessarily a problem of (in)activity at all but, rather, a problem of experience; a problem of practice, involvement, awareness, learning, skill-development and value.

Being Someone Through fitness

In this study being a certain way also implied being a certain type of person. Katie (26, female), for example, explained how she would “probably associate someone who is very fit” with “someone who runs marathons, does triathlons, cycles, does cross-country, or plays a sport”. Similarly, Deirdre (42, female), made a distinction between “being reasonably fit” and “being very fit”, and the type of person that might be associated with each:

Deirdre: Someone that’s very fit continuously works out and all of their life centres around the gym. [P]eople who are very very fit are totally focused on some club team or they’re into team sports or whatever. They’re doing a lot of activity. [M]y fitness level is not for playing football three times a week. I think that someone would have to be very fit for that...I could compare myself to my brother who would be very fit...Everything in his life centres around his training schedules. He’s very fit. My life centres around all the other things I have to do as well. For me, it’s not a focal point.

For Deirdre, a “very fit person” is one who has constructed his/her world in such a way that the going to the gym and working out stands out as being figural and act as a locus of control around which other daily activities are organized. It might even be said that, when this person is at the gym all of these other activities (necessarily) recede into the background (this is obviously the other way round for Deirdre). Being someone through fitness is not merely an effect of doing fitness (it is not about “just getting in and doing it”, as Deirdre bluntly puts it). Rather, there is a broader environment or “horizon of significance” (Taylor, 1991, p. 52) at stake here which makes alternative consumptive activities either more or less valuable.

Take as another example the following excerpts from Louise’s (34, female) narrative, the prevalence of sport as a horizon of significance subtending one’s fitness trajectory.

Louise: Because I’m a *naturally sporty person*, I have always been involved in health and fitness, and have always been surrounded by [other] people that are ...[So] when I’m not working out I feel like I’m not being *true to myself*. So, I feel slightly, without getting into the all the health, mind and body stuff, *out of alignment*.

Although she is not involved in sport in any direct way anymore (acknowledged elsewhere in dialogue), this continued involvement in fitness clearly represents an important localization and extension of her previous sporting narrative. In fact, when she is not involved in this type of activity she feels out of sync with this “natural” self. In the absence of context, she experiences a reduced sense of equilibrium that results in her description being “out of alignment”:

Louise: I’ve often heard people say it to me that I’m happier when I’m actually involved in sport or I’m involved in health and fitness. It’s like *something I’m meant to be doing*. It’s just *part of who I am*. So that’s probably the biggest thing for me,

rather than the physical side of things or the confidence side of things. It’s that feeling that *everything is as it should be; everything is right*.

Interviewer: It fits?

Louise: Yeah, *it’s part of me*. So, if I’m not doing it, I’m missing something.

This is one of the clearest examples of the notion “relation of fit” emerging from our research. Louise’s experience of going to the gym and working out is characterized by a general feeling that “everything is as it should be...everything is right”. “It fits”. It is constructed as a means of bringing her body and mind into equilibrium (or “alignment”), as an expression of virtue (“being true to myself”) and character (“it’s part of who I am”), and can be linked to the possibility of authentic selfhood (“it’s something I’m meant to be doing”). What is less clear perhaps is the extent to which the importance of fitness for Louise is marked by the possible threat of being not only untrue to herself, but perhaps being untrue to others (“I’ve often hear people say it to me...”). This relationship between identity and alterity is discussed in more detail in the following sections.

Oneself as an Other

Although it appears to be the most personal of things, Louise’s thoughts open up the case for the assumption that one’s identity presupposes an Other. They open up the possibility that being a certain way might imply being a certain way in relation to, or being a certain person for, others. That individuals can find in an Other an aspirational counterpoint is a well developed theme in fitness discourse (MacNeill, 1998; Mansfield, 2011; Markula, 2001; Smith Maguire, 2002). However, for some participants involved in this study, there was a greater tendency to define themselves (their current, fit selves) in juxtaposition with *their* “Other” (or former) self. In John’s (54, male) case, for example, it would have been remiss to discuss what fitness meant to him without recourse to the fact that he was “always inclined to be heavy” and given the fact that he “put[s] on weight very easily”. Such is the

significance of this picture of his former self, John reasons that going to the gym and keeping fit is “probably [just] a routine that [he] got into”.

With Steve (74, male), however, we get an insight into how fitness comes to the fore in the context of two former selves (both of which, though related, differ in their level of complexity). The first, and of the least complexity, was his former self prior to having an operation. Going to the gym was Steve’s idea to “get a bit of weight down”, since he “was up to about twelve stone, eight [pounds] at the time”. At the time of the interview, Steve explained how he was “back [down] now to eleven [stone], ten [pounds]” and how his former self at “eleven [stone], seven [pounds]” still functioned as a reference point orienting his attention towards the gym. At a broader level, Steve’s commitment to keeping fit was linked to a very significant narrative event – his retirement. Reflecting on the physically intensive labor requirements of the post-WW2 period, he explained that, even if there was a gym back then, “you wouldn’t have time to go to it!”

Steve: At that time, things weren’t good because of the war. We went on ration books for clothes and food and everything and every small farm, whether it was small or big, had so much to till – what they called compulsory tillage – and that had to be done. That had to be ploughed and tilled with the horses and everyone had to do that. That was from 1946 on. I was born 1934 so we’ll say that from the time I was ten or twelve I was doing a bit of work all the time. You had to.

He also recalls how this work had to be done “before [he] went to school” and how one had to “walk to school, a mile and a half down and a mile and a half back”. “Everyone walked everywhere and they were working nearly up until the time you died”. It is “a completely different way of life now”. For Steve then, keeping fit has not only taken on a compensatory role but reflects a hybridization of values. Virtues such as control, productivity, efficiency, and discipline – inculcated in him in what seems like another lifetime now – actually help in negotiating the demands of a more formalized approach to being physically active. In fact, at his age (74), Steve’s is a good example of how those who grew up in the society of producers have had to re-evaluate the trajectory of their selves in

order to cope, not only with a new mode of sociality, but with a new sense of self. In fact, it might even be said that the argument that the society of consumers does not need those values previously associated with the society of producers is somewhat misplaced here. They are merely in scarce supply.

These findings resonate closely with the work of Crossley (2006, p. 31; cf. Stewart & Smith, 2014) who found that many gym-goers are not, in the main, setting out to construct a particular body but often seeking to recover something they feel they have lost (“recapture ‘former glory’”, Crossley, 2006, p. 46). For Crossley, the identity-formation process is not merely confined to one (future-oriented) temporal plane of experience. Rather, gym-going can take on a more dynamic temporality in that these former selves function, not only as indexical markers, but as fixations of energy which direct an individual’s organization of attention towards working out. In addition to these important temporal aspects we can get (in this section and in the last) a sense of the important spatial-environmental aspects that impress upon the identity formation process. It should hardly be surprising that an individual’s fitness has important environmental correlates. However, this matter is still relatively marginalized within the existing literature. For example, in treating fitness as temporally ambivalent, Bauman says nothing of its spatial dimensions. The most that is said about the environment is that it is an increasingly consumerist one. However important this ideal-type contextualization is to our understanding of fitness under liquid modernity, it generally fails to acknowledge that identities are not merely precarious because they have to be negotiated *over* time. Rather, they also have to be negotiated *through* space and in relation to specific activity-environments. Perhaps this is an area in which the notion “relations of fit” might be even more appropriate.

Not Being Someone Through Fitness

Finally, in contrast to strategies outlined in previous sections, Kevin (34, male) and Liam’s (45, male) offered examples of how an apophatic stance towards identity construction enabled them to organize their experiences of “self”. That is to say, “being a certain way” also implied “not being a certain way” (or, rather, “being a certain type of person” also implied “not being someone else”). The following excerpt from Kevin shows his tendency to frame his identity in terms of the “Other”:

Kevin: It takes a lot for a fat person to go to the gym in the first place. Apart from anything else, people will be going “fucking hell, look at the size of him”. And that’s unfair. I do see these lads coming in and you feel great. I personally feel great because you’re going “fair play to you mate”. It’s not easy coming down here wearing a pair of shorts and a t-shirt when you can practically see his stomach underneath. And he’s still willing to do that. But then it’s not just that simple, going down to the gym, especially for those people. They have to really really push themselves a lot harder than you or I because *we have already got that in ourselves to do it*. You know, the gene or whatever. Or the aptitude to go. There’s a lot of ignorance out there in terms of exercising. You know I’d be reasonably well up on exercising. As I said, people think that if they go to the gym for an hour, or two hours, then they can go home and scoff.

Kevin’s description highlights the importance of the “Other” as a constitutive feature of the identity formation process. In the first instance he appears to empathize with the Other. However, this is interestingly tempered by his description of the “Other” as “those people”; who “really really have to push themselves”; who “go home and scoff”; “those people” presumably radically different from “you or I”. Being a certain way for Kevin is, thus, clearly constituted by the fact that he is none of these things (i.e. neither fat nor ignorant).

These points were also prevalent in Liam’s (45, male) narrative. Upon encounters with the Other, Liam described how first thing that would come into his head was “Are you for fucking real?” When asked what he meant by this, the following dialogue ensued:

Liam: I often look at people and say to myself, “How did you get yourself into that state? Have you no self-pride to go around looking like that?” You’d be looking at guys jogging on the treadmill and they’re doing a few bits and pieces but they’re not doing what they should be doing...You’re not going to get rid of them man boobs by just running around like a clown. You need to lift weights to tone yourself up. But a lot of guys don’t know that.

Kevin and Liam’s descriptions clearly resemble Featherstone’s (2007, pp. 77-8) distinction between “classical” and “carnavalesque” bodies, emphasizing “protruding stomachs”, “walking heart-attacks”, “big lazy slob”, “panting clowns”, and “fat fools” who “have man boobs and the lot”. This carnivalesque is, for Kevin and Liam, also associated with a perpetual sense of lack: lacking “knowledge”; lacking “aptitude”; lacking all of those things that characterize classical fit selves. For Kevin and Liam, being a certain way implies (apophatically) not being this carnivalesque “Other”, an Other that they do not seem to hold out much hope for.

Although this “not me” attitude towards identity formation is important, there is also a sense in which it is not just about being different from the Other. Rather, there is an irony in the general distinction since this negatively framed carnivalesque Other is, desirable – perhaps indispensable – insofar as it impacts positively upon the self-making process. For Kevin and Liam being someone through fitness makes sense only in the presence of something (or someone) that they do not want to be, an “Other” that is to be legislated against as it were. What they are perhaps unaware of is the fact that their identity is not merely differentiated from the Other but is, from the very beginning, constituted in a relationship with a multiplicity of Others.

This alterity also invites reflection on a number of more general points that resonate across the foregoing sections. First among them is Nozick’s remark on being someone or being a certain way. Nozick (1974) writes: “There is no answer to the question of what a person is like who has long been in the tank...It is not merely that it’s difficult to tell; there is no way [s]he is” (p. 43). And perhaps even more relevant to the context of this paper: “Someone floating in a tank is an indeterminate blob” (ibid). This emphasis on identity and alterity was clearly borne out in this research and it also gives us an opportunity to revisit Bauman’s work and the *Erlebnis-Erfahrung* distinction. Take, for example, Benjamin’s

(1999, p. 803) assertion that “*Erfahrung* is the outcome of work” whereas “*Erlebnis* is the phantasmagoria of the idler”. For Joan, since her friends were merely going through the motions and engaging in compensatory consumption, their action could hardly be elevated to the weighty attunement of *Erfahrung*. Correspondingly, the mere passing of time by going through the motions is the very stuff of *Erlebnis*. Because of this, Bauman is accurate in his assertion that, for the great majority, fitness is about *Erlebnis*. Their experience is one of excess, alienation, isolation, and an incompleteness that exposes lack and deficiency. It is for this reason that we attribute significance to previous studies’ equating of fitness with an experience akin to *Erlebnis* and to Benjamin’s commodity-filled dream-world of the *flâneur*.⁸ However, as the insights, observations and testimonies provided in this paper have shown, none of this negates the possibilities for doing fitness and being someone through fitness (i.e. for translating *Erlebnis* into *Erfahrung*). Rather, it is just something that takes time and work. To repeat a point made earlier, it involves practice, involvement, awareness, learning, skill-development and value. This investment is what we believe to be the central insight in Nozick’s thought experiment: when it comes to experience, people *care* about doing and undergoing to consequences. This being-as-care puts Nozick in good company with the phenomenologists who will help us flesh out this perspective in more detail in the following paragraphs. Importantly, it is something that Nozick (1974, p. 43) clearly sees as being taken for granted: “[S]hould it be surprising that what we are is important to us?”

That participants involved in this study care about going to the gym and working out should be self-evident. It is difficult to conceive of individuals being oriented towards any activity in this manner if they did not care about it in some sense of the term. The level of investment that goes into managing the trajectory of one’s fitness participation must be a testament to this claim. This caring, as we have seen, requires more than a mere cognitive commitment. Actual work is needed to attend to the practical aspects of working out. We

believe that this invites us to think about fitness – or about this “being someone through fitness” – not in terms of some constitutive “I am” but in terms of the primal capacity to stabilize body-environment relations that Merleau-Ponty (2002, pp. 159-167) designates as “I can” (that form of “basic intentionality” prompted when there is “harmony between what we aim at and what is given, between the intention and the performance”, p. 167). That fitness should designate a sort of understanding between the body and its environment should not be surprising. In the latter sections of this paper, we can see how this experience of “I can” resonates with the sense of harmony and tension-reduction sought by participants. For example, we saw from Louise’s account in particular how being a certain way or being a certain type of person (a “naturally sporty person”) helped to bring her mind and body into equilibrium. We saw how Steve’s activity is managed by the continual balancing and incorporation of seemingly outdated life skills. We can also see how this performative stance was also taken up by Bob and Joan in their emphasis on the practical aspects of working out and their depiction of how mere activity (“merely going through the motions”) does not constitute experience. In fact, in Kevin and Liam’s depiction of the self in the context of the carnivalesque Other, we even get an insight into what Young (1980), following Merleau-Ponty, meant by the “I cannot” (p. 146) – the fact that gym goers of a certain disposition might experience an “inhibited intentionality” (p. 146). Nozick would say of these people that, when it comes to their efforts to go to the gym and work out, they fail because there is *no way in which they are*. Young would say that they fail because they *cannot*. Another helpful interpretation can be found in the work of Todes (2001, pp. 173-180) – another follower of Merleau-Ponty – who argued that, when it comes to the capacity for meaningful activity, our basic mode of being in the world is prompted by *need* rather than by *desire*. It is prompted by the need to make our world sufficiently determinate so as to produce effects. We would hardly be remiss in saying that the participants involved in this study were prompted

much more by this type of “need” rather than “desire”. And it is this practical sense of a need – rather than a mere cognitive commitment based on desire – which implies that experienced fitness participants find themselves in situations in which they feel obliged to exercise.

We believe that this distinction also helps in revisiting the question posed previously: “Can anybody *do* fitness?” To borrow from Dreyfus (1996, 2002) – a final interpreter of Merleau-Ponty – it might be said that, when it comes to doing fitness, participants *need* to have an experienced sense of the optimum body-environment relation. In other words, they need to make their environment sufficiently determinate so as to be solicited by the situation to get into alignment with it. It is this repeated solicitation to get into alignment with some social-material activity-environment that we think more accurately captures what is at stake with the problem of fitness, what we mean to imply in proposing the extended term “relation of fit” and, most importantly, the characteristic trait we wish to invoke when referring to “being someone through fitness”.

Conclusions

In the introduction, we joined with previous research in lamenting an over-emphasis on consumption as the context for understanding modern embodiment and the fact that, as previous research has come together to show in relation to this, the fitness industries have now largely taken over as a surrogate for the concept fitness in general. In fact, it occurred to us that scarcely any remnants remain of its original meaning in environmental adaptation, propensity fulfilment or in its prospects for health. Rather, since our environment has become increasingly consumerist, fitness is now largely understood in terms of the construction of ideal body images to fit commercial logics. Whether this process is “healthy” or not now seems largely beside the point. What seems to be more fundamentally at stake is a general failure that Deleuze and Guattari (1994) indicate in the following passage:

In successive challenges, philosophy confronted increasingly calamitous rivals that Plato himself would never have imagined in his most comic moments. Finally, the most shameful moment came when computer science, marketing, design, and advertising, all the disciplines of communication, seized hold of the word concept itself and said: “This is our concern, we are the creative ones, we are the ideas men! We are the friends of the concept, we put it in our computers.”...How could philosophy, an old person, compete against young executives in a race for the universals of communication for determining the marketable form of the concept[?] (pp.10-11)

We would hardly be remiss in saying that fitness has also confronted calamitous rivals (“new friends”, as it were). And perhaps this is the principal lesson of previous research in the area: that we are at odds to compete with the marketable form of the concept “fitness” and no longer lay claim to it in to conceptual practice. In other words, as an ontological principle for understanding the body, embodiment and identity politics in modern society – one which gives expression to the interplay of the individual and environment – fitness has largely given over to exhibitionism and has been translated into an ethic of on-going sales promotion.

In order to explore some of the possibilities for fitness beyond consumption in this paper, Robert Nozick’s (1974) “Experience Machine” thought experiment was deployed as a pragmatic gesture: both for coming to terms with important strands of existing research in this area and for reinterpreting the problem of fitness in terms of a tension between mere activity and experience. The thought experiment helped us make an important methodological move towards an account of fitness based, not on asking *why* people go to the gym and work out, but asking them *what it is like?* In other words, this research did not ask about why people would plug into the “Experience Machine” – pre-programming their lives on desirable body-consumptive experiences – but what the possibilities are for plugging out. It asked, is there anything beyond the consumption of external ends that matters to fitness consumers?

For us, and for those people we designated as “experienced fitness participants”, the prospects for plugging out were to be found in an affective recognition that fitness cannot be merely outsourced to the wares of consumption activity. This is because fitness does not

merely indicate a list of attributes that people have or achieve. In fact, its links to consumption are tenuous because it cannot be bought or sold. That fitness is something to be worked at was best expressed in this research through its general designation as a negotiated endeavour and the term “doing fitness”, which was a reflection of participants’ on-going ability to resolve tensions between the particularities of daily events and its broader trajectory as planned. For us, this meant that being fit could more usefully be thought of on extended terms as logically equivalent to one’s experienced sense of an optimum body-environment relation. The consumption emphasis cannot come to terms with this relation because it wants to tie fitness down to the individual. It fails to acknowledge that fitness is too dynamic a concept to be equated with identity politics. Rather, “being someone through fitness” is better expressed through the term “identification”; or, more precisely, with an individual’s on-going identification with some social-material activity-environment. It was this identification – this repeated solicitation to get into alignment with some social-material activity-environment – that we feel best describes “experienced fitness participation” and that we wish to imply in the proposed use of the term “relation of fit”.

Looking forward, if we are correct suggesting that the discourse on fitness has largely been synonymous with consumption, then perhaps there is scope to focus on some its productive aspects. For example, emphasis might be shifted from (i) ambivalence to negotiation, (ii) representation to practice, (iii) pragmatism to pragmata, (iv) what is valued to the process of valuing, (v) cognitive commitments (“I am...”) to practical commitments (“I can...”), (vi) mere activity to experience, (vii) identity to alterity, (viii) temporality to spatiality, (ix) *Erlebnis* to *Erfahrung*, (x) attending to one’s body to attending with one’s body, (xi) being fit to doing fitness, (xii) individual fitness to relations of fit, and so on. Practically speaking, some of these shifting interests could even form the basis of directives with immediate and direct policy focus. Our notion “relations of fit”, for example, is very

much within the purview of what Das and Horton (2012; see also Hallal *et al.*, 2012) were looking for in their recent call for “rethinking our approach to physical activity” (p. 189). Similarly so, findings from across the participation cycle presented in this paper speak closely to Bailey *et al.*’s (2013; see also Bailey *et al.*, 2012) recent call for a greater acknowledgment of “positive movement experiences” (p. 297) as the “underestimated investment” (p. 289) in relation to physical activity promotion. Additionally, and quite apart from the disciplinary focus of these previous positions, the practical emphasis called for here also resonates with Coffey’s (2014, p. 10) recent work in sociology and affect studies on the need for a politics of “feeling” bodies as opposed to merely “showing” ones. Building on these analyses, we would argue even more concretely that key recommendations which focus predominantly on the quantity of engagement in physical activity – i.e. on the habituation of activity via passive lifestyle accommodation and compensatory consumption – do so at the expense of important factors pertaining to the quality of experience. What if there was a *greater* acknowledgement that individual physical activity seems to be a necessary, but not a sufficient, condition for resolving the problem of fitness? Does this indicate that we need to look after the quality of engagement in physical activity as our principle focus? And if we did, could we rely on the quantity of engagement in physical activity look after itself? These are some of the questions that have occurred to us over the course of, and beyond, this research; questions that are worthy of serious consideration that have not yet been brought to the forefront of analysis.

For now, we would like settle on a term for describing the productive aspects of fitness exhibited in this research; a term to designate the type of freedom that is experienced when the consumption of mere clichés is transformed into the production of archetypes (Harman, 2013). Production alone seems hardly up to the task (though it will be a necessary condition). The phenomenologists (as well as the pragmatists) often hinted at “risk” being fundamentally involved the kind of experience we have in mind (see e.g. Dreyfus, 1996,

2002). Similarly so, sociologists have spoken about the imperative of laboring at one’s leisure or the imperative self-work (Rojek, 2010; Smith Maguire, 2008a, 2008b; Smith Maguire & Stanway, 2008; Waring 2008). In looking to describe the character of this experience – of the producer, laborer, worker or risk-taker – for now, we use the extended term “virtuous production”: because (i) *production* need not stand entirely in opposition to consumption but can function in a complementary relation to it and (ii) *virtue* speaks of the contextualized event-environment sensibility of which we spoke previously while retaining a human quality.⁹ Most importantly, we have settled on this term because of the people involved in this research and the uniquely qualitative capacity for action that they exhibited. For them at least, “doing fitness” was a reflection of the level of work involved in going to the gym and working out, and because “being someone through fitness” operated as an indexical marker of virtue.

Notes

1. These findings are based on a study which examined (a) meaning-making in the context of fitness participant’s lived descriptions, (b) the types of mechanisms that encourage and nurture development in fitness activities, and (c) the types of pleasures that accrue to participants on these bases. Given the space limitations that apply, this paper focuses primarily on objective (b).
2. It is noteworthy that Nozick’s work has been used by sports scholars in the past (see e.g. McNamee, 1994), though more as an anecdote than as a pragmatic tool for interpreting disparate strands of social scientific research.
3. Nozick’s “Experience Machine” is timely given the interest in Deleuze and Guattari’s (1983, 1987) work and their depiction of the body-as-desiring-machine. Just as I do not entirely believe that Nozick’s account of the “Experience Machine” is merely a thought experiment – the relationship between the human body and technology likely being a

prominent issue at the time of publication – machines are not merely metaphors for Deleuze and Guattari. Rather, since they define the body in terms of its capacity to form new relations – i.e. to affect and be affected – it too is a machine. For Deleuze and Guattari, one might even say that it is not about whether or not we should “plug in”, but the fact that, since “everything is a machine”, then “everything is always already plugged into everything else”.

4. This depiction might seem unnecessarily provocative. However, it is clearly evident in Bauman (1998) and Frew and McGillivray (2005) both depicting the project of fitness in terms of the *Myth of Sisyphus*. Like Sisyphus contemplating his torment, Bauman argues that the plight of the fitness-seeker is an agony of which our health-conscious ancestors had no inkling. He explains: although the prime motive in turning our attention toward bodily fitness was meant to offer security and certainty (in relation to our radically disembedding social-material environment) our preoccupation with matters of superficial embodiment has resulted, paradoxically, in the generation of more anxiety (rather than less). That fitness exhibits an inherent ambivalence is best summed up in the following passage from Frew and McGillivray (2005):

As consumers pursue physical capital they occupy the consumer role of pseudo-sovereignty, believing in the subjective attainment of capital, yet, naïve or ambivalent towards the mechanisms that drive and promote its consumption. The body beautiful becomes a rationalized and idealised image that is constantly displayed but, even for the few who attain it, an embodied state that is enjoyed ephemerally. Tantalized by, and desiring physical capital and its dreamscape symbolism, consumers find themselves caught in an aporia of capital. They become the modern day Sisyphus, where any physical peak and symbolic honour is quickly met with a return to dissatisfying desire. (pp. 173-4)

Like Sisyphus ceaselessly rolling the rock to the top of the mountain, the pursuit of fitness turns out to be an inexhaustible source of self-reproach and self-indignation and hope in its achievement is misplaced as the product of modern consumerism.

5. That much research in this area has taken its impetus from grand theoretical accounts of reflexive embodiment (Crossley, 2006, p. 25) is a testament to the importance of this *why?*

question. Applications of Foucault’s work are notable (Bordo, 1993; Duncan, 1994; Kennedy & Markula, 2010; Lloyd, 1996; Maguire & Mansfield, 1998; Mansfield, 2010; Markula, 1995, 2001; Vertinsky, 1994). Similarly so, the work of Bourdieu (Frew & McGillivray, 2005; Smith Maguire, 2002, 2008a; Stewart, Smith & Moroney, 2013; Waring, 2008), and Baudrillard (Glassner, 1989, 1990). More recently, scholars have turned to the work of Deleuze and Guattari and their account what a body can do (Coffey, 2014; Fox, 2002; Kennedy & Markula, 2010; Markula, 2006; Pronger, 2002).

6. The term “gym” is used in this paper (instead of “fitness club”, “health club”, “health and fitness club”, “leisure club”, “sports club”, etc.) because it was employed by all of the participants involved in this study.

7. In previous research, fitness has often been depicted as an encapsulated experience sequestered off from everyday habitual practice. At some level of abstraction this is clearly true since the fitness field is something of an exemplar in respect of the modern forces shaping leisure: overt individualization, privatization, commercialization, commodification, rationalization, hybridization, simulation. A more explicit claim for cutting fitness off from the external environment is Sassatelli’s (1999) discussion of how gym-going can foster a “plugging out” of external identities. Of this cultural declassification, Sassatelli explains that:

Gym environments are...all constructed as specialized places relatively separated from external reality...[But] [t]he specificity of the gym is not simply due to its physical separation from external reality, but is more fundamentally negotiated through changing-room practices. Within its boundaries the gym offers a space to facilitate shifting inwards – into the world of training – and outwards – back to different external realities. The changing-room is thus a remarkably complex space...organized to facilitate an institutional passage, marshalling symbols to support a switch to exercise as the activity which defines the gym. (pp. 230-231)

This bracketing off from the everyday “life world” is also evident in Freund and Martin’s (2004, p. 274) work. They argue that the fitness industry has flourished by capitalizing on the lack of opportunities for safe activity in our current material (typically

auto-centric) infrastructure and that this process has obscured the possibility of more organic ways of attending to our bodies. What we would like to emphasize here is that, with gym-going, experienced participants are never wholly cut off from the external world; they do not self-report as being entirely cut off from the prospect of going to the gym and working out across the day. We tend to agree with Crossley (2004, pp. 55-57) that gym-going is not as cut off from the outside world as Sassatelli supposes. For example, Crossley emphasizes the sociality of the workout and how participants “drift in and out” (p. 56) of the workout frame (which is absent in Sassatelli’s work). In fact, we would go as far as to say that experienced fitness participants “drift in and out” of this workout frame long before they get to the gym. For example, we found that many gym goers bypass the changing rooms entirely (Sassatelli’s “liminoid”, *ibid.*, p. 231) and, therefore, do not experience this explicit cultural declassification. Moreover, time spent outside of the gym is often replete with supplemental practices that provide conditions for the possibility of gym going (proper nutrition, adequate hydration, and sufficient rest are just a few examples that spring to mind). The tendency to view gym going as mere compensatory consumption does not sufficiently account for the fact that going to the gym and working out often requires a seamless weaving of tools, tactics, and affective responses *into* the life-world. Acting as a competent and credible gym-goer does not allow the life-world go unaffected. Rather, it often contests it and, at times, can refresh and renew it. Each of these additional points can be borne out in the research findings.

8. The irony that *Erlebnis* can also be interpreted to mean a short-term (impulse in) response to shock stimuli is not lost in the analysis. For example, in the modern-day fitness club, January’s influx of well-intended New Year’s resolution-makers is certainly a unique case of *Schockerlebnis*.

9. It is this uniquely qualitative capacity for action and the necessary relationship between one’s character and environment that MacIntyre (2007) meant to imply when he defined

virtue as “an acquired human quality the possession and exercise of which tends to enable us to achieve those goods which are internal to practices and the lack of which effectively prevents us from achieving such goods” (p. 191).

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Table 1. Breakdown of Participant Demographics

No.	Pseudonym	Sex	Age	Education	Occupation	Gym Experience
1	John	Male	54	Secondary	On disability leave	8 years
2	Bob	Male	22	College	Full-time student	5 years
3	Steve	Male	74	Primary	Retired farmer	5 years
4	Kevin	Male	34	College	Construction worker	7 years
5	Louise	Female	34	Graduate	Consultant	14 years
6	Katie	Female	26	Graduate	Clerical worker	3 years
7	Dermot	Male	28	Graduate	Credit manager	15 years
8	Patrick	Male	27	Secondary	Clerical worker	10 years
9	Liam	Male	45	Secondary	Taxi driver	23 years
10	Joan	Female	22	College	Full-time student	1.5 years
11	Gail	Female	45	Postgraduate	Academic	20 years
12	Deirdre	Female	42	Postgraduate	Academic	8 years