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Exersizing Agency

Feminism and Aerobics

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Abstract

Feminist debate on aerobics mainly focuses on the disciplining discourses that women face, to be thin, fit and beautiful. Although it is important to examine these discourses I argue that the discussion has taken a wrong turn in putting such emphasis on the disciplining pressures. I argue that this kind of debate, which is greatly influenced by Michel Foucault, disregards the experience of women aerobicizers and reduces the millions of women that enjoy aerobics to be passive victims, cultural dupes or docile bodies. This kind of debate also leads feminists to label aerobics as oppressive, which I believe is unfair because aerobics, like most practices, is contradictory and can be both oppressive and liberating. I argue that feminist debate on aerobics would greatly benefit from using the classic feminist method of building theories from women's personal experiences. Feminist scholars should put more emphasis on the experiences of the aerobicizers, than the oppressive, disciplining forces that women face. Focusing on the experiences of women aerobicizers would reveal the liberating aspects of aerobics and open the discussion to examining how women aerobicizers exercise agency.

Introduction.....	4
Theoretical standpoint:.....	6
Power, discipline and self-regulation: Michel Foucault’s theories.....	7
Power, discipline and femininity: Foucault and feminism	8
Power, agency and liberation: Feminisms problems	13
Analysis:	15
An ideology of aerobics	16
Empowerment through discipline	18
The liberating aspects of aerobics.....	21
The contradictory nature of aerobics	23
Conclusion:	26
References:.....	28

Introduction

Aerobics can be both fun and good for you. It is a fairly normal leisure activity for women to participate in and millions of women enjoy it. Feminists do however tend to be rather negative towards aerobics. Feminism has always been critical of any activity that promotes stereotypical images of femininity and feminist researchers have criticized aerobics for being an activity that does more to maintain patriarchal ideologies of women than it does to empower women. Feminist writers have often been suspicious of women's motives for doing aerobics. The pleasures that women get from engaging in aerobics has been deemed by feminists to be a masochistic pleasure that comes from conforming to dominant ideologies.

When I started to go to aerobics classes one year ago, my friends (which are mainly hardcore feminist activists) were a little suspicious of this new hobby of mine. Some made jokes about me developing anorexia, others tried to boost my confidence saying I looked fine and didn't need to lose weight and others blamed my mother (who is a part time aerobics teacher) for implanting in me an unrealistic image of what a normal female body should look like. The anti-aerobics attitude of my friends did not surprise me. What puzzled me were my own motives; Why would hardcore feminists like me and my mother, and many other women who are otherwise critical of stereotypical images of femininity let themselves be seduced by such a normalizing, disciplining activity like feminists have deemed aerobics to be. Is it possible that feminists have been wrong to judge aerobics as oppressive?

I would like to problematise how feminist scholars often categorize women's practices as either oppressive or liberating, I believe this severely limits feminism's understanding of women's lives. Feminist debate on aerobics is the subject of this essay. My focus is on feminist debate, I use aerobics more as a convenient example to shine a light on the limitations of this eagerness feminists have to label women's everyday practices (like aerobics) as either liberating or oppressive.

This essay has a theoretical ambition; I would like to explore the feminist and Foucauldian perspective of the body, and then put this perspective to the test by analyzing how feminists have used this popular theoretical standpoint in their examination of women's aerobics. Feminist research on the body, aerobics and the fitness industry has been greatly influenced by Foucault's theories of the modern

functioning of power and the docile body. His theories have enabled feminists to look in a new way at the control of women. Foucault himself did not study women's oppression per se. In his book *Discipline and Punish*, which feminist debate has mostly centered around, he studies prisons, schools, the military and architecture and he hardly mentions women at all. Foucault's theories have however been quite useful to feminists because his theories on power are not just theories but more a series of methods for examining the operation of power.¹ Foucault has created methodological tools that feminists have taken up to examine the workings of power in regard to women's lives.

Foucault's theories of power, ideology and discipline can be very useful to feminism, but there are also some problems for feminists in using Foucault's theories. The main problem that I see in using Foucault in feminist theory is the question of agency and experience. In his theories of power and discipline Foucault's focus is on the disciplining forces and he speaks of individuals as docile bodies, he does not take the experience and feelings of individuals into account. Many Foucault-inspired feminist writers have also disregarded women's experience in their analysis of aerobics even though it has been considered an essential part of feminist methodology to build theories on women's experience. Marysia Zalewsky notes that the radical feminists of the 1970 gathered their knowledge from the experiences of women in the so called consciousness-raising groups, their theories therefore grew out of the feelings and experiences of women.² Women's experiences have been a crucial factor in feminist theorizing since the 1970's. Feminists have criticized the proclaimed objectivity and neutrality of the traditional social sciences and embraced subjectivity and partialness.

I will argue that the feminist debate has focuses too much on the disciplining forces that women face and disregarded the experiences of women. This kind of debate leads to a limited understanding of the aerobics phenomenon makes it easy for feminists to condemn aerobics as oppressive. I believe that the feminist discussion on aerobics has taken a wrong turn in putting such emphasize on overwhelming pressures that women face to be thin, fit and beautiful. This sort of discussion does not only limit feminisms knowledge of women's lives it also has the negative effect of denying women of all possible agency because it reduces the

¹ Brooks, A. (1997). pp. 57.

² Zalewski, M. (2000). pp. 50.

millions of women that enjoy aerobics to passive victims of overwhelming disciplining forces and it does not give women any room for exerting power. Feminism is not just a scientific paradigm it is a political perspective which has the specific aim to emancipate women. A discussion of aerobics that only focuses on the normalizing pressures that women face makes women out to be mindless docile bodies that are so thoroughly controlled that there is little hope for liberation and that must go against the objective of feminism.

My aim is not merely to point out the shortcomings of feminist analysis of the aerobics phenomenon but to try to show how the debate may be steered in the direction of a more fruitful discussion. My proposition is that feminist discussion of aerobics (and in fact all of women's activities) would greatly benefit from using the classic feminist method of building theories from women's personal experiences. Exploring women's experiences of doing aerobics would shine a light to how women deal with the disciplining aspects of the fitness industry and how they exercise agency, and it also opens the discussion to the empowering effects of participating in aerobics. In consequence making it harder for feminists to condemn aerobics as an oppressive activity

Theoretical standpoint:

Michel Foucault's theories have been influential on feminist theorizing in the past twenty years. His theories on power, discipline and the docile body have proved to be very useful to feminists in analyzing the modern forms of women's oppression. His theories have fit well with feminist ideology because there is a critical note in his analysis of the modern exercise of power. Foucault views the body as the point where power relations are manifest in their most concrete form and he examines how social institutions like prisons, schools and the army seek to control the bodies of their subjects. Feminists have criticized Foucault for being gender blind. Sandra Lee Bartky has tried to fill the gender gap in Foucault's theories; she analyzes the disciplining pressures that are specifically aimed at women. Foucault's gender blindness is however perhaps not the most serious problem for feminists. Incorporating Foucault's notion of power into feminist ideology could pose as a threat to the feminist politics of liberation. The ridged social control he describes makes

individuals seem like string puppets or cultural dupes and leaves little room for personal agency.

Power, discipline and self-regulation: Michel Foucault's theories.

In *Discipline and Punish* Foucault argues that there has been a shift in the exercising of power. In modern society, power is not exercised from above, it circulates through finer channels but it is much more invasive on the body and mind of individuals.³ Control over individuals is made possible through relentless surveillance and power is exercised in a faceless bureaucratic mode. Power has now become anonymous.⁴

Foucault's ideas on power depart from traditional ideas on power in the way that for him power is not possessed, given or seized, but exercised. According to his ideas men exercise power over women but don't hold power.⁵ Power is exercised through dominant discourses, that is, the common ideas that the members of a society hold. For Foucault power is neither positive nor negative. It is productive.⁶ Power is deployed in the production of meaning. It is consolidated through dominant ideas, when many people share a common view of the world, their ideas make up a "regime of truth".⁷

In Foucault's account of the modern operation of power he says that individuals are now under much more rigid control than in the older authoritarian political system. Along with a more egalitarian political system and civil rights, there have emerged disciplinary practices that seek to invade the body of its subjects and regulate its movements, its time and even its thoughts, Foucault says:

"A 'political anatomy', which was also a 'mechanics of power', was being born; it defined how one may have a hold over others' bodies, not only so they may do what one wishes, but so they may operate as one wishes, with the techniques, the speed and the efficiency that one determines. Thus, discipline produces subjected and practiced bodies, 'docile' bodies."⁸

³ In older authoritarian systems, power was embodied in the monarch. Power was exercised from above down to the subjects. A violation of the law was seen as an insult to the monarch and punishment was brutal. The power of the monarch was however not far reaching and punishment operated in a haphazard manner. Bartky, S.L. (1990). pp. 78.

⁴ Bartky, S.L. (1990). pp. 78-79.

⁵ Brooks, A. (1997). pp. 50.

⁶ McNay, L. (1992). pp. 38 and Crowley, H., and Himmelweit, S. (ed) (1992). pp. 236.

⁷ Crowley, H., and Himmelweit, S. (ed) (1992). pp. 236.

⁸ Foucault, M. (1979). pp. 138.

Foucault mainly focuses on modern institutions like the army, schools, hospitals, factories and prisons. These institutions often work by a strict and specific timetable, they demand very specific behavior from their subjects and they aim to increase the utility of the body.

One of the key factors in upholding such rigid control as the discipline society demands, is surveillance and namely self-surveillance. Foucault used the Panopticon, a model prison, to explain the effects of surveillance. The Panopticon is designed in a particular way so that the prison guards can observe the inmates at all times without the inmate's being able to see them. This induces in the inmate "a state of conscious and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power."⁹ The inmate does not know when he is being watched so he starts to regulate his own behavior and by consequence he becomes his own jailer. According to Foucault self-surveillance is extremely effective in controlling individuals and it is a crucial factor in the operation of power in modern society. For Foucault, the self-surveillance that the panopticon induced in its prisoners served as an example of how disciplinary control has gotten a hold of the mind as well as the body; people have been made so self-conscious that they regulate themselves.¹⁰

Foucault notion of power is unorthodox because it does not only control people as an external force, through violence or public sanctions. Foucault's theories on power, discipline and self-surveillance show that the modern exercise of power relies more on internalization, which is integrating self-surveillance in its subjects so they regulate their own behavior. Foucault's theories on power, discipline and self-surveillance have been very influential on feminist theory since the 1980's and in the next chapter I will discuss how feminists like Sandra Lee Bartky and others have built a new feminist perspective on the domination of women in modern society with Foucault's theories as a foundation.

Power, discipline and femininity: Foucault and feminism

Feminist theory has taken a lot from Foucault's discussion of the formations of the body through the minutiae of the bodily disciplines and the increasing interest of the state in bodies of citizens. His theories have proved to be very useful to feminists in

⁹ Foucault, M. (1979). pp. 201.

¹⁰ Foucault, M. (1979). pp. 201 and Bartky, S.L. (1990). pp. 65.

analyzing the modern forms of women's oppression. Foucault's theories have fit well with feminist theory in many ways. Lois McNay says that Foucault's view of the body is consistent with feminist ideas because he views the body as the point where power relations are manifest in their most concrete form. Foucault also sees the body as a concrete phenomenon and is not a biological determinist.¹¹ This is an important point for feminists, because gender inequality is often legitimized by the biological difference between male and female bodies and one of the main theoretical projects of second wave feminists was to brake down the common conception that femininity is naturally connected to the female body. Foucault's theories have proved useful in the reconstruction of second wave feminist paradigm, by using Foucault's theories on power modern day feminists have reconsidered the all too simple ideas that second wave feminists had on oppressors and oppressed.

Foucault's work, I believe, is also useful to feminism because he has given feminism the tools needed to show how power plays a part in the production of femininity. Bidy Martin claims that experts in various fields have the power to define what it means to be a woman:

“Woman as a category of meaning, and women have been subject to the gaze, the interventions, and the control of medical, psychoanalytic and aesthetic experts who do the work of limiting and regulating what it means to be a woman in line with the exigencies of their own discursive fields and legitimating truths.”¹²

In an introduction to a chapter that discusses medical discourses on women Crowley and Himmelweit discuss how dominant discourses do not only constitute what it means to be a woman but they effect individual women and control their behavior. Women are therefore both the subjects of discourses of femininity and subject to control by them.¹³ Femininity (what it means to be a woman) is produced by dominant discourses such as those created by the experts that Martin talks of and these discourses on femininity work as a disciplining force in women's individual lives.

Sandra Lee Bartky has written about the modernization of patriarchal power and how women are controlled by disciplining discourses. She uses Foucault's theories on power, discipline and self-surveillance but she adjusts them to examine the discourses and disciplinary techniques that are specifically aimed at women and in

¹¹ McNay, L. (1992). pp. 16-17.

¹² Crowley, H. and Himmelweit, S. (ed) (1992). pp. 283.

¹³ Crowley, H., and Himmelweit, S. (ed) (1992). pp. 65.

so doing she fills a gap that can be found in Foucault's work. Feminists have remarked upon the gender blindness in Foucault's work and accused him of the same sexism that has colored other theories in social science. Bartky criticizes Foucault for treating the body as one, "as if men and women bore the same relationship to the characteristic institutions of modern life."¹⁴ Bartky says that although women, like men, are subject to many of the same disciplinary practices, Foucault is blind to those disciplinary practices that produce a modality of embodiment that is peculiarly feminine.¹⁵ In her work Bartky not only fills this gender gap in Foucault's theories but outdoes him by showing how the female body is controlled to produce bodies that are even more docile than the bodies of men.

Today's women in the western countries are less controlled by external forces; women are not as confined to being homemakers, we have more sexual liberty, and more legal rights. Sandra Lee Bartky however claims that as women have gained more freedom, there is an escalating in the objectification of women. As normative femininity is now coming to be more centered on women's bodies, there is an increased regulation of women's size, appetite, appearance and posture.¹⁶ I resided earlier than Foucault claims that there has been a shift in the workings of power, that the effects of power now "circulate through finer channels, gaining access to individuals themselves, to their bodies, their gestures and all their daily actions." Bartky says that the same is true in regard to women's lives, women are less restricted by external execution of power, like laws and public sanctions, but women today face an anonymous disciplinary power that is increasingly aimed at the female body.¹⁷

In Foucault's analysis of the workings of power he examines the disciplining methods of various social institutions like the army, schools, factories and prisons. Bartky however notes that the disciplinary power that inscribes femininity in the female body is institutionally unbound, it is everywhere and it is nowhere, the disciplinarian is everyone and yet no one in particular.¹⁸ The disciplining forces that women face are powerful though there is no specific institution that sees to the regulation of female behavior. Bartky describes the disciplinary practices that are aimed at women, like how female bodies must be of the right size and shape, how

¹⁴ Bartky, S.L. (1990). pp. 64.

¹⁵ Bartky, S.L. (1990). pp. 65.

¹⁶ Bartky, S.L. (1990). pp. 80.

¹⁷ Bartky, S.L. (1990). pp. 79-80.

¹⁸ Bartky, S.L. (1990). pp. 74.

women are also conditioned to move their bodies in a very particular and quite restricted way and they are to dress and make themselves up in a way that often is very time consuming. Her account of what women are expected to do so they can look 'normal' is very thorough and because she explains this as if she were an anthropologist describing the peculiar grooming rituals of an exotic tribe, she makes one realize how silly and unnecessary all this work is:

"A women's skin must be soft, supple, hairless, and smooth; ideally it should betray no sign of wear, experience, age, or deep thought. Hair must be removed not only from face but from large surfaces of the body as well, from legs and thighs, an operation accomplished by shaving, buffing with fine sandpaper, or foul smelling depilatories."¹⁹

Bartky goes on further and describes still other forms of removing hair from various places, hot wax for women with mustaches, plucking for bushy eyebrows, and electrolysis treatment so the hair never grows back. Bartky makes it clear that no one is actually marched off for electrolysis at the end of a rifle, it is the women herself that shaves, waxes or plucks her hair.²⁰ Nobody commands a woman to shave her legs (and that makes it seem like it is voluntary), but still it may not have been a conscious choice either.

These hair removing procedures that Bartky describes are often, if not always, quite painful and they are only the tip of the iceberg. So why do women do this to themselves? If you ask a dozen women straight out why they bother to do all this, the answers would most likely be on this note: I do it for myself, I like to look good, it makes me feel confident. Bartky answer to why most women have such extreme grooming habits is that in a regime of institutionalized heterosexuality woman must make herself "object and prey" for the man.²¹ However a woman would most likely not say that she shaved her legs or painted her face for men (or a man) and most women would be offended by the insinuation. But Bartky also says that: "In contemporary patriarchal culture, a panoptical male connoisseur resides within the consciousness of most women: they stand perpetually before his gaze and under his judgment."²² Women are not lying when they say that they shave their legs for their own sake, not for men. The pressure that women feel to shave or paint there faces does not come directly from some external force, like their male friends. Women have

¹⁹ Bartky, S.L. (1990). pp. 69.

²⁰ Bartky, S.L. (1990). pp. 75.

²¹ Bartky, S.L. (1990). pp. 72.

²² Bartky, S.L. (1990). pp. 72.

incorporated a male gaze within their own minds, women watch themselves being looked at, as John Berger famously noted.

Women face many disciplining discourses in their everyday life. Knowing and women say that the control of these discourses is not a simple process, for there may be many competing discourses on femininity and who is subjected to which combination of discourses needs to be explored.²³ This, I believe, shows how important it is that researchers in social sciences take into account people's varying situations, because people of dissimilar race, class or gender are surrounded by different kinds of discourses that shape their lives. There are discourses on femininity that are more dominating than others and some manage to cross over the barriers of race, class and gender as for example the discourse that feminists have labeled the tyranny of slenderness. However, though the image of the ideal female body may vary in the minds of different people, women's commitment to obtaining this ideal image does not. Susan Bordo, who has written a great deal on the subject of anorexia and the tyranny of slenderness in western culture, states that the discipline and normalization of the female body has to be acknowledged as an amazingly durable and flexible strategy of social control and perhaps the only gender oppression that is exercised across age, race, class and sexual orientation.²⁴ Bartky on the same note says that there is little evidence that women of color or working-class women are in general less committed to the incarnation of an ideal femininity than their more privileged sisters. However, she points out, the rising young corporate executive may buy her make up at Bergdorf-Goodman while the counter-server at MacDonald's gets hers at the supermarket.²⁵

In *Discipline and Punish* Foucault's says that the modern operation of power puts individuals under much more rigid control than in the older authoritarian political system. Both Bartky and Bordo obviously feel that the disciplinary forces that women of all kinds face are extremely effective and invasive. This is a bleak picture I have painted for you and to end on this note would be quite depressing. If women are wholly under the control of the disciplinary pressures that impose on them, then there is no room for asserting agency. Feminism is not only a critique of patriarchal power; it also has the specific aim to liberate women and feminist theory must give women a

²³ Crowley, H. and Himmelweit, S. (ed) (1992). pp. 65.

²⁴ Bordo, S. (1993). pp. 166.

²⁵ Bartky, S.L. (1990). pp. 72.

window to resist patriarchal control. In the next chapter I will attempt to find a way to give women agency without losing sight of the power structures that discipline women.

Power, agency and liberation: Feminisms problems

The problem with Foucault's theories is that his ideas of power, discipline and docile bodies leave little room for personal agency. The ridged social control he describes makes individuals seem like string puppets or cultural dupes. Incorporating Foucault's notion of power into feminist ideology could pose as a threat to the feminist politics of liberation.

In *Foucault and Feminism* McNay argues that the most serious limitation of Foucault's work is not his gender blindness but his definition of individuals as docile bodies which cannot explain women's experiences and individuality. McNay says that feminists have recognized the need to show women as more than passive victims of domination, but she says that: "Foucault's understanding of individuals as docile bodies has the effect of pushing women back into this position of passivity and silence."²⁶ McNay also criticizes Bartky for seeing women as passive victims of systems of patriarchal domination; McNay says that the disciplinary techniques that Bartky describes are total, perpetual and exhaustive.²⁷ Viewing women as victims of an overarching patriarchal system can be a threat to the feminist political objective. If patriarchal control is so thoroughly complete then there is no way out for women. There is no way to rebel against such an exhaustive system.

It is immensely important for feminism that feminist theorists invoke the question of women's agency. To avoid rendering women as dupes or helpless victims, feminist theorists must grant women agency, that is, they must recognize the role of the woman herself in the predicament on her existence. Feminist theorists must dance on a tightrope; while researching and theorizing about women's lives they should take into account all the structures and mechanisms that oppress women, but still give women responsibility for their lives.

To grant women agency it is important to focus the discussion on women's being and not the disciplining discourses. One way to give women agency is by using

²⁶ McNay, L. (1992), pp. 47.

²⁷ McNay, L. (1992), pp. 36.

the classic feminist method of taking female experience into account in research and in building theories. This opens the possibility for taking into account the methods women use to cope in a patriarchal society and more importantly how they resist.

To understand the body as battlefield is a good way to keep the feminist debate in balance between the disciplining forces that women face and granting women agency. The notion of the body as battlefield fits well with Foucault's view that the body is a site where power relations are most explicit. Susan Bordo states in *The Unbearable Weight* that she sees the body as battlefield:

“I view our bodies as a site of struggle, were we must work to keep our daily practices in the service of resistance to gender domination, not in the service of docility and gender normalization.”²⁸

Bordo recognizes the disciplining forces impose on women but grants individual women the responsibility to work against them. This work, Bordo claims, requires a skeptical attitude to the routes of liberation and pleasure that our culture offers us. It also demands awareness of the often contradictory relations between image and practice, popular representations may seem as the symbol of empowerment, personal freedom and “having it all.” Yet female bodies pursuing these ideals may find themselves distracted, depressed and physically ill.²⁹ Awareness is a tool in the struggle against oppression and can grant women the means to resist disciplining pressure in their daily lives. The awareness that comes with a feminist consciousness can therefore be a mighty weapon to free oneself of the control of disciplining forces.

In the more popular discourses of pop culture the body is often seen as a playground, not a battlefield. This notion of the body as playground is quite the opposite of the idea of the body as battlefield. This popular discourse I'm talking about is the idea that the body is a project that one can work on and has limitless possibilities. These possibilities are relentlessly promoted by advertisers. Television talk shows like Oprah also frequently express this idea of the body, and the body is talked about as if it were clay that one can molded to our will, by dieting, doing exercise, having makeover's and even surgery. Bordo has criticized this postmodernist discourse on the body for losing sight of the structures that oppress. She is very displeased with the now popular postmodern discourse that sees the body as playground, Bordo says that this discourse is “fueled by fantasies of rearranging,

²⁸ Bordo, S. (1993). pp. 184.

²⁹ Bordo, S. (1993). pp. 184.

transforming and correcting, an ideology of limitless improvement and change, defying the historicity, the mortality, and, indeed, the very materiality of the body.”³⁰ This postmodern discourse does not distinguish between a white woman getting a perm and a black woman straightening her hair; it’s all just free play, fun, a matter of creative expression, different but has no meaning. Bordo criticizes this popular discourse for losing sight of the disciplinary reality of these practices (styling one’s hair or applying makeup), these practices do not merely transform, Bordo says, they normalize the subject.³¹ The idea that the body is a playground can not only be found in popular culture but also in the writings of some postmodernist feminists but as Bordo says this sort of discourse loses sight of the structures that subordinate women. In order to serve feminism’s political goal of women’s liberation feminist theorizing must have a balance, it is not in feminism’s favor to either put too much emphasis on disciplining structures or to totally lose sight of these structures.

Foucault and Bartky focused mainly on the structures that discipline people and have therefore been criticized for reducing people to docile bodies. It is not to the benefit of women’s liberation to reduce women to mere victims of an oppressive system. It is very important that feminist theorists recognize the disciplining forces that impose on women but not overemphasize them because feminist theory must give women a possible way out. One way to grant women agency in feminist theories and research is to focus the discussion more on women’s experience and how they cope with the disciplining pressures they face. The notion of the body as battlefield as Bordo describes it can also be a useful guideline in the feminist debate because it has a good balance, it recognizes the disciplining pressures but gives women agency and a possibility to resist patriarchal control by being aware.

Analysis:

Foucault’s theories of the modern functioning of power and the docile body as greatly influenced feminist research on aerobics and the fitness industry. In my analysis I will be discussing the dominant discourses on aerobics, such as in the media, but my focus is on the experiences of women who do aerobics and the question of why women do aerobics. I will argue that disregarding women’s experience in feminist debate on aerobics leads to a limited understanding of the aerobics phenomenon. It has the effect

³⁰ Bordo, S. (1993). pp. 245.

³¹ Bordo, S. (1993). pp. 253-4.

of making the discussion focus on the disciplining ideologies that the fitness industry promotes making it easy for feminists to condemn aerobics as oppressive.

The public discourses around aerobics blatantly promote a highly normalized female body and therefore it is a popular view among feminists that aerobics is oppressive. However Aerobics is also an extremely popular activity among women and it would be quite depressing to conclude that women who do aerobics are cultural dupes. I believe that the feminist discussion on aerobics has taken a wrong turn in putting such emphasize on overwhelming pressures that women face to be thin, fit and beautiful. This sort of discussion does not only limit feminisms knowledge of women's lives it also has the negative effect of denying women of all possible agency because it reduces the millions of women that enjoy aerobics to passive victims of overwhelming disciplining forces.

What about the many feminists, lesbians and generally critical women who engage in aerobics? Are they really so dictated by this tyranny of slenderness that they can't resist the need to be thin even though it is against their better judgment? If feminists can't even resist the oppressive discourses on femininity then there is little hope for the ordinary Jane. Are women such dupes that they are endlessly prepared to chase after what society defines as a perfect body?

An ideology of aerobics

Around 1980 many new leisure sports where introduced to the public and they quickly became popular. These newly popular sports were of a various kind, as for instance yoga, aerobics, jogging, cycling, skateboarding, and various wilderness sports, but they differed from older popular sports because they were mostly non-competitive and non-combative. Many of these newly popular sports might be considered quite gender neutral, in the way that men and women seem to enjoy them equally, both together and apart.³² Aerobics however emerged as a distinctive type of exercise designed to appeal to women. It also perhaps symbolizes the most radical break from the fiercely competitive, masculine tradition of popular sports, and it has been a part of the legitimating of physical activity for women.³³

³² Whitson, D. (2002). pp. 233.

³³ Whitson, D. (2002). pp. 236.

In the early years aerobics was introduced as a new, more natural way to loose weight.³⁴ The famous actress Jane Fonda emerged as a fitness icon and promoted aerobics as a more healthy way to loose weight, as opposed to strict dieting and using laxatives.³⁵ Jane Fonda herself has confessed to having battled with anorexia and used every trick in the book to loose weight until she started doing aerobics. Arthurs and Grimshaw the editors of *Women's Bodies* note that the public discourses on aerobics are mostly centered on aerobics as a means to loose weight and gain a healthy lifestyle, and in fact Arthurs and Grimshaw mention that health, fitness and beauty have today become nearly inseparable terms in popular discourse, this was not the case 30 years ago. In the 1960 makeovers were no more then 'skin deep' the editor's state, and fashion and sportswear barely intersected.³⁶

Today it is a whole other story, the lines between health and beauty have blurred. Eskes, Duncan and Miller's study on women's fitness texts shows that fitness magazines promote beauty more then health and actually equate beauty with health, as if what is beautiful is healthy. Their study also indicated that the methods that these magazines describe to help the readers loose weight are sometimes actually unhealthy and normal people are warned against using these methods without the supervision of a doctor.³⁷ What these magazines are therefore implying is that the undertaking of a healthy life style is done for the sake of beauty and the magazines themselves put so much emphasis on the beauty factor that they often seem to forget the health factor in fitness.

Occasionally aerobics are advertised as a potential for increasing strength, but it usually follows that increased muscle mass raises metabolism and causes calories to burn faster, so building muscle is really just considered a means to loose weight, strength is therefore really more an enjoyable byproduct. Moya Lloyd argues in her paper *Feminism, Aerobics and the Politics of the Body* that aerobics is today: "so clearly enmeshed in a discursive matrix of femininity (understood in inferiorized terms) that even its 'scientific' sanctioning operates politically to pressure women to normalize their bodies."³⁸ What Lloyd is saying is that the problem with aerobics today is that the discourses within witch aerobics is enmeshed all have the same

³⁴ Markula, P. (2001). pp. 291.

³⁵ Lloyd, M. (1996). pp. 84.

³⁶ Arthurs, J. and Grimshaw, J. (ed.) (1999). pp. 4-6.

³⁷ Eskes, B. T., Duncan, M. C. and Miller, E. M. (1998). pp. 318.

³⁸ Lloyd, M. (1996). pp. 94.

general strategy, they all agree that female bodies should be slender and the female bodies that are not are in need of discipline. Even the scientific experts that debate the efficiency of the various forms of aerobics have the prerequisite that women should be slim. Lloyd does not claim that aerobics is produced by one singular discourse matrix that pressures women to normalize their bodies, but that the different, and fairly specialized discourses around aerobics still all imply that feminine women are slim.³⁹ According to Lloyd it is clear that the magazines on fitness, the workout videos, the advertisements for aerobics classes and the fitness experts all agree that women should workout to be(come) thin.

Doing aerobics is healthy and good for you not like anorexia witch everybody can agree is unhealthy and pathological, but the discourses around aerobics promote ideal femininity with such force, that it seems to suffocate any discourse that sees aerobics as just a sport that is healthy, fun and makes you feel good. The fact that people now tend to equate physical beauty with health has made is almost incomprehensible that any woman would engage in aerobics for other reasons than to loose weight and sculpt her body to perfection.

Empowerment through discipline

Aerobics is often linked to a change in the aesthetic of the ideal female form, from the more curvaceous Marilyn Monroe to the hard body of Jane Fonda.⁴⁰ A sinewy and muscular body has now become a sign of empowerment both for men and women. A muscular build has been incorporated into the image of an ideal female body and the media even eroticizes this new muscularity; however women are still required to be slim.⁴¹ I'm sure everybody may agree with Bartky when she says that a woman may now be muscular but she may by no means develop more muscular strength then her partner: "the bride who would tenderly carry her groom across the threshold is a figure of comedy, not romance."⁴²

Although women today are allowed to be fairly muscular and still hold on to their femininity, the tyranny of slenderness is as great as ever. Earlier in this essay I quoted Sandra lee Bartky as she implies that the demand on women to be slim is more

³⁹ Lloyd, M. (1996). pp. 87.

⁴⁰ Lloyd, M. (1996). Pp. 83.

⁴¹ Bordo, S. (1993). pp. 191.

⁴² Bartky, S.L. (1990). pp. 73.

today than it was maybe 30 years ago. She says that normative femininity is now coming to be more centered on women's bodies and there is an increased regulation of women's size, appetite, appearance and posture.⁴³ Bartky notes that at the same time as women are gaining more legal rights and are less confined to the home, there is an escalating in the objectification of women; women today face an anonymous disciplinary power that is increasingly aimed at the female body.⁴⁴ There is now more pressure on women to have control over their bodies, to diet, and work-out and shape the body into passivity.

Arthurs and Grimshaw notice this trend of the 1980s. Along with the merge of the discourses on beauty and health, women became more obsessed with having control over their bodies:

“This increasingly powerful intersection of the discourses of health, fitness and beauty operated within a culture characterized... by an increasing level of pessimism about the future of the planet... There was a nagging suspicion that perhaps your body is the *only* thing you can hope to control (even if this control will always elude you in the end).”⁴⁵

This quotation brilliantly describes the desperation of our modern day obsession with disciplining the body and shaping it into passivity. The body is not something you are simply subject to, but it is seen as something you can work on, with aerobics, bodybuilding, self-starvation and even plastic surgery. All our effort is however doomed to fail in the end as old age creeps up on us.

Women's magazines and television shows like Oprah are full of success stories of women who have transformed their bodies by throwing themselves into rigorous exercise programs. By exercising and dieting excessively for a certain period of time, the subjects of these success stories have lost weight and thereby conquered their low self-esteem and gained a newly found confidence in their physical selves. These women are described as having finally taken control of their lives, or that they finally did something for themselves for a change. Their weight-loss 'story' is introduced to the audience as if transforming her body had been intensely liberating.

Despite the fact that these success stories are often expressed through a postfeminist discourse of empowerment, feminists are highly suspicious of the empowering effects, because they most likely stem from a feeling of finally fitting

⁴³ Bartky, S.L. (1990). pp. 80.

⁴⁴ Bartky, S.L. (1990). pp. 79-80.

⁴⁵ Arthurs, J. and Grimshaw, J. (ed.) (1999). pp. 5. The authors italics.

into the strict mould of the ideal female body and the joy that comes from being excepted by others. Arlie Hochschild notes that for some women, especially white, middle-class, married heterosexuals this bodywork that the media promotes as so empowering may result in more work on top of women's already stifling "second shift."⁴⁶ Eskes, Duncan and Miller's study of success stories in fitness magazines come to the conclusion that fitness magazines use a postfeminist discourse to convince the readers of the necessity of bodywork, along with encouraging women to concentrate in their physical selves, specifically physical beauty. The magazines use words like, choice, strong and empowerment to convince women that a hyper-awarement of one's body (like severely limiting caloric intake and constantly evaluating the body's appearance) is good for them. In these magazine texts, feminist discourse is reduced to a language that dominant ideologies can use as a disciplinary power.⁴⁷ Though success stories in magazines women are encouraged to monitor their bodies, their weight and calorie intake, and that is supposed to be taking control of one's life. Women are encouraged to think about themselves for a change, which in itself is good advice, but there is a panoptic mechanism at work here, this is exactly the sort of self regulation that Foucault and Bartky describe. Women are encouraged to monitor and discipline themselves and as a result they become their own jailers.

In view of the discussion above, of how the public discourses on aerobics all seem to support the 'tyranny of slenderness' and how success stories encourage women to discipline themselves as if that were a good thing, it seems natural for a feminist to deduce that aerobics is disciplining rather than liberating. The commodification and commercialization around aerobics also seem to lay grounds for this perspective on aerobics. The fitness industry has become a billion dollar industry; with health clubs, fashionable sports wear, magazines and advertisements⁴⁸ that prey on women's insecurities. It is easy to conclude that aerobics is an oppressive practice and that women who participate in aerobics are victims, cultural dupes, or docile bodies.

As a feminist and as an aerobisizer I feel that this is not a satisfying conclusion because it robs women of all possible agency and it does not account for the experiences of all the critical woman that enjoy aerobics. In the next chapters I will

⁴⁶ Whitson, D. (2002). pp. 23.

⁴⁷ Eskes, B. T., Duncan, M. C. and Miller, E. M. (1998). pp. 317 and 341.

⁴⁸ Whitson, D. (2002). pp. 328.

take a look at the experiences of women who do aerobics and try to assess for what reasons women do aerobics; is it only to get the sort of masochistic pleasure that comes from conforming to patriarchal values or does aerobics hold the possibility of being a truly empowering experience.

The liberating aspects of aerobics

Feminist researchers have deemed aerobics to be an oppressive practice for women to participate in.⁴⁹ I believe it is a narrow-minded approach to categorize a popular female practice as either oppressive or liberating. Bartky says that modern society is patriarchal and in such a society very few things are free of sexism, this goes for personal relationships as well as the political system,⁵⁰ and aerobics is no exception. There are however liberating aspects of aerobics, which can be truly empowering for women. I believe it is not fruitful to try to categorize aerobics as either oppressive or liberating, because aerobics, like many things in our society, can be both, it is a contradictory practice. In the chapters before I have discussed the sexist discourses surrounding aerobics and how it can be falsely empowering, but now I would like to discuss the real empowering effects women may experience through aerobics.

Many researchers have noted that men and women move their bodies in a different manner. Robert Connell has claimed that the occupation of as much space as possible is coded as masculine behavior.⁵¹ Grimshaw has noted that women are often inhibited in their bodily movements,⁵² and Bartky claims that the restricted manner in which women move speaks silently of her subordinated status in a hierarchy of gender.⁵³ David Whitson suggests that men and women move in different ways because women experience their body as an object for others, whereas men have learned to experience themselves in an active forceful way. He revises the work of Iris Young who says that the style of movement that is characterized as girlish (throwing like a girl, running like a girl and so on) all have in common that the motion is concentrated in one body part and the motion does not follow through in the direction of her intention.

⁴⁹ Lloyd, M. (1996), and Kagan, E., and Morse, M. (1988).

⁵⁰ Bartky, S.L. (1990). pp. 18.

⁵¹ R.W Connell (1983).

⁵² Grimshaw, J. (1990). pp. 108.

⁵³ Bartky, S.L. (1990). pp. 74.

Grimshaw, who is herself a feminist aerobicizer, talks of a new bodily experience that comes with participating in aerobics. Grimshaw describes her relationship with her body before she started doing aerobics in a way that it resembles the alienated relationship that an anorexic woman has with her body:

“For much of my life there was a real phenomenological sense in which ‘I’ and ‘my body’ pulled against each other. I did not want to ‘be’ in my body; I frequently experienced it as an obstacle; I often felt as if I ‘carried it around’ under sufferance.”⁵⁴

Grimshaw talks from her own experience of how doing aerobics changed her perception of her body. She builds on the theories of Merleau-Ponty who writes that we can expand our being-in-the-world by developing fresh bodily skills. Doing aerobics, learning to move her body in new ways brought her closer to her body, she felt more integrated, as if she possessed her body and this led her to project herself differently into the world. Grimshaw says that part of her uneasiness with her body stemmed from having lived an inactive lifestyle most her life. Participating in aerobics made her realize what her body was capable of; it made her test her limits.⁵⁵

Exercise does not only develop the body, it makes you feel your own physicality and helps you develop a sense of your body. Through exercise women can test their body’s limits and learn to know their own strength. This is not to say that women should be more like men and learn to see their bodies as a force. Like I mentioned above aerobics is perhaps the most radical break from the fiercely competitive, masculine tradition of popular sports, it has therefore opened the door for a new kind of embodiment for both men and women. Whitson claims that aerobics has not only given women an opportunity to empower themselves through exercise by learning to use their bodies actively, it has also opened up spaces in which men, too, can experience different kinds of physicality and ways of being strong other than through use of force.⁵⁶ Aerobics holds the possibility of making men and women experience their bodies in a new way. For women I believe it has the possibility of being truly empowering, by making them feel active and strong and making them test their limits. This I believe can give women the courage they badly need to dare to take up space in the world.

⁵⁴ Grimshaw, J. (1990). pp. 111.

⁵⁵ Grimshaw, J. (1990). pp. 111.

⁵⁶ Whitson, D. (2002). pp. 236.

The contradictory nature of aerobics

It is clear that the ideology surrounding aerobics and the media discourses all seem to promote a patriarchal view of femininity, but could it be that it is just the superficial packaging around aerobics that is oppressive. Is it possible that women somehow manage to disregard cultural messages and happily engage in aerobics without seeing it as a means to obtain an ideal body? I would like to believe this but I have to admit that this is wishful thinking because aerobics is clearly an activity that many women engage in to become thinner. Women are affected by the disciplining discourses that state that feminine women have to be thin and I do suspect that the driving force behind most women's engagement in aerobics is to achieve a 'better' body.

One of the most popular websites in Iceland *femin.is* confirmed my suspicions.⁵⁷ *Femin.is* can be described as both a women's magazine and an information database on matters that especially appeal to women. Health, fitness and beauty is a major issue on *femin.is* and looking at comments from the website visitors it obvious that losing weight is the main objective for exercising.⁵⁸

The fact that many women exercise to improve their looks, does not mean that they are totally blind to the harmful nature of the 'tyranny of slenderness.' Pirkko Markula noted the contradictory nature of women's engagement in aerobics in her study *Firm but Shapely, Fit but Sexy, Strong but Thin*. Markula says that the ideas of the women she interviewed were similar to that of the fitness discourse of the media; most all of the interviewed women expressed a desire to conform to the body ideal of the media. However these same aerobicizers also criticized media's portrayal of the ideal body and found the whole process of achieving a perfect body ridiculous.⁵⁹ Markula's aerobicizers actively tried to make sense of their social world and did not surrender completely to the values of hegemonic ideology, however, Markula notes that:

“Against their own judgment, many aerobicizers still desire to look like flawless models. It seems a lot easier to judge the body image on the intellectual level then engage in the resistant action in real life.”⁶⁰

⁵⁷ *Femin.is* has thousands of hits every week according to information on the website itself and a few thousand hits can be considered a lot in a country of 380.000.

⁵⁸ <http://www.femin.is/>

⁵⁹ Markula, P. (2001). pp. 305-306.

⁶⁰ Markula, P. (2001). pp. 299.

Although the women in Markula's study exercised to achieve the ideal body, Markula's study shows that these women were still quite resistant to the ideal body discourse and did manage some level of personal agency.

Leslea Collins looks closer at these contradictions in women's engagement in aerobics. In her early studies she had found that individual women participate in aerobics for both empowering/feminist reasons and oppressive/patriarchal reasons. In a later study *Working out the Contradictions* she interviewed 10 feminist exercisers and organized the contradictions, that both she and Markula had found, into four strategies that enable women to downplay the oppressive aspects of aerobics and enhance the empowering aspects. These strategies consisted, first of all of distancing themselves from the oppressive discourses and simply adjusting to a culture in which being an uncompromising feminist at all times is impossible. Secondly, the women rejected the critique of feminist researchers that condemned aerobics as oppressive. Thirdly the women tried to assert agency by maintaining as much control as possible and exercising choice. This they did by resisting harmful cultural messages and by not giving into pressures from the aerobics industry, like for instance the pressure to wear certain training cloths or to take special fat measurements that many health clubs offer. The fourth strategy Collins calls making do. The feminists she talked to made a distinction between intrinsic and superfluous aspects of aerobics. This helped them make do of the unsatisfying aspects by making them out to be just the packaging and not at the core of the real aerobics. Collins says that postmodernists would not accept the notion that there is a pure aerobics, devoid of cultural messages, but Collins says these feminist aerobicizers use this distinction to negotiate this contradictory practice that aerobics is. As a conclusion Collins points out that these:

“Women's ability to enjoy a practice while constantly remaking it to suit their own purposes is indicative of the way women must often live their lives within a misogynist, patriarchal culture.”⁶¹

Though there may be some patriarchal elements in the aerobics practice there are still critical women that enjoy aerobics, women that are aware of, and resistant to, the cultural imperative to be slim. The brilliance of Collins's study is that it gives a very real idea of what it is like to live in a patriarchal culture. Even though a woman is a feminist she still lives in this same patriarchal culture and must sometimes

⁶¹ Collins, L. H. (2002). pp. 85.

compromise and engage in a less than satisfactory practice. What Collins however shows is how critical women manage to turn things around and remake them to better suit their needs.

The difference between Markula's subjects and Collins's subjects can be characterized by their motivation for doing aerobics. Whereas Markula's aerobicizers exercised to obtain an ideal body (although with a touch of self ridicule). Collins's aerobicizers rejected the imperative to be thin and distanced themselves from this side of the aerobics practice. This difference in perspective can only be explained by the fact that Collins's aerobicizers were feminists and Markula's were not. In *Femininity and Domination* Bartky tries to detect those distinctive ways of perceiving which characterize feminist consciousness. Bartky notes that feminists are no more aware of different things than other people; they are aware of the same things differently. According to Bartky, being a feminist means that the scales have fallen from our eyes:

“We are no longer required to struggle against unreal enemies, to put others' interest ahead of our own, to hate ourselves. We begin to understand why we have such depreciated images of ourselves and why so many of us are lacking any genuine conviction in personal worth.”⁶²

Bartky says that a feminist consciousness is both that of victimization and strength, she says: “to see myself as a victim is to know that I have already sustained injury... that I have been at worst mutilated, at best diminished in my being.” But at the same time, Bartky says that a feminist consciousness is a joyous consciousness of one's own power, of the possibility of unprecedented personal growth.

Feminism is a very powerful tool that women can use to understand the inequalities they face in their daily lives. Being a feminist does not mean that one can finally see the world for what it really is; it can often be confusing to decide what to struggle against. However, being a feminist definitely means that one knows that the world is not as it should be. Bartky describes feminist consciousness as a little like paranoia, sexism is everywhere and everyone could be an agent of patriarchy, even our own minds. Bartky gives us a classic example of a problem that probably every feminist has dealt with:

“The persistent need I have to make myself “attractive,” to fix my hair and put on lipstick- is it the false need of a “chauvinized” woman, encouraged since infancy to identify her human value with her attractiveness in the eyes of men,

⁶² Bartky, S.L. (1990). pp. 21.

or does it express a basic need to affirm a wholesome love of one's body by adoring it."⁶³

Aerobics can pose as a similar problem to feminist aerobicizers. Sorting out ones motives for exercising can be quite confusing, especially since beauty, health and fitness are such inseparable terms in today's discourse: do I exercise solely because it's healthy and fun or does my need to exercise stem from the false need of a disciplined woman to make myself attractive in the eyes of men. However, though feminist aerobicisers may sometimes question their motives for exercising, the simple fact of being a feminist still gives them a greater possibility for resisting disciplining ideologies like the 'tyranny of slenderness.'

Conclusion:

I believe aerobics holds great potential for empowering women, by giving them confidence in their abilities and by making them feel active and strong. However the dominant discourse around aerobics is that the sole aim of exercise is to loose weight and this discourse suffocates any discourse that sees aerobics as just a sport that is healthy, fun and makes you feel good. It has become almost incomprehensible that any woman would engage in aerobics for other reasons than to loose weight and sculpt her body to perfection. Aerobics can be an empowering experience for women, but this will not be achieved if confidence is measured by inches lost and curves gained. This kind of discourse prevents women truly empowering themselves though fitness. In order of it to be so women must struggle to resist harmful cultural messages that diminish women's self worth. Agency does not come naturally; like Bordo said, women must work to keep their daily practices in the service of resistance to gender domination, not in the service of docility and gender normalization.⁶⁴ The awareness that comes with being a feminist gives a greater advantage at resisting sexist ideologies and distancing themselves from the oppressive factors in the aerobics practice.

Feminist research on aerobics has been greatly influenced by Foucault's theories on power, discipline and the docile body. Most of the researches I

⁶³ Bartky, S.L. (1990) p. 18.

⁶⁴ Bordo, S. (1993) p. 184.

encountered in my search for source material focused on the discourses surrounding aerobics, and just like Foucault they totally ignored women's experiences. Aerobics is a contradictory practice; it has both liberating and oppressive aspects. Because feminist discussion on aerobics has mostly focused on the dominant discourses surrounding aerobics the liberating aspects have not surfaced in the discussion.

If feminist researchers would focus more on the experiences of women, then, not only would we better understand the empowering potential of aerobics, but we could understand how women deal with the oppressive, patriarchal pressures and how exactly they affect women. I noticed that many of the researches that analyzed the disciplining pressures from the fitness industry, had no answers as to how the pressures effected women, however inevitably, by putting such emphasis of on the force of the promotion of disciplining messages these researches imply that women are cultural dupes. I believe that one of the reasons that I found more researches on discourses then on experience was that it is easier to do a text analysis then it is to do research on people's experience, it is more time consuming and possibly more expensive. It would be sad if mere economics were leading the feminist debate.

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