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Running, health and the disciplining of women's bodies: The influence of technology and nature

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the relationship between health, the body and exercise through an examination of women's running practices. Drawing on a series of original interviews with women it shows how running reflects anxieties about health and the unruly body and how running practices are firmly linked to ideas about body size and shape and to the 'ghosts' of potential, future illness. The paper then explores the ways in which running practices are shaped by attitudes to technology and by the relationship between nature, environment and the body.

1. Introduction

There has been considerable attention devoted recently to the ways in which, as responsible citizens, we are increasingly required to regulate, monitor and discipline bodily health as part of the care of the self (Evans and Colls, 2009; Hurd Clarke and Griffin, 2007; Zweiniger-Bargielowska, 2010). A range of practices, knowledges, technologies and commodities has been identified as relevant to such care and to a broader notion of health and wellbeing. Such practices are central not only to the daily repair of the body and avoidance of ill health but also to the long term maintenance of regimes of fitness which go beyond illness and disease to include strategies for healthy living and physical and mental wellbeing. At the heart of these strategies are very strong messages about embodied ideas of health – in particular the kinds of bodies that are believed to be healthy and the relationship between fitness and bodily size and appearance. As has been frequently recognised, such ideas and practices are highly gendered.

Geographers have been very interested in the ways in which both the specific practices of fitness as well as the broader understandings of health and wellbeing have been linked to place. They have questioned the association of particular landscapes or environments with health and asked why certain places are seen as therapeutic (Atkinson et al., 2012; Conradson, 2005). As part of this analysis Geographers have looked at the valuing of particular qualities of outdoor environments and spaces of nature and drawn attention to the relationship between bodily discipline and wellbeing. They have pointed (often in the context of historical studies) to the ways in which outdoor exercise has been incorporated into ideas not only of health but also of what constitutes a

fit body. In this way the natural environment, as a space for exercise and relaxation, has been seen as an important space for the care of the self and the regulation of the healthy body (Lea, 2008).

In this paper I bring these issues of health and wellbeing, bodily discipline and the natural environment together in an exploration of women's strategies for developing and maintaining a fit and healthy body. Drawing on understandings of running as an increasingly popular form of exercise (Allen Collinson, 2008; Hitchings and Latham, in press; Howe and Morris, 2008), I look at how women use running as a means of improving fitness and disciplining the body. Rather than a simplistic association between fitness, exercise and weight control, however, I develop a more nuanced appreciation of the role of health broadly in women's exercise strategies. In particular I explore how women's running is shaped by a set of understandings about their own health and the responsibilities they feel towards family members to maintain a fit body. Here I interrogate the simplistic association often claimed in social scientific analyses between fitness, discipline and body shape that seems to align such characteristics with a rather abstract notion of health.

The paper also examines the ways in which women's running strategies are informed and shaped by ideas of 'nature' in a variety of ways – in the understandings of health and of the body as well as in the spaces and environments in which the practices take place. Again, this is not necessarily a straight forward relationship but one which asks questions about the benefits of natural spaces and exercise regimes as women develop different levels and competencies in terms of their running. Here I also draw attention to the ways in which the relationship between nature and exercise is mediated by technology and ask questions about the role and importance of technology in both every-

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day exercise practice and also the wider understanding of the relationship between running and health. The paper starts with a discussion of relevant debates within the literature and then goes on to present some findings from recent original research. These findings draw together the different foci of the research around the relationship between fitness, the body and ‘the natural’.

2. Running, technology and the body – conceptualising women's strategies for fitness

The study of women's running and strategies for fitness engages with a substantial literature which crosses many different areas of academic writing. This paper is situated within three such areas. First is work on the body, health and fitness. Second, nature and technology and third, exercise and environment. These topics have each been associated with a varied body of work so my review is necessarily selective. Some of the more conceptual work to which I refer is well known but the paper makes a more original contribution by bringing these familiar areas into conversation. The work on the body and fitness is, for example, explored in the context of more recent writing on technology and health and interesting ideas in the overlap between these areas of work are noted. Central to all the conceptual areas I discuss is gender – indeed the performance of gender identity is a thread that links all the sub areas of literature, underpinning as it does, the embodiment of health and fitness practices, the interaction with technology and with the natural environment.

2.1. Corporeality, health and fitness

Within academic discussions of health much had been written about the increasing importance of self-regulation in the maintenance of a healthy body. Sustaining health has become a matter of individual responsibility, linked to particular practices and lifestyles (Moore, 2010). Constant monitoring and regulation ensure that this responsibility for health is ever present while signs of ill health are associated with moral laxity. According to Foucauldian perspectives (as drawn on by much research in this area), health maintenance and the associated regimes and practices are part of a system of biopower which imposes discipline over the individual through internalization and self-policing. While some bodies (namely those of the middle classes) are more able to mobilise resources to respond to the disciplinary expectations of society, other bodies become more ‘docile’ and subject to the biopower of experts (Legg, 2005; Rose, 2001).

Critically, health has become associated, both individually and collectively, with ‘fitness’ and with a particular form of the body. Thus, to be healthy means conforming to a narrowly defined set of bodily ideals, ideals that are highly gendered, as will be elaborated upon below. Moreover, as Dworkin and Wachs (2009: 12) observe, it is the *appearance* of the body rather than the ‘reality’ of fitness that is at issue. The achievement of a desired bodily appearance has become, in their words, a ‘critical determinant of social status’ and one that is ‘self-policed by individuals as they negotiate social positions’. Failure to conform to the publically defined ideals of bodily fitness and health are highly visible and, again, presented as private, individual failure. Controversially it has been suggested that the relationship between health, fitness and the social construction of an idealized body type reinforces, and in turn is reinforced by, moral panic (Hopkins, 2012), particularly in relation to the overweight body. The fat or obese body has been constructed as not only a threat to the self and to individual health but to the wider wellbeing of society and to the idea of good citizenship. Thus, as Dworkin and Wachs (2009: 35–38) again observe, “maintaining a fit body is no longer viewed as personal choice but as an obligation to the public good... (and) while the fat body remains stigmatized as lazy, undisciplined or as a poor member of the social body, the fit body becomes a metaphor for success.”

Fat, as authors such as Lupton (2013a) point out, has become the

most feared aspect of fitness failure and a dreaded indication of the out of control body. Fat is feared by men and women alike but although discussions of contemporary masculinity argue that men are under increasing pressure to regulate their bodies and conform to socially prescribed notions of the acceptable or desirable body, and that they are equally as dissatisfied with bodies deemed to be overweight or unfit, there are still important gender differences in the relationship between fat, fitness and the body. Thus, while the focus of the fit male body is on cutting fat and increasing muscle size, for women the fit body is characterised by size and weight loss.

In recognising the power and importance of particular constructions of the fit and healthy body we also need to acknowledge the substantial industry that has developed in support of acquiring and maintaining the fit and healthy body. Reference was made above to the representation of bodies in fitness magazines and the power of particular bodily types in defining and managing the appropriate body for both men and women. The body industry consists of far more than sport and fitness media of course and as noted in the introduction, includes an array of consumer goods designed to encourage the individual to understand and access the ‘correct’ body. Elsewhere I have discussed the breadth of the body industry in more detail, documenting not only the gyms and fitness centres, the weight-loss clubs, exercise boot camps and holidays that exist to promote and police a particular kind of fit body but also the broader cosmetic and beauty industry through which the quest for a slim body is incorporated within classed and gendered notions of lifestyle and self-worth (Little, 2013). In this work I focus particularly on ‘pampering’ and on the relationship between the feminine body, reward and leisure suggesting that attaining a certain kind of (valued) body is not only about discipline and regulation but also about conspicuous consumption and earning the chance to be thin.

In research on fitness and beauty in the contemporary spa I also remark on the relationship between bodily and mental health in contemporary notions of wellbeing (Little, 2013; Little and Morton, forthcoming). This relationship is clearly apparent in the importance of relaxation, time to one's self and even ‘spoiling and indulgence’. The ability to gain and maintain a valued, healthy body through practices of diet and exercise is dependent upon mental health, as has been noted in a range of ‘therapeutic geographies’ and which I argue below, is highly relevant to the study of women's running.

2.2. Nature and technology

The second key area of conceptual work with which the current research engages is that concerning the technologies through which knowledge and understanding about bodily health and fitness are communicated and applied. Specifically I am concerned with how the kinds of health and fitness practices discussed above are enacted through exercise/running. How do women make sense of the relationship between health, embodiment and exercise and how does their running address the need for a healthy body? My argument is that women's running is motivated by goals of health and fitness and by the understanding they have of the ways in which exercise (and specifically running) contribute to both the broad issue of fitness but also specific health conditions. I also suggest, as discussed above, that these ‘health knowledges’ are also shaped by popular ideas of what constitutes an appropriate body and as such are part of the disciplining and surveillance of the body. In this paper I look specifically at how technology is used to inform and mediate the health knowledges underpinning exercise practices and routines.

Much academic work on the relationship between health knowledges and technology focuses on illness and recovery and on the ways in which technologies allow individuals to manage their own treatment regimes in a way that enhances a sense of control (for example, Lupton 2013b), offering improved ways of delivering health care. Researchers have explored the use of various forms of digital health technology in

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