

Re-Thinking Wellness: A Feminist Approach to Health and Fitness

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Abstract:

Is wellness a feminist issue? Can self-care contribute to popular paradigm disruption? Fitness and wellness are often approached in decidedly non-feminist ways, with popular culture's emphasis on beauty and size detracting from the core benefit of any personal wellness practice – empowerment. This paper explores the roots of feminist critiques of sexist beauty norms and thinness mandates and analyses how these provide barriers to holistic wellness in society at large, and within the feminist community. From “besieged feminists” to athletes and sex radicals, women are affected by the negative messaging currently deployed concerning fitness ideals. Fitness ideals and beauty norms combine to promote and image of thin as ideal, rather than athletic or strong. Mindfulness-based wellness practices can build individual awareness and strength and create communities of connection that foster social change. Self-care and the embrace of our physical, emotional, and spiritual selves is a feminist notion.

1 A Christmas morning spent as a young girl comes to mind whenever she runs outdoors on a rainy day. She remembers how her family rose early, opened presents, then looked outside to see new snow falling – it was beautiful and they decided to go enjoy it. The whole family bundled up and headed out to a quiet, residential street. By then, what appeared to be light snow from inside a warm living room was coming down more like hail and icy sleet. Her little sisters were on their bicycles, and the rest of the family started off on a jog. She smiles today when she thinks of what the neighbors had to say later. She knows how crazy they looked, a ragtag group of six running along in bad weather on Christmas morning, dodging hail, laughing, and breathing hard. She remembers that day as happiness uncomplicated by age or societal expectations. It was visceral and childish – it was joy.

2 Fitness in contemporary society can often be accused of working in diametric opposition to such celebratory expressions of physicality. So often, physical endeavors are linked to pursuit of an aesthetic, with no focus on empowerment and strength. The National Eating Disorder Association estimates that ten million Americans suffer from some form of disordered eating. Physical activity has the potential to provide happiness and to celebrate the female body outside of dictates about what it should look like. If strength and movement are beautiful, not punishing, can the field of professional health promotion do a better job of communicating that?

3 To make wellness a useful construct, one has to deconstruct the vantage point from which it is currently, commonly viewed. Does pursuing self-care really mean color-coordinating sports bras and critically assessing waist size? When promoted in a healthy, feminist fashion, wellness can be a vehicle for individual, community, and social

empowerment. One only needs to sit in stillness and take a few deep breaths to innately feel it – wellness is about physical practice. Inherently selfish, personal endeavors, physical motion and meditation provide pathways to connect the external with the internal, and to revel in what can be found in that space.

4 Physical practice for many women is a thorny concept, however. It is not as simple or as pure as it might seem at first glance, as anything dealing with the body and gender carries with it the weight of societal expectations and hegemonic ideals. Queer and trans scholarship to date has been critical of fitness practices in that they are often used as a way of disciplining the body and conforming to hetero-normative notions of attractiveness and slimness. “Women’s empowerment through fitness is thus largely imagined in a very limited, individualistic, apolitical sense that does not disrupt dominant ideologies or structures” (Scott-Dixon 36).

5 Claiming that physical practice and wellness are ideal pathways to happiness can, however, be problematic for reasons outside of hegemonic beauty norms. Sarah Ahmed decries prescriptive happiness in her work on the subject. Prescriptive happiness exerts a strange, subversive form of pressure on individuals. Notions about what can and should bring what feeling work socially as directives or mandates that paint outliers as unhappy, troubled, and misguided. Ahmed’s deconstruction of the notion that happiness is a universally agreed-upon state brought about by universally understood circumstances and objects asks us to think critically about the ways in which happiness becomes a form of thought control. Should every feminist person feel welcome in today’s fitness arena? Should weight loss and self-loathing be accepted sources of motivation for joining a gym? Popular paradigms would have us believe that it is completely acceptable to judge ourselves based on Body Mass Index (BMI) and make fat-phobic statements amongst fitness-minded friends because to disagree renders one an outlier or killjoy (Ahmed 7).

6 The study of feminism as an opponent of general happiness is an interesting lesson in the power of this notion to shape the box of acceptable behavior. If a strong emphasis is placed historically on beauty, family, kinship, and heterosexual partnerships as being the sources of happiness, “feminists might kill joy simply by not finding the objects that promise happiness to be quite so promising. The word feminism is thus saturated with unhappiness” (Ahmed 107). Feminism becomes the ‘f word’ in this way. Prescriptive notions of wellness are full of recrimination, but we continue to couch them in benevolently condescending terms. “The violence of what was said or the violence of provocation goes unnoticed. However she speaks, the feminist is usually the one viewed as causing the argument, who is

disturbing the fragility of peace” (Ahmed 187). Therefore, to make wellness a construct worth using, one has to deconstruct the perspective from which it is presently viewed.

7 So where is the hope for physical activity as a source of happiness? Is there a pursuit of happiness that lies outside the boundaries of social pressures and preconceived norms? We believe the answer lies in deconstruction of the term itself, and in a return to focus on the individual. A young girl fell in love with physical activity on a snowy Christmas morning. She didn’t love it because anyone told her to or because she had already internalized societal pressures about how large or small her derriere should be. The girl loved it because it was a chance to get in touch with herself and bond with family in a spontaneous, authentic way, finding a pathway to that smiling place through breath and movement. A woman can develop strength and independence simply as happy side effects of a basic love of physical movement; athleticism offers opportunity for mastery experiences in the corporeal realm and increases self-efficacy. While physical strength and independence sound like concepts that would deconstruct hegemonic ideals of femininity, fitness has been carefully commodified in contemporary society and occupies a murky space that can be simultaneously feminist and anti-feminist. Dominant wellness paradigms often prescribe appropriate physical practice for women. For example, “while men’s participation in many sport and fitness activities has historically been consistent with dominant conceptions of masculinity as well as heterosexuality, women’s participation has tended to bring their femininity and sexuality into question.” (Dworkin 286)

8 The result is a careful negotiation engaged in by many active women between strength and predetermined notions of femininity. In order to meet some physical ideal, many women work hard to avoid increasing muscular mass in an overt way, and focus their efforts on things like calorie-burning. This focus is tied to pursuit of an aesthetic; such physical practice is not a healthy, holistic endeavor, and does not contribute to empowerment.

9 Women who won’t restrict their athletic prowess and muscularity in order to embrace a feminine ideal potentially become successful in a given sport or athletic endeavor, but don’t often receive public accolades for that. The 1999 Women’s World Cup provided a great example. When Brandy Chastain scored a game-winning goal against China, she celebrated by racing forward and ripping off her jersey to reveal a chiseled torso. In media outlets, she was alternately criticized for her ‘indecent display’ and for her muscled form. Her legions of female youth soccer fans however, cheered her on (Scott-Dixon 22).

10 Our culture trivializes women’s physical activity as only associated with diet/weight loss and appearance.” (Malin 72). However, a positive physical practice embraces a “health at

any size” approach, and although the notion seems vague, it is important to let go of predetermined judgments of what each of us should weigh. Positive practice and holistic wellness requires an abdication of responsibility to make others happy, and to meet any preconceived notions about attractiveness or appropriateness of an athletic activity. The definition of fitness is less about results and more about the power to do, the power to express, the power to live fully.

11 There is, of course, a public health reality that must be discussed when one thinks about diet and physical activity. As problematic as racialized, gendered, and mysteriously-determined BMI indicators may be, national numbers rise each year. While it is hardly a secret that Americans’ waistlines are increasing on a yearly basis, it is of greater concern that lifestyles are increasingly sedentary. A review of national averages shows steadily-increasing figures. In 2001, the Center for Disease Control did a study using the Body Mass Index for measuring height and weight proportionality. Their study showed that 21% of the population was classified as overweight or obese. Today that percentage is closer to 33% (CDC 2009). The problem is not a knowledge gap. The center for American Sports Data also conducted independent studies that showed Americans know they are at risk; 61% of their surveyed respondents felt they themselves were overweight. The issue is not a problem with behavior as much as it is environment. Our bodies, minds, and spirits were never meant for the high-tech, sedentary lifestyle that most Americans currently live. Though much of the health and wellness data collected at present concerns body mass and size, savvy, contemporary health promoters must move away from an emphasis on BMI and obesity statistics, and move towards emphasis on holistic wellness and the joy of movement. Research shows that troubling BMI numbers will drop naturally as people get moving, and adherence to exercise programs is increased with positive messaging and a friendly framework (Malin 86).

12 Physical practice has to be a positive, individualized experience, not a chore put up with for the vacuous goal of moving numbers on a scale. While tracking public health statistics is epidemiologically useful, it is not useful in individual health promotion or behavioral change. Throwing medical statistics at practitioners does not motivate them to move. Body Mass Index is not the best indicator of total body composition, although total adiposity ratios may provide medical relevance. Adiposity does create health risk, but it cannot be the focus of a positive health practice either. Decreased adiposity will be an inevitable result of a holistic wellness program, and one need not self-flagellate on the way to undertaking it.

13 Positive practice is highly individual, because what speaks to one person may not another. Our bodies were made to move in constant search of unity with our minds and spirits. Those who have felt a natural stillness within them while engaged in a physical practice, love the sensation and will pursue it and fight to regain it if lost. When we discuss the lethargic, overly-cerebral lifestyle most live in modern society, we believe we **MUST** discuss holistic fitness and feminist approaches to wellness as part of the remedy. Holistic fitness is any movement-activity that combines an emphasis on physicality with stress management and mind-body connectivity. It can take many forms.

14 Perhaps the answer for some will lie in yoga as traditionally defined, meaning more than just the physical practice. It is the most universal fitness modality that we have ever encountered. It combines intensity with openness and quiet, and is something accessible to all different types of practitioners. It is a form of meditation and exercise that can bring love, respect, gratitude, and health into a practitioner's life. It has elements both of movement and stillness that enables one to slow down and assess, to cultivate compassion both for self and others. We came across yoga as over-trained athletes looking for something fun to try, something new to master, and something to help bend unyielding muscles a bit more easily. What we found on the mat changed our lives, and inspired us to become yoga teachers. Practice is about more than training the body, and is something anyone can practice and study while joyously never 'mastering.' We still struggle with how much there is to learn, even as we dedicate a great deal of time, energy, academic study, and personal thought to yoga. Maybe you only grasp the practice when you accept that there is no mastering it.

15 Perhaps seated meditation, Pilates, weight lifting, distance running, or traditional aerobics will be a person's movement modality of choice, or perhaps a combination of many. The goal of a positive, holistic physical practice is to feel good rather than *look* good, though. It provides a means for quieting the mind and understanding how the body is connected to every thought that crosses it. The focus in such a practice is on positive sensations happening in the present moment rather than a militant, self-loathing desire to burn fat. The feeling resulting from an hour spent holistically should be revelry, not self-criticism.

16 The feminist looking for examples of critical theory applied to the body can find parallels in the sex radicalism. Nowhere is the embracing of the physical more omnipresent than in the sex radical feminist community. Not only embracing the physical, but reveling in it, sex-positive feminists offer powerful lessons in the importance of physicality to a complete, balanced person. Not always popular in the feminist movement, "whores...are the dykes of the nineties, the lavender menace whom it is still considered okay to ostracize"

(Nagle 26). Feminism has not always created space for physically-focused, sexual women who embrace these notions with agency and thoughtfulness. It is easier to dismiss sexual women and sex workers as victims somehow manipulated by a misogynistic culture into acting out the fantasies of heterosexual men, just as it may be easier to dismiss the fitness-minded woman as being manipulated by patriarchal beauty norms, seeking to cash in on the social capital promised to the thin and beautiful.

17 It is both the definition of feminism that must change in order to include both ‘good girls’ *and* ‘bad girls,’ physical women and sedentary intellectuals, not they who must conform to a ‘good girl’ image so as to be considered feminist. Sex trade workers like Nina Hartley claim, in effect, to be feminists in exile and ask questions of the movement that apply as much to sexuality as to physical fitness. “Is it not in our best interests to become friends with our bodies, fully at home in them” (Nagle 59). Excluded from a rightful place in the feminist movement, they demand to be recognized as members of the women’s community. Feminist athletes value the physical perhaps from a slightly different perspective than the sex radical feminist, but the emphasis on connectivity, individuality, and self-knowledge espoused by both communities is markedly similar.

18 The writing of famous dancers and burlesque performers like Lily Burana and Diablo Cody celebrate the sex radical feminist’s confusing blend of celebratory exhibitionism, social capital gained through adherence to normative beauty standards, and rebellion against notions of ‘appropriate’ female behavior. Their writing thematically resonates with feminist athletes. Burana and Cody write of enjoying the physicality of exotic dancing and of embracing the foreign image of self created with costumes and artifice, whether on stage or in the dark recesses of the club. Dancing was a choice they made, a flirtation with a world they wanted to know about, and an exhilarating experience. They know that the female body can be both a site for individual empowerment and for influence by destructive, disciplinary, patriarchal beauty norms. The brave, personal way that both sex radicals and athletes navigate this quagmire is inspiring. Our feminism is complicated by such a lifetime love for the physical – this respect for the social capital that strength and beauty yield, and this understanding of the dual purpose physicality can fulfill. It empowers us even as it is weaponized against us.

19 The question of celebrating the sexual and physical is more about choice than anything else. The freedom to choose how, with whom, and whether to operate inside or outside prescribed constructs is a right that the sex-positive feminist claims that threatens dominant discourse. While a liberating proposition for the individual woman, agency of this sort is terrifying to those in the heterosexist, ‘sex-is-for-reproduction’ and ‘women’s-bodies-

are-for-others'-enjoyment' camps. Sex-positive feminists laud the individuality of human sexuality, celebrate the physical body, and bump heads with feminist activists who combat sexist notions of female aesthetics by embracing their physical selves only from the neck up. Popular notions of serious feminists are that of the beleaguered, embattled, non-sexual frump. As a result, some feminists fear naming their physicality and sexuality, as both are too easily used as weapons to discredit or silence.

20 "The female body is a site where social codes and relationships of gender, race, sexuality, and class are rehearsed, enforced, and contested" (Verbrugge 55). Acknowledging this, many feminists seek to demonstrate resistance by disconnecting from that bodily site. Sex positive feminists provide a powerful model for how to reconnect, celebrate, and affirm the power of the physical whether for sex, fitness, holistic wellness or a combination thereof. Feminists have generally accepted the wisdom that dominant beauty ideals are destructive to women, but this may have also ushered in the sometimes dangerous illusion that healthful exercise is not feminist and that fitness spaces hold only potential for negativity (Malin 82). In order to resist beauty myths, many feminists eschew self-care through physical movement altogether, and call it liberation.

21 Allison Piepmeier writes about the notion of feminist besiegement in her chapter of the *Rethinking* anthology. She argues that because the academic field of Women's Studies is often targeted for funding cuts or questioned in terms of its academic rigor, feminists have taken on a combative narrative in their theory and conversations surrounding feminism. Because feminism is under attack, serious feminists must constantly be on guard, fighting for recognition and legitimacy (Piepmeier 124). To celebrate physical movement isn't 'serious' and to champion sexuality is too risky for the feminist academic, she implies. As the field of professionalized feminist theory emerged out of activist communities in the late 1960's, it was subjected to internal and external critiques. Piepmeier argues that "program directors, especially those who were instrumental in initiating programs in the early days of the field, often had to learn to operate in hostile environments. They developed besiegement mentalities as a self-preservation strategy" (119). As this narrative became unconscious and normative among feminists, it contributed to a continuing feeling of marginality and paranoia.

22 Constantly feeling combative has held feminists back from embracing new critical theories or accepting feminism in all of its forms. There is an acceptable, canonical type of feminist and then there are unacceptable outsiders who refuse to stick to the script. Piepmeier cogently argues, "the besiegement mindset thus becomes a tool that not only differentiates

between the discipline and the outside world but that is used within the discipline to police its boundaries and ultimately hold it back from certain kinds of academic change” (134). For embattled feminists, the acceptable model is cerebral and not unacceptably-sexual; physical self-care and celebration are hardly emphasized. In fact, a focus on the physical is considered a throwback, a misplaced priority, or a concession to patriarchal beauty norms. As such, fitness becomes the province of the failed feminist.

23 Castelnuovo and Guthrie examine feminist aversion to the physical in *Feminism & The Female Body*, arguing that since feminism works to change the way society perceives women and how women perceive themselves socially and mentally, there is a natural correlation to the physical realm (72). Strength of the physical form is resistance to patriarchy in its own way. Embracing the physical requires a great deal of permission to be selfish. An exercise regimen is an investment in the self; athleticism requires a great deal of time and personal commitment. For a woman to embrace this level of physical activity may not just require a reevaluation of self-care priorities and reclamation of her time, but also a feminist, holistic approach to fitness.

24 A spiritual connection is important in holistic wellness, and the goal of movement should be to foster the connection. Using physical movement to improve one’s connection to the present tense improves total quality of life and is an exercise in mindful living. The purpose behind a wellness program must be to improve quality of life, strength, and to provide empowerment to live more fully. A feminist commitment to exercise in this empowering sense can improve lives.

25 The intention of encouraging wellness, not thinness, will be met or missed depending upon the professionalism and foresight of current health promoters. Second-wave feminism was fond of the mantra, “the personal is political.” When it comes to health and lifestyle, nothing could be truer. Our failure in the health profession to create deliverables salient at the local and individual level is a betrayal of those we strive to serve. Consistently failing to approach health and wellness from a critical angle isolates, alienates, and fails to reach. The effective health promoter must be cognizant of the conundrum faced by the physical woman operating against norms that abuse or discipline, and understand the intersecting pressures of gender, race, class, and sexual identity on choices made around wellness. Feminist and queer theories provide an impetus to think critically and deconstruct before internalizing or worse, delivering harmful messaging. Critical analysis is a professional responsibility for health promoters and wellness professionals.

26 The answer lies in the personal – we must remember that the roots of the wellness profession are intensely personal, and any program and initiative must bear in mind the myriad of social, economic, environmental, and cultural factors relevant to a target population. Interventions must always be fine-tuned, referencing a specific demographic both externally and internally.

27 There is no one-size-fits-all with health programming. Using theory for guidance and reference, professionals must stay mindful of social factors when communicating about wellness. As much high-level research is being conducted to explain the neuroscience, the genetics, and the statistics of health, professionals must work incredibly hard to stay in touch with the population they mean to serve. There can be no ego in health promotion, and there can be no judgmental, normative ways of communicating health messages. With health, it is always personal.

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