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EDITORIAL NOTES FROM THE EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

August 31, 2017

Editorial Notes

It is my pleasure to present the seventh volume of *Contemporary Journal of Anthropology and Sociology (CJAS)*.

While it has been one year since the release of the most recent issue of CJAS, I am excited to announce that the Journal is continuing its role in the dissemination of knowledge relevant to Sociology and Anthropology. As Editor-in-Chief, it is my vision to continue to expand this journal's state, regional, and national presence. We are fortunate to have outstanding editorial members that have collaborated to objectively publish articles that will further our collective understanding of society. I believe that you will find the two articles included in this publication to be diverse and informative.

The first article, by Glass, critically examines quantitative disciplinary statistics utilized by administrations at a suburban high school in Kentucky. Glass identifies, through her methodology, that sometimes it may be the qualitative variables we should focus on when examining the unequal application of disciplinary actions across varying demographics.

In the second article, Beggan illuminates how fitness infomercials perpetuate the cognitive dissonance often felt by mothers after pregnancy (mom vs. sexual object). The fitness programs often represent their products as empowering, transformative tools, which allow women to take control of their bodies. However, Beggan shows us that by imbedding the underlying principle of "The Beauty Myth" (Wolf et al. 2009), such programs actually impose traditional gender roles and values upon women by presenting the body as an ongoing project.

Regards,

Shaun A. Dixon
Editor, *Contemporary Journal of Anthropology and Sociology*

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Contemporary Journal of Anthropology and Sociology

**Attitudes and Actions:
Conflict Within the Classroom and Disciplinary Outcomes**

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Abstract: This article examines disciplinary practices at a suburban high school in Kentucky. Statewide data shows a pattern of overrepresentation of some subgroups, particularly African American students, Special Education Status students and males, but qualitative observations in this study suggest that the problem originates within the classroom at the referral level based upon combinations of students in any given class, the teaching philosophy of individual teachers and his or her personal level of tolerance for misbehavior, rather than any overt system of discrimination at the administrative level. This article also gives consideration to the possibility of cultural mismatches between student and teacher, and whether differences may exist between African American and white educators in their management of underperforming or misbehaving students. Providing context from qualitative classroom observations and insights gained from interviews with the educators, this article briefly reviews selected disciplinary data from the participating high school and presents an argument that while statewide patterns indicate over-representation of some subgroups, caution should be given to interpretation of the numerical data and should be analyzed with consideration given to the demographics found within individual school districts.

Keywords: Cultural Mismatch, Overrepresentation, Discipline, Defiance, Disrespect

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ATTITUDES AND ACTIONS: CONFLICT WITHIN THE CLASSROOM AND DISCIPLINARY OUTCOMES

INTRODUCTION

In the Spring semester of the 2010-11 academic school year, I began a year-long ethnographic research project in the area of Social Inequality and Sociology of Education. In particular, I wanted to know why some students find themselves a frequent visitor to the detention or In-School Suspension room while others are happily engaged in sports and clubs, seldom if ever finding their actions closely scrutinized. A “common-sense” answer might say that it is simply a difference in the students themselves: their attitudes and personalities that cause the difference. Sociology, however, moves beyond common-sense assumptions to empirical research which can add valuable insight into social conditions that might otherwise not be readily apparent. It is true that some students “get into trouble” more than others, but understanding *why* and *how* this happens can only come from sociological inquiry. Moreover, the answer may have as much to do with the educators and the process of education as with those being educated. The purpose of this study was to gain an understanding of the processes used by teachers, guidance counselors and administrative personnel within the high school setting to determine when a student has passed the educator’s final latitude of acceptance of misbehavior.

This qualitative research project involved the participation of a variety of educators and administrators within a densely populated high school in the Commonwealth of Kentucky. As with any ethnography, because this project was carried out at only one institution, it cannot be generalized to all students and teachers within the state or the nation. It does,

however, provide insight into understanding how differences in the disciplinary outcomes are related to the educators’ perceptions of the students, regardless of the social characteristics of the student in question, and to how differences in the decision to make a referral are tied to the personality and teaching philosophy of the teacher. Rather than simply demonstrating through statistical evidence that some subgroups are overrepresented in disciplinary actions, this study sought to explain what may cause that overrepresentation to occur in the first place through direct observation of the interactions between educators and the students. A critical argument will be made that for this particular school, while overrepresentation was found among the minority students, the males and the special education students, ample evidence exists from the observations that this overrepresentation is not an intentional nor discriminatory process, and that it originates at the referral level within the classroom rather than as an outcome of administrative decisions.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Much of the academic literature focuses on the pattern of overrepresentation of racial minorities and lower socioeconomic status students as well as the male gender. A twofold gap exists in the literature: (1) addressing *how* this overrepresentation occurs, and (2) addressing the decision-making process in general, regardless of the student’s social characteristics. This project sought to rectify this gap in the literature by teasing out the underlying processes through which educators decide when and how to administer sanctions for misbehavior. Quantitative data does not reflect actual events in the classroom that may lead up to a child being referred out of the classroom for punishment at the administrative level. Because of this, it is not clear whether minority students and other subgroups are

misbehaving at a higher rate, or if the teachers' perceptions and expectations may be influencing how quickly those students are sent out of the classroom for misbehavior. As noted by various authors, including Lareau and Horvat (1999) and Ferguson (2001), it is possible that some students (specifically middle class whites) are given special consideration by the school administrators while black students (who are more likely to come from a disadvantaged background) are not given the same consideration. This qualitative study addresses this gap in the literature.

Skiba, Michael, Nardo and Peterson (2002) note that minority overrepresentation in disciplinary patterns has been a consistent finding in social science research. Skiba, et al. (2002) document this pattern in a literature review of various research studies published between 1979 and 2000, relying on state, regional and national data sets (see, e.g. Children's Defense Fund, 1975; McCarthy and Hoge, 1987; Skiba, Peterson and Williams, 1997 and Wu, Pink, Crain and Moles, 1982). Studley (2002) documented that in four of the six largest school districts in California, African American students had higher suspension rates than any other racial/ethnic group during the two years of data analyzed. Mendez, Knoff and Ferron (2002) reviewed data from Florida's second largest school district and found African American boys had higher suspension rates than any group. The Civil Rights Data Collection ("CRDC") results were published in 2012, which indicate a continuing discrepancy in discipline based on race. Specifically, African American students represented 18% of students in the CRDC sample, but 35% of students suspended once, 46% of those suspended more than once, and 39% of students expelled. Additionally, discrepancies in outcomes were found by the CRDC based on both race and gender of the

students. Twenty percent of African American boys received Out-of-School Suspension, compared to seven percent of white boys, while eleven percent of African American females received an Out-of-School Suspension, compared to three percent of white girls (CRDC, 2012). In more recent research, Skiba, Homer, Chung, Rausch, May and Tobin (2011) once again document the ongoing pattern of minority overrepresentation in both office referrals and in disciplinary outcomes, including Out-of-School Suspensions and expulsion. Losen, et al. (2015) report that nationally, during the 2009-10 and 2010-11 school years, 16% of African Americans were suspended, compared to 7% of Latinos and 5% of whites. Martinez, McMahan and Treger (2016) discuss the overrepresentation of African Americans in office referrals, placing the problem within the framework of both critical race theory and social-ecological theory, noting that teacher thresholds for misbehavior have been found to be related to classroom context in addition to the likelihood of implicit bias.

Fenning and Rose (2007:548) advocate the need for a study "to examine the ways in which school personnel invoke discipline procedures for students perceived as troublemakers or as threatening classroom control." Since that time, Skiba (2015) has considered this "ground level" approach, interviewing teachers and principals to gain insight into those decision-making processes. Skiba (2015) cites examples of inconsistent actions by school personnel, such as a teacher who spoke of the need to build strong relationships with students, but who was later observed sending an African American boy out of the classroom for calling out an answer without raising his hand. The present research, likewise, addresses the need for such an approach:

interviewing and observing to determine if actions are speaking louder than words.

The possibility also exists, but is not well-settled in the literature, that the race, social class or gender of the teacher may impact the treatment of the students. Evidence of this ongoing question can be found in the work of Ferguson (2003) and the work of Foster (1993). As noted by Ferguson (2003:461), there is a “controversial but common assumption that teachers’ perceptions, expectations and behaviors are biased by racial stereotypes.” This common assumption of bias typically revolves around white, middle class teachers of minority, lower-class students. However, Ferguson (2003) notes that the differential treatment experienced by lower-class minority students do not appear to always be tied to differences in the race of the teacher and the student. Quoting the experience of one African American teacher, “Paula,” in a study by Cabello and Burstein (1995), Ferguson (2003:482) provides support for the notion that teachers of any race may be overburdened by the demands of some subgroups of students and thus treat those students differently:

The first thing I knew was that they were just BADD. I know part of the problem was myself because I was saying things that I probably shouldn’t have said because they got me so upset and I wasn’t able to handle it. . . . I felt that being black I would automatically know more, and so forth, and in ways I think I do, but [the training program she attended] has helped me to understand things from many perspectives. . . . Black teachers who have been in different programs. . . haven’t got this cultural awareness and I know that because they’re so negative. . . . A lot of them aren’t culturally sensitive to

their own culture. (Ferguson, 2003:482, citing Cabello & Burstein, 1995:289-290).

Michele Foster (1993) paints a somewhat different picture, arguing that, historically, African American teachers have been depicted as unsympathetic and out of touch with their students. For example, she accepts the validity of Dee Ann Spencer’s 1986 interviews with fifty teachers, but notes that only one of those interviewees was an African American teacher. Foster (1993:393) shows that Spencer (1986) depicted that single African American teacher in an extremely negative manner:

Despite Valerie’s own poor background, she always blamed parents for children’s problems and had little sympathy for the poor. . . . Valerie’s animosity toward the poor reflected her own frustrations at having to teach in a school not far from where she grew up – in the same cultural milieu (Foster 1993:383, citing Spencer, 1986).

Foster (1993) contends that this is the image that many have come to accept as the typical African American teacher. To counter this image, she presents evidence of interviews and in-depth studies of eighteen African American teachers who clearly defy this stereotype and are seen as exemplary role models for their students. Ultimately, the question of whether African American teachers, who may or may not come from the lower social class themselves, show differential treatment, either positive or negative, toward their lower-class minority students is an issue that remains open and unsettled. Likewise, whether white, middle class teachers consciously or unconsciously engage in discriminatory behavior toward lower-class, minority students is also a

matter of debate. Townsend (2000) suggests that white teachers may be unfamiliar with African American mannerisms, which may lead to interpreting their interactions as combative. Vavrus and Cole (2002) also document classroom student-teacher interactions that indicate cultural mismatch and racial stereotyping based on violations of expected linguistic codes of conduct. Neal, McCray, Webb-Johnson and Bridgest (2003) found that walking with a pronounced “stroll”, often characteristic of African American movements, was associated with stereotyping by the teacher, and that this stereotyping occurred regardless of whether the student was African American or white. It was not the *race* of the student, but the *action* associated with a race, that led to the biased assumptions. Martinez, et al. (2016) note that African American males are overrepresented in office referrals, and are more likely than white students to be referred for subjective offenses such as disrespect or loudness. Accordingly, office referrals may be a combination of overt misbehavior and teachers’ understanding and interpretation of their behavior. The present study provides evidence that addresses these concerns.

CONTEXTUAL INFORMATION AND RECRUITMENT METHODOLOGY

Kentucky’s public school system is predominantly white, with only 21% of students belonging to a racial or ethnic minority group, divided equally between African Americans and all other groups combined. Over 60% of public school students in the Commonwealth qualify for Free or Reduced-Priced Lunch. Statewide data (Kentucky Center for Safe Schools, 2007-2008 through 2015-16; Legislative Research Commission, 2016) shows significant gaps in disciplinary actions and outcomes based on race, gender, special education status and social class (as

measured by Free and Reduced Price Lunch status). Disciplinary outcomes represent the final disposition of office disciplinary referrals that originate most often at the classroom level, although some infractions originate in the hallways, stairwells, cafeterias and elsewhere on school property. Data from the Commonwealth is divided between Board violations and Law violations, and both sets indicate continued disparities in violations and in outcomes (KCCS, 2015-16; LRC 2016). Board violations include infractions such as bullying, harassment, defiance and disrespect, truancy and possession of tobacco and look-alike drugs. Law violations, by definition, are illegal acts such as vandalism, assault, and possession of drugs. In both data sets, African Americans, Special Education students and students receiving Free or Reduced-Price lunch were significantly more likely to be referred to the office for a Board violation or a law violation than whites, non-Special Education students or students who pay full price for their meals (KCCS, 2015-16; LRC 2016). It is possible that the discrepancies shown in the state data with respect to disciplinary outcomes are occurring at such high rates in schools that are atypical for this state (the large, urban areas), that it makes the issue appear to be institutionalized, without giving consideration to the wide variations that may be found across schools. That is, larger and more urban school systems with a higher percentage of racial minorities, special education students or students lower in measures of socioeconomic status may discipline at such high rates that it makes it appear that the problem is systematic. For smaller schools where only a small percentage of students are identified as minority status or special education status, even slight variations in disciplinary decisions will lead to significant

discrepancies in percentages, and is not, in and of itself, indicative of discriminatory practices.

The participating high school was a “typical” high school in this state (that is, suburban or rural, not urbanized; and predominantly white, matching the characteristics of the state population data as a whole), which allows the possibility of disparate outcomes described above to be explored. Because this was not a funded project, it was necessary to recruit a school system near my academic institution to minimize travel and other associated costs of the study. Four high schools in the geographic area were contacted for recruitment purposes, with all declining the invitation except the school which is now documented in this study. The school serves students throughout the county, which gives the school a great deal of diversity with respect to characteristics of the student population, a factor that was given consideration when recruiting schools in the area to participate. The research protocol approved by the University’s Institutional Review Board requires confidentiality. All names are pseudonyms; no teacher, administrator or the school itself is identified through an actual name. Disclosure of demographic data of the school and surrounding community has been limited to avoid compromising the identity of the participating school district.

Following a school-wide invitation to participate in the project through a presentation to all faculty and administrative staff, a total of twelve classroom teachers agreed to participate, along with three administrators, two program coordinators and a guidance counselor. Observations were conducted typically two days per week, over the course of two semesters, working around the teachers’ individual schedules of testing, activities and other school-related events.

The observations were documented in real time, through a process of shorthand note-taking that recorded the academic subject matter being discussed in class by the teacher, the teacher’s interactions with students and his or her command of the classroom, as well as the actions of the students during the class period, including their comments, individual conversations (to the extent those could be overheard), their body language and the overall atmosphere of the classroom. To the extent possible, comments were recorded verbatim, but that was occasionally rendered impossible due to the overlapping conversations and chaotic environment of some classrooms. Journal entries elaborating on the experiences in the classrooms and informal conversations with the teachers were prepared immediately following the observation periods, typically in the library or elsewhere on the school premises.

Because the group of volunteers was self-selected, it is plausible and perhaps even likely that these teachers represent the “cream of the crop” of educators. That is, teachers who are willing to open their doors to a stranger for observation and possible criticism are the teachers who feel most confident in their abilities and do not feel they have to adjust their behavior for the benefit of the observer. Nonetheless, even if these teachers represent the best the school has to offer its students, the observations remain of critical import. Events that unfolded in some of those classrooms were shocking to one who was unaccustomed to the daily routines of the high school and it leaves open the question that if misbehavior occurred with regular frequency in the “best” classrooms, then what might be occurring down the hall? This study, however, can only address the events that were observed and place them into context with the disciplinary data that is available. While

twelve classroom teachers were studied during the scope of the project, the present article will focus on two English teachers, as the experiences documented in those classrooms provide a clear contrast between teacher perceptions, student actions and disciplinary outcomes. Observations made during this study that provide additional insight into classroom misbehavior and give consideration to other elements of the disciplinary process are documented elsewhere in the literature (Glass, 2014).

OBSERVATIONS IN THE CLASSROOM

Disrespect as a Problem

Junior and Senior English classes are sometimes combined into one single class for students who have fallen behind in their required English credits. By placing these two levels together, students can be “fast tracked” into earning the necessary credits for timely graduation. However, a downside to this class structure is evident when considering which students are the ones who are part of a combined-credit course: students who have failed the standard course and who must now get caught up with their peers. The failing students are often the ones who have behavior problems which leads to time out of the classroom thus compromising their ability to stay on track academically. The failing students also tend to have more absences and tardies than their peers, which leads to academic downfall. The end result is clear: a combined English 3/4 class will be comprised of students with troubled backgrounds and absent any high achieving students who could help their struggling classmates or who might otherwise be able to spur the academic interests of their lesser-achieving peers.

One of the English 3/4 classes observed on multiple occasions is led by Ms. Greene, a soft spoken African American teacher who appears to be mid-fifties. Ms.

Greene is a long-term substitute at the school, and she is the third substitute this academic term for Ms. Yardley, who has taken emergency family leave during the Spring semester. Ms. Greene will stay with this class through the end of the school year. Each time I visit this particular English 3/4 class, it is extremely chaotic. It overlaps with the lunch period, so the first thirty minute portion of this class is labeled as a study block; when the students return from lunch, the actual class period begins. Study blocks, however, are still expected to be held in an orderly fashion, and Ms. Greene works, often unsuccessfully, toward this goal.

On one particular day in March, she calls one group of girls down three times for excessive talking. Each time, they complain loudly to each other and to her, but they eventually settle down to do some bookwork. During lunch, these same girls annoy another classmate, Jarod. Jarod returns from lunch, very frustrated with the girls, and tells Ms. Greene that he’s not coming back into class with them, that they’ve been talking too much all day. It’s evident that he is very agitated by their behavior although it isn’t apparent that any of their actions have been directed toward him.

Ms. Greene tries to calm him down, using a soothing and patient tone, to no avail. When he refuses to take his seat, Ms. Greene asks the girls to accompany her into the hallway so that she can get a better idea of what has transpired. While she is speaking with the girls in the hallway, Jarod states, loudly, to no one in particular “I hate fuckin’ bitches anyway.” Ms. Greene returns, and asks Jarod what he would like to do about the problem. He requests to do his work in the hallway, and she allows him to move his chair out of the room where he remains for the rest of the class period.

She later explains to me that Jarod qualifies for Special Education based upon his behavioral history, but his parents have opted for him not to be formally identified to receive the services. She accommodates his needs to the best of her ability, and points out that it was the best solution, in her opinion, to allow him to work in the hallway. Had she insisted that he take his seat in the room, he would have continued to disrupt the class with his complaints, and had she sent him to In-School Suspension, then he likely would have not done any of the assigned work. She shows me his fully completed worksheet as evidence that she made the right decision. The question remains, however, for purposes of this research, as to whether Ms. Greene truly handled the situation effectively. On the one hand, she did accomplish two goals: first, she maintained classroom order by placing the offending student in the hallway, albeit at his own request; second, the struggling student successfully completed that day's work. On the other hand, she allowed a non-compliant student to dictate *what* he was or was not going to do, and *where* he was going to do it. This can send a message to other students that the teacher is not in full control of the classroom, and that they too could choose or refuse to comply with the rules.

Ms. Greene also teaches Senior English, a General Education class comprised of approximately twenty students, almost exclusively male. On every occasion that I visit this particular class, the room exudes a chaotic, almost frightening, atmosphere. The students have separated themselves into friendship groups, and conversation is never lacking in this room. Respect for Ms. Greene's authority is also lacking, as the boys challenge her at every opportunity. Although these challenges are done in a joking manner – "Ah, Ms. Greene,

don't make us do that!!" – more often than not, the students do their work slowly and continue to talk and banter among themselves throughout the hour. On one occasion, Ms. Greene became very frustrated with Josh, who had talked almost non-stop during the period. Even with her frustration level clearly shown on her face, she maintained her composure and quietly asked him if he was doing any work, to which he responded "You mean, right now? I did some work this morning." Ms. Greene responded "I didn't say this morning. I mean right now." This type of student response to this particular teacher was typical, and as the observations continue throughout the semester, the non-compliance of the students increase, especially as the school year (and Senior Year, for many) comes to an end. Although this class is a general Senior English course, the behavior of the students in this classroom is no different than the students observed in the remedial English 3/4 course.

Reflection and Analysis.

Had these types of situation been confined to a single or couple of incidents, or an experience typical of only the underperforming English 3/4 students, then an appropriate analysis would be that Ms. Greene was maintaining control of her class while making concessions at the individual level for the good of the whole. However, observations of both the lower level class and the "on-track" class continued to demonstrate that while her heart was in the right place – as was apparent through the many comments she made to me during break periods and later in her full interview – her lax discipline policy often led to a highly disruptive classroom atmosphere and was not conducive to truly effective behavior management. On another occasion, for example, rubber bands were being shot across the room by a male student, while

another repeatedly bounced a small rubber ball off the back wall. Both misbehaviors were simply ignored, although they were clearly disruptive. On yet another occasion, a student climbed over chairs to get to Ms. Greene's desk to ask her a question (rather than just walking down the aisle) and students were frequently seen using their phones and Ipods during video presentations. The issue of personal space sometimes manifested itself in her classes, as students were often seen touching and poking one another, and boys were seen playing with girls' hair, which would typically elicit loud complaints by the offended student, although this was more for "show" than out of any real sense of offense. "Ms. Greene, tell Chris to quit touching me!! . . . He's still doing it!!" These outbursts served to disrupt the entire class and flow of lecture or quiet work, yet they continued throughout the semester without being effectively quashed.

Eventually, as the school year comes to a close, Ms. Greene had managed to work with these students so that all have successfully completed the course. This was quite an achievement, given that one hundred percent of this class was comprised of students who were lagging academically. Despite the constant bantering, outbursts and displays of disrespect, Ms. Greene had achieved her goal of academic success among the students. In personal discussions, Ms. Greene left no doubt that she saw each child as a potential success story, and she was willing to work after hours, on weekends and during Spring Break to help each student meet the minimum course requirements even if that didn't necessarily translate into English proficiency. Nonetheless, the behavior of the students did not improve during the Spring semester, and they finished the year as unruly as when observations first began.

In contrast, other general English courses observed with Mrs. Black (discussed below), whose teaching style differed from Ms. Greene, were much more contained although some misbehavior was observed in those classes as well. This leads to the conclusion that the teaching style and teacher personality play a definite role in determining student behavior, in some instances more so than the academic level of the course. It also impacts the ability to analyze numerical data, as some teachers, such as Ms. Greene, try to work with the students individually rather than writing a referral to an administrator. To this end, then, the data is skewed because the referrals that are available for analysis are not evenly distributed across the offending students, but is more a reflection of a teacher's tolerance level of misbehavior. Teachers with less tolerance will write more referrals to his or her students, while other misbehaving students, such as those taught by Ms. Greene and who most certainly warranted a referral, may not receive a referral at all.

Lack of Motivation as a Problem

Mrs. Black has been teaching English courses at the school for eight years. She engages her students with a peppy attitude and is constantly in motion as she lectures her students, using elaborate gestures and body language to convey the ideas and storylines of the novels she uses in her courses. On more than one occasion, I note that her enthusiasm for the material is evident, and this often (but not always) serves to keep her students engaged in activities that are otherwise passive, such as listening to audio recordings. When she utilizes audiotapes, she often starts and stops the equipment to elicit comments and reflect on the events within the scene. Even with her high-energy, bubbly personality, she commands respect in her classroom, often

speaking sharply to students when they are off-task.

As observations within her classes began, she advised me that her students generally exhibited positive attitudes and good behavior with the exception of one class period. Observations in her various classes confirmed her description, as one class of students was generally less compliant than students in her other hours, although there was no difference in the academic level of her classes. This might most accurately be summed as “luck of the draw,” simply the outcome of student assignment to that particular class period. Nonetheless, the type of misbehavior displayed by those students had a completely different tone than the misbehavior witnessed down the hall in Ms. Greene’s room.

On one particular day in early May, I am seated in the classroom as the students file in. They take longer than usual to settle down, and Mrs. Black wastes no time raising her voice to tell them there should be no talking. Immediately after calling the class to order, however, two girls (one African American and one white), sitting rows apart, begin to discuss the film clip that is currently being used to supplement the novel they are reading in class. “Are we going to see the ugly girl again?” the African American girl asks. The white girl, who has evidently already read the upcoming portion, replies “No.” “Good,” the first girl replies, “She needed to be gone, she was so ugly.” Mrs. Black gives the girls a sharp glance, but says nothing.

This class is small with approximately 16 students, five of whom are minority students, which is a large number of minority students for such a small class at this high school. The minority status of this classroom, however, does not appear to play a significant role in behavior, other than the

African American students are typically louder-voiced and more verbal with one another than the white students on every occasion that I visit this classroom (and which is a pattern that is demonstrated in many classrooms that I observe and in the corridors). One particular African American male is often seen sleeping throughout the period. On this day in May, he lays his head on his desk as soon as he arrives, and appears to fall asleep almost immediately. He is using his iPod headphones, and the music is audible to the students close to him and to me, three rows away. A few minutes after class begins, he raises up, stretches broadly, and his head makes a soft “thump” as it lands back on the desk. The body language of several students in the class makes it apparent that they are disinterested in the novel (*The Great Gatsby*). One white girl and one African American boy have their heads down, arms outstretched across their desk, heads turned to the side, appearing to follow along with the reading but clearly not enjoying the story.

Similar body language is seen across the classroom, including five white girls who sit in the back seat of every row. Each of these girls have their heads down, napping. (On this particular day, only two students appear to be fully engaged in the reading and the film clips, and both of those are Hispanic students). About one third of the way through the period, Mrs. Black has finally reached her limit with the lack of engagement. “Would all of our sleepers in the back get their heads up?” In unison, the five girls raise their heads and flip their hair. The African American male who has been sleeping the entire time raises his head, pulls his hoodie over his forehead and returns to sleep. By the time the class is half finished, the other African American male, who had been at least pretending to follow along, has also fallen asleep.

Reflection and Analysis.

This lack of interest in the material was a common theme for this group of students and this type of quiet noncompliance was observed on multiple occasions. It was much different than the unruly misbehavior observed in Ms. Greene's course, but it nonetheless represented a rejection of the authority of Mrs. Black to demand that the students pay attention and participate in the class. Also in contrast to Ms. Greene's insistence that every student is able to master enough material to pass was the attitude of Mrs. Black toward these non-participating students. I asked her about the continual napping in her room, and she replied: "Well, the girls back there, sometimes they pop up and comment, so I never really know if they are sleeping." Nodding to the seat occupied by the ever-snoozing African American, she noted "That one, he's failed for the year. He has some ridiculous grade in here right now, less than a ten percent. And that one," gesturing to the seat occupied by the other African American male, "he's not passing either, but his grade isn't as bad as the other one. So, sometimes I get them up, and other times I think, hey, you're sixteen or seventeen, you know you're failing, your parents have been contacted and they've seen your grades. It's up to them." Other groups of students observed with Mrs. Black did not seem to have the same level of disinterest; this may have been related to the particular mixture of students assigned to any given class, rather than related to Mrs. Black's teaching methods. Nevertheless, the observations in this particular classroom raise the possibility that Mrs. Black had different expectations for this group of students as a whole, or individually, as in the case of the failing African American. Based upon the series of observations, informal conversations and the formal interview,

however, there is ample evidence to suggest that Mrs. Black's choice to let the students make their own academic decisions did not mean she was unconcerned about the students; rather, she let them make their own choice as to what their class performance would be in anticipation of the adult roles they would soon assume. On multiple occasions, she was seen encouraging the students to ask questions and complete the assigned work. Her classes generally ran quite smoothly, with the exception of the occasional students who were out of their seat or students who showed up to class after the bell rang. The sleepers, although they were chastised for their behavior and told to sit up, did not disrupt the other students and it appeared that after Mrs. Black had brought them to attention at least once, sometimes twice, she typically ignored the behavior. Her decision to make the students responsible for their own academic success was echoed by other teachers during this study, as it was seen as a way to make the student aware of adult-like responsibilities and behavior.

These observations provide support for the assertion that classroom management style has a direct impact on student attitudes and disciplinary outcomes and that certain student-teacher combinations result in higher rates of referrals (Gregory and Weinstein, 2006; Gregory and Ripski, 2008). The data provided by the school indicates that Mrs. Black's no-nonsense attitude is echoed by her greater willingness to write referrals to students who are tardy or who are overtly misbehaving, even though she appeared to disregard the unobtrusive non-compliance witnessed in her classroom.

DISCIPLINARY OUTCOMES

Misbehavior at this school was witnessed among racial and ethnic minorities and white students, and with both boys and girls. What happens to these students,

though, once they are sent out of the classroom? The academic literature indicates that within many school districts minority members and certain other subgroups are subjected to higher rates of disciplinary actions, specifically In-School Suspension, Out-of-School Suspension or Expulsion than other students. The typical student who is suspended or expelled is more likely to be from a lower socioeconomic group, in a special education class, male and a low-achiever (Skiba, et al. 2011; Gregory and Weinstein, 2008, Skiba, et al. 2002; Leone, et al. 2002; McCarthy and Hoge, 1987 and Wu, et al, 1982). Moreover, racial disparities have been documented for over four decades, noting that African Americans were as much as three times as likely to be suspended as a white student (Children's Defense Fund, 1975; Ferguson, 2001; Skiba, et al. 2002; Gregory and Weinstein, 2008; Gregory, Skiba and Noguera, 2010; Skiba, et al. 2011; CRDC 2012; Skiba, 2015, Losen, 2012 and Losen, 2015). The long-term consequences of repeated disciplinary actions are also well documented in the literature. Citing Gregory and Ripski (2008:338):

Suspended students are more likely to have low achievement (Arcia, 2006), be retained (Civil Rights Project, 2000), receive future suspensions (Skiba and Noam, 2002), and experience dissatisfaction and alienation (Lovey, Docking & Evans, 1994). Moreover, suspended students are at risk for long-term negative outcomes. They are more likely to drop out of school, become involved in the juvenile justice system, and later be incarcerated (Baker, et al. 2001; Civil Rights Project, 2000).

Within this particular school, based upon the observations, behavior concerns were more pronounced in classes with low achievers and those which contained a large number of students identified as Special Education students. It did not appear that teachers or administrators were making any intentional decision to discipline any racial group or social group any more than others. However, as the teachers who chose to participate with the classroom observations were self-selected, and it is possible that teachers who see themselves as more fair and who are generally more confident in their teaching methods would have been the ones more likely to participate with this study. To the extent that some subgroups may be more likely to be referred to an administrator for punishment, this study suggest that this is related more to the actions witnessed within various classrooms where referrals originate and are thus an outcome of individual teachers' tolerance level for misbehavior, the teaching philosophy of the individual educator, the perception of the teacher with respect to the individual student or the collective class, and to a cultural mismatch between student and teachers.

The school provided disciplinary data for two months of the study, March and September. Because the emphasis of this study is qualitative, the discussion of the data has been limited. The school's total minority membership is currently just under 14%, consistent with percentages found in many rural areas of Kentucky. Referrals of minority students were somewhat higher than would be expected if their offending occurred at rates consistent with their percentage of the student body. In March, 25% of referrals were written to minorities, and in September, 33% of referrals were written to minorities. A similar pattern emerged when considering some (but not all)

disciplinary actions, and it must be remembered that some resolutions indicate a positive outcome for the student, such as phone calls to the parent or detention, both of which are mild outcomes, rather than a more severe punishment such as suspension. Minority students were overrepresented among the outcomes which could be viewed in this positive light. Cross-tabulation of data of Disciplinary Actions by Race did not support a finding of discriminatory behavior at the administrative level, nor did another layer of cross-tabulation, Violation by Race by Disciplinary Action. With respect to defiant behavior, an event which is often mentioned in the literature as one of the areas where minority students are overrepresented in the disciplinary data (Gregory, Skiba and Noguera, 2010; Monroe, 2005; Skiba, et al. 2002), it could be argued that in some cases the minority members received lesser punishments than the whites. In particular, a larger percentage of minorities were assigned to After School Detention (which can be construed as a mild punishment) and resolved through parent conferencing, while a larger percentage of whites were given In-School Suspension than minorities. At the same time, however, a higher percentage of minority students did receive Out-of-School suspension.

Overall, no evidence of any intentional discriminatory behavior at the administrative level emerged between white students and minority students. To the degree that minority students may be overrepresented in the disciplinary process, it is occurring at the referral level. This could be a result of social class differences more so than race, stemming from a cultural mismatch between students and teachers or the direct effects of poverty. Minority members are more likely to live in impoverished circumstances which oftentimes are a contributing factor in poor

academic performance and high levels of frustration (which may be expressed through defiance and disrespect), as noted by teachers and administrators alike.

For purposes of this research project, it was not possible to cross tabulate the data by socioeconomic status because the school's disciplinary data did not contain information on free lunch status of the students, nor was that data available on an individual basis to the administrators. Instead, reliance must be made on the social/cultural capital displayed by the student in their everyday interactions at the school to glean insight into his or her social class status. While it may be accurate to believe that a large percentage of the African American and Hispanic students at this school are at the lower level of the social class ladder, it is just as accurate that a large percentage of the impoverished student body are white. Many of those impoverished students, both white and minority, were seen in lower-level academic courses as well as being identified with special needs. It was in those classes that misbehavior was most pronounced and it was in those classes that teachers were continually struggling to manage behavior and return the students' attention to the academic material at hand.

Because many of the referrals may have originated in classes such as those, to the extent that some of those students may have been minority members, then it follows that minority members may eventually be overrepresented in the disciplinary outcome data. In and of itself, that should not be construed as an indicator of racial discrimination stemming from the teachers or the administrators, but as a result of (1) student apathy or student frustration, both of which may lead to displays of defiance or other disruptive behavior or (2) as a result of teacher frustration in which a single student may be the one called out for punishment

after a series of students have acted out in a short period of time (Vavrus and Cole, 2002). Moreover, the overcrowding of some classes, the mixture of students within any class, and the assignment of students to classes to which they may feel are not relevant to their future lives may exacerbate the misconduct and which are situations that are beyond the original control of the student.

As previously noted, to the extent that minorities are overrepresented in this school's disciplinary data, it appears to be originating at the classroom level. For example, referencing the category of defiant behavior during the month of March, approximately 73% of the referrals were given to white students, an underrepresentation, while approximately 27% of the referrals were given to minority students. If the defiance was not definite and overt, and instead was a matter of subjective interpretation, then this may indicate the problem of cultural mismatch: verbal intonations and body movement that is normalized within the minority community may be construed as defiance on the part of the white teacher (Skiba, 2011; Neal, 2003; Ferguson, 2001). This does not indicate any type of *intentional* discriminatory treatment directed toward an individual student or group of students, but instead points to the need to understand cultural differences and practices within the home environment that may carry over to the school. As the behavior continues, and the same students receive multiple referrals, then the punishment becomes more pronounced, leading to the gap in the data.

Similarly, the violation "disrespect to a school employee" provides useful insight into the nature of escalating consequences and the dangers of misrepresentation of statistical information. In September, the total number of referrals for disrespect to a

school employee was nine, four of which were minority student referrals and five of which were white student referrals. Among the five white students, one received Saturday school, two received detention and two received In-School Suspension. For the four minority students, however, the punishments differed: one received detention; two received In-School Suspension and the fourth received Out-of-School Suspension. A quick glance at only the percentages could quickly lead to the conclusion that minorities are being punished more severely. A higher percentage received In-School Suspension, and one was suspended from the school campus while no white students received such a harsh punishment. However, from a numerical standpoint, which may serve as a guide to the administrators, they saw an almost equal number of whites and minorities (5 to 4) and within each group a variety of outcomes were given: detention, In-School Suspension and Out-of-School Suspension. If the minority students receive more referrals over time, then for the minority student who received the Out-of-School suspension, his or her punishment may be warranted based upon utilization of the discipline matrix. White students, on the other hand, who may be more likely to have only a few or even no referrals on record, will be on the lesser end of the continuum of punishment. This does not, in and of itself, indicate any type of racial discrimination at the administrative level, regardless of the inferences that could be made from looking solely at numerical data. It is this concern that is addressed by triangulating the numerical data with qualitative research through observations and interview.

In contrast with the literature, which argues that "Educators' unwillingness to draw distinctions between severe and minor

offenses and the breadth with which zero tolerance approaches are applied appear to be primary sources of the problem” (Monroe, 2005:47; Skiba and Peterson, 1997), the conclusion from this particular school is that the teachers and administrators *do* make efforts to draw those distinctions, but within some classrooms, such as that of Ms. Greene, the teachers are being pushed to the limit of their ability to maintain order, or in other cases, an air of apathy, such as that witnessed in Mrs. Black’s classroom, leads to disengagement from the educational process among students and frustration among educators. Interviews with those in charge of disciplinary decisions indicate that administrators attempt to give individual consideration to each student. However, if the Code of Conduct discipline matrix is construed as a form of “zero tolerance,” meaning that as offenses are repeated and referrals are multiplied, then the corresponding punishment must also be increasingly severe, then it stands to reason that if minorities are given more referrals at the classroom level (which does appear to be the case at this school), and if the administrators are adhering to the discipline matrix, then those students will have correspondingly higher levels of more severe punishments, including both In and Out-of-School Suspension.

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

One teacher who participated in the study made the following observation, demonstrating the intersections of race, place and socioeconomic considerations within the educational system. Not only do her words provide a good summation of the variables that play a role in misbehavior, but her choice of words also convey the sense that the teachers are at a loss for how to change the situation:

I don’t care what color you are, or where you’re from, you’re not going

to disrupt this class. I don’t know what makes the difference. They [the minority students] just seem to have more problems. Two or three of them in first period give me problems every day, but there is another African American boy in the class who never gives me any problem. Every student is different, I know. The African American kids that act out are from poor backgrounds, so could it be more of a socioeconomic thing, sure, but there are lots of poor white kids too. In one of my classes, there’s this particular group of boys, and they are nice enough farm kids, but they talk too much and act out.

The classrooms where the most misbehavior was witnessed were General Education classes (not Honors or Advanced Placement classes), classes with large numbers of underperformers (such as students taking a course for the second or third time such as Algebra I or II or the English 3/4 class described herein) and classes with several students identified as eligible for Special Education services. Thus, the lowered academic expectations and the past social and academic history of those students very likely were contributing factors to their levels of defiance, disrespect and general misbehavior which led to the writing of referrals in those classes, regardless of the race or ethnicity of the student in question. Past research (Ferguson, 2000; Monroe, 2005, Hanna 1988; Weinstein, et al. 2004; Weinstein, et al. 2003) supports the idea of a cultural mismatch between students and teachers; an argument could be made that this problem was found in the participating high school. For example, speech patterns and mannerisms which may differ based upon

racial, ethnic or social background may be viewed disparagingly by middle-class white teachers (Delpit, 1995; Townsend, 2000; Neal, et al, 2003; Gregory and Weinstein, 2008; Skiba, et al. 2011). Thus, given the large number of referrals which were written for defiance and disrespect, whether a cultural mismatch might be in operation at this school is a valid question. In many instances, the defiance and disrespect which were witnessed during classroom observations left little room for subjective interpretation (such as cursing at a teacher), other issues arose which became a matter of how the teacher reacted to body language, verbal intonations and speech patterns. Such issues are documented in the literature as differing between whites and minorities (Delpit, 1995; Ferguson, 2001; Monroe, 2005). Increasing awareness of cultural differences should be a priority for school districts, particularly in areas where racial and ethnic minority teachers are not well represented, as was the case at this participating high school.

The academic literature (Foster, 1993; Spencer, 1986) also speaks to this issue of minority teachers and whether their interactions with students of color or lower social class status students differ from their white counterparts. As previously noted, one of the teachers who volunteered to participate in this study was a long-term substitute, a soft-spoken African American teacher named Ms. Greene. This teacher, who was observed throughout the spring semester when she was employed at the school, was witnessed to be an extraordinarily understanding and patient teacher, treating all students fairly and consistently. Nonetheless, she remarked that she was dismayed by the disrespect displayed by the students in the school, an attitude that was clearly at odds with her value system. Her dismay, however, did not

negatively impact her treatment of the students; if anything, it appeared to strengthen her resolve to remedy the misbehavior through the process of reflection.

Ms. Greene confided to me that her son had attended an urban high school with a majority of minority students, and that she was always shocked, as a parent, by the attitude of the teachers at that high school. "You wouldn't believe the things you would hear them utter in the halls," she explained. Recognizing this pejorative attitude toward minority or lower class students and the damaging effects it can have on student morale, she explained that she made conscious attempts never to label a child as being incapable of success based upon their social location. Moreover, she remarked that it was her belief that the teachers and administrators at this school all took steps to ensure that did not happen. She explained that compared to the urban high school, the atmosphere at this participating high school was entirely different. "You don't hear things like that over here," she remarked. Her patience with the students, both academically and behaviorally, was remarkable. She held her students, even those who were underperforming, to a high standard, insisting that they were capable of succeeding. She sometimes shared their work with me, beaming with pride at their accomplishments. Her willingness to engage the students in conversation and forge a connection with them was always apparent even when the students were misbehaving which was common in her classroom. The academic literature (Gregory and Weinstein, 2008) suggests that this type of approach -- her demandingness that they *can* do the work coupled with her efforts at relationship building -- should be very effective in gaining students' trust and earning their respect for her authority over the class.

Unfortunately, this process is made all the more difficult for Ms. Greene, as she was the third teacher in that particular classroom in the Spring portion of this project, a fact that she believed had significantly contributed to their poor behavior and academic performance. Her limited time in the classroom does not provide an adequate opportunity to determine how her teaching and disciplinary strategies would have worked, had she been with the students a full academic year or more. Whether Ms. Greene is representative of minority teachers in this school district, or in others across the state, is not known. At this high school, regularly-employed minority teachers simply were not seen; while the school employed minority administrative and custodial staff members, the primary educators were white. Therefore, increasing the racial diversity of the teaching staff could be seen as an area where there is room for improvement by the participating school district, combined with workshops that focus on cultural awareness.

CONCLUSIONS

This participating institution is faced with the same challenges that are rampant across our nation, and a critical analysis of the sources of defiance, disrespect, lack of motivation and the prospect of eventual attrition of those students must be undertaken, with a corresponding analysis of teacher perceptions, expectations and willingness to accommodate students from all walks of life. This study indicates that although the participating school does not appear to have any systematic discrimination present in its process of discipline, there is room for improvement. Administrators need to seek out seminars and workshops for their faculty that specialize in cultural diversity which will increase the teachers' awareness of both the obvious and the more subtle differences between white and minority students in their everyday behavior,

including common mannerisms and speech patterns so that behavior which is normalized in their home life is not misconstrued as defiance or other misbehavior by white educators. Likewise, increasing the racial diversity of the staff could help achieve this goal. Increased diversity and workshops alone, however, will not adequately address the full range of concerns that surfaced during the course of this study. Students must be held to high standards of accountability, regardless of background experiences, to minimize the chaotic environment that was witnessed during the course of this study in the lower-level and General Education classrooms. Students should be expected to "rise to the occasion," rather than teachers giving up on their chances for academic success by mid-year. This requires increased efforts toward academic success by both the teachers and by the students. Increasing the motivation and lessening the negativity among late adolescents, however, is not as easily accomplished as changing the teaching strategies and disciplinary methods of the teachers. Student concerns must be understood and addressed during the elementary years, prior to poor study habits, poor attitudes and poor academic performance having had an opportunity to become the norm. Thus, while this study originated at the high school level, its implications of the need for change are more far-reaching. It is possible to achieve these goals, although the current structure of the educational system across the nation (i.e., often overcrowded, underfunded and understaffed) presents significant challenges.

In sum, qualitative data provides insight that cannot be gained from quantitative analysis alone. Data often appears to indicate a systemic problem of discrimination, and while that may be case in some schools, it should not be the default

assumption. The inability of the educational system to effectively address these issues is summed up in the words of another English teacher at this school, and reflects the seriousness of the problem that must be addressed for all underperforming students, regardless of the students' race, ethnicity or gender. Her statement serves as a warning to parents, school officials and anyone else who is interested in fixing our nation's educational system, and it underscores the necessity of swift change:

[S]ome classes just don't seem to care. It's about their upbringing. If a student is willing to tell a teacher to fuck off, then you know they're doing it at home. And the fact is, there's not much you can do about it. Just assign the work and accept the attitude. Writing them up doesn't do anything, In-School Suspension doesn't deter them. And then Saturday school, well, they don't show up for that either. After three detentions, the policy is Out-of-School Suspension, and they don't care. They didn't want to be here in the first place. It is truly a flawed system. The school is really powerless to do anything with those kids.

In light of her observations, it is clear that teachers must receive proper training in classroom management techniques and cultural competence. That, along with flexibility and the willingness to adjust teaching styles to speak to the individual learner, engagement of the student at an early age to foster good study habits and instill motivation, and a positive relationship with families and the community, can support the mission of the public education system to provide a solid foundation for the future of our nation.

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‘You’re Never Going to Wear a Bikini Again, Just Deal with It:’ The Meaning of Motherhood in Exercise Infomercials

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Abstract: Exercise and feminism have an ideologically ambivalent relationship. Exercise often has been seen as an attempt to meet an unrealistic, patriarchy-based definition of feminine beauty. Alternatively, the quest for fitness can be viewed as a means to self-empowerment or a necessary component of good health. This paper examines how motherhood--an identity uniquely linked to women--is presented in exercise infomercials. Using a sample of 20 exercise infomercials, I first identify how they establish a conflict between valorized elements of motherhood that stress a nurturance role and shunned elements that revolve around alterations to the body caused by pregnancy. Second, I underscore how exercise infomercials frame exercise as an empowering, transformative action to control the post-pregnancy body, but in reality actually reify women's traditional gender roles and values. They do so in part by ratifying a narrow and unrealistic standard for attractiveness. In the conclusion, I address how exercise infomercials reject mind-body dualism but, in the process, support consumerism cycles that emphasize the body as an ongoing project.

Keywords: exercise, motherhood, pregnancy, gender stereotypes

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**‘You’re Never Going to Wear a Bikini
Again, Just Deal with It:’
The Meaning of Motherhood in Exercise
Infomercials**

‘I had a beautiful baby boy, and it was a great gift. But I was left with an enormous amount of weight.... Certainly after you have children your life doesn’t get any less hectic....From a physical standpoint, I am strong and fit and healthy, but more importantly, I feel on the outside who I’ve always been on the inside. I’m comfortable in my skin, I’m confident with who I am. The *Spinning Program* transformed my life and delivered me into the body that I was meant to always be in.’

--Kris Rondeau, who lost 106 pounds, is a client profiled on the *Spinning Program* infomercial.

The above quote highlights two important influences on how women think about their bodies. The first influence is the culturally constructed concept of motherhood, valorized as a goal to which most, if not all, women should aspire (Morell, 1994). For example, although it is possible to debate where in the life cycle it is most appropriate to become a mother, the essential value of motherhood is rarely challenged (Perrier, 2013). In the quote, Kris Rondeau defines a child as a ‘beautiful...great gift.’ At the same time, she sees motherhood as a burden associated with an ‘enormous’ weight gain and ‘hectic’ lifestyle. As socially constructed, mothers doing motherhood are expected to selflessly give to their children, even at the expense of their own well-being (Bailey, 1999; Marshall, 1991). The failure to reproduce is stigmatized as a non-normative identity for women (Blackstone and Stewart, 2012; Shapiro, 2014). In the

present research, I explore how the conflict between the benefits and costs of motherhood is framed for women by using a novel but potentially rich data source: exercise infomercials aimed predominantly at a woman demographic.

Motherhood puts women’s two major socially constructed roles (mother and sex object) into conflict. Whereas motherhood boosts a woman’s performance of femininity by emphasizing her reproductive and nurturance capacity, it hinders her ability to conform to a strict standard of beauty framed as thinness and lean muscularity (Harrison, 2000). Motherhood places a significant demand on women’s time for childrearing duties. For example, in a qualitative analysis of employed mothers in Sweden (Elvin-Nowak and Thomsson, 2001), one theme that emerged was women’s struggle to manage their time effectively to meet the needs of their children while also juggling workplace demands. A lack of free time also makes it more difficult to engage in body disciplining routines such as exercise and beauty treatments. Pregnancy has an effect on the body in the form of stretch marks, weight gain or redistribution, and abdominal muscle weakness (e.g., Jenkin and Tiggemann, 1997).

A second influence on how women think about their bodies is the strong relationship people perceive between their physical bodies and selfhood (Battersby, 1993; Lawton, 1998). That is, they reject the notion of mind-body dualism. Although the body is the physical locus of the person, it is not synecdoche for identity. It is possible to ask, ‘What is the relationship between a woman’s phenomenological experience of identity and what she feels her appearance says about her?’ In the quote above, Kris Rondeau felt that her pre-*Spinning Program* body was not the one she was ‘meant to always be in.’ Her body-

identity relationship was dissonant and therefore distressing. Given societal pressures on women to appear young, fit, and toned (Markula, 1995) it is possible that the effects of pregnancy cause women to experience a disassociation between an inner identity and outward appearance.

I consider how infomercials frame exercise as the solution to women's problems derived from dealing with a post-pregnancy body. For example, according to the respondent in the quote above, exercise--in this case, the *Spinning Program*--provided a means to increase the correspondence between her experience of her body and her sense of identity. I also examine how exercise infomercials ratify feminine gender stereotypes and an unrealistic standard of attractiveness in the process of framing exercise in terms of pro-feminist empowerment.

In the present research, I used the cultural constructions of motherhood and fitness to explore how women experience the embodied self. I chose to examine these ideas using infomercials geared toward marketing workout videos and fitness equipment for three reasons. First, with the explosive growth of cable and satellite channels, infomercials represent a pervasive share of what appears on television (e.g., Donthu and Gilliland, 1996). Thus, they have a potentially significant, but largely unexamined, influence shaping the nature of the preferred female body. Second, the format of infomercials includes testimonials from successful consumers of the product. While I recognize that these testimonials are mediated by the gatekeeper abilities of the infomercial producers, they still provide insight into how consumers think about their embodied selves. At the very least, they model a set of attitudes for women and men who consume the infomercial. Third, an initial, but informal, analysis suggested that women are disproportionately

represented as spokespersons for and consumers of fitness products on fitness infomercials. Thus, infomercials represented yet another potential, but unexplored, influence on women's dissatisfaction with their bodies.

Danger! The Blessings of Motherhood Ahead

There are strong societal norms about the importance of having children (Morell, 1994; Ory, 1978) despite utilitarian considerations--such as financial costs--that would argue against it (Schoen, Kim, Nathanson, Fields, and Astone, 1997). Women often cite happiness and a sense of well-being as the motivations to have children (van Balen and Trimbos-Kemper, 1995). Mothers and women who are trying to conceive will voice their desire to have children, even when they cannot justify or even explain their motivations (Grewal and Urschel, 1994). Although people acknowledge the emotional and financial costs of parenting (e.g., Gerson, Berman, and Morris, 1991), in discussing the findings from her study of the voluntarily childless, Park (2005, 397) questioned whether 'there exist any socially acceptable motives for choosing childlessness.'

Callan (1985) and Mueller and Yoder (1997) demonstrated the existence of pro-parenthood stereotypes which associate being a parent with positive traits like emotional maturity and self-fulfillment and associate voluntary childless with negative traits like selfishness and individualism. The near-universal positive view of motherhood, which has been expanded to the point of creating parent-focused public policies, such as parental leaves and childcare services, has also been criticized for propagating a 'pronatalist' bias (e.g., Burkett, 2000; Heitlinger, 1991) which can, for example, frame having children as a patriotic act (e.g., Brown and Ferree, 2005). The urge to parent is sufficiently strong that

gay men will often go to great length and expense to acquire the opportunity to nurture children (Murphy, 2013).

Despite the 'near-hegemonic appeal' (Stanworth, 1990, 297) of motherhood, both mothers and non-mothers view motherhood as a causal variable with a detrimental effect on their abilities to achieve and maintain an ideal body. In interviews with new mothers, Bailey (2001) identified sensuality and shape as two elements of the gendered body important to women who had been pregnant. Further, she found that women reported that motherhood interfered with their ability to see themselves in sexual terms. Veevers (1980) reported that childless women were concerned about the physical consequences of childbirth--including a decrease in sexual desirability--that discouraged them from wanting children. She also noted that even women who did not personally view pregnancy as a stigma felt that other people, especially men, might view it as such (e.g., Draper, 2003; Taylor and Langer, 1977). From this perspective, then, exercise after pregnancy can be conceptualized as a means of resolving the socially constructed mutual exclusivity of women's roles as sex versus maternal object.

Dworkin and Wachs (2004) suggested that mass media frame pregnancy as 'shameful' for women's bodies and provide physical fitness as an individual-level pro-feminist solution. Women are sensitive to their postpartum bodies when they return to paid labor (Fox and Neiterman, 2015) and adopting strategies related to self-kindness can provide psychological benefit (Woekel and Ebbeck, 2013). Rather than shame, I adopt 'sacrifice' as an underlying construct to guide my analysis. I suggest that, as culturally constructed, becoming pregnant is associated with a requisite acceptance of inevitable damage to the youthful body.

Moreover, women also recognize and accept that motherhood will reduce their time and energy available to work on the body as a project (Brumberg, 1977). These sacrifices are justified by the unchallenged assumption that children bring joy and fulfillment to a woman's life and allow her to achieve a transformative identity unattainable by any other means.

Although it is generally agreed that motherhood represents an important transition for women, there is some disagreement regarding the extent to which motherhood changes identity. Some authors suggest that motherhood creates a permanent change in a woman's identity. Draper (2003) asserted that even before the baby is born, the state of pregnancy 'challenges the woman's concept of self, as the developing baby, contained deep within her body, upsets her understanding of where she begins and where she ends' (751). From this perspective, becoming a mother leads to a fundamental change in character because the child will always be with the mother, as a part of her life, even if adult relationships may come and go. Books about pregnancy frame having children as a rite of passage that requires the mother-to-be to put aside her own interests in favor of the welfare of the child, both before and after the baby is born (Marshall, 1991).

In contrast, Bailey (1999, 2001) found that pregnancy was not seen as producing a fundamental change in character. Rather, becoming a mother revealed different aspects of personality, but the core personality itself did not change. Just as a prism alters light by refracting—but not eliminating—it, pregnancy alters the relative importance of aspects of the self, but those elements do not disappear permanently. Instead, for a period of time, being pregnant allows a woman to put aside certain aspects of her identity. It is interesting that mothers

identify the importance of motherhood as a means to self-fulfillment, whereas the voluntarily childless cite the ability to achieve self-fulfillment as a reason *not* to have children (Houseknecht, 1987; Morell, 1994).

Health, Fitness, and Beauty: Competing Motives for Exercise

Although exercise can be viewed as a means by which women increase their strength and muscularity, it can also be seen as a way in which women discipline their bodies to conform to unrealistic standards of thinness and beauty. As such, physical fitness and feminism have an ambivalent relationship (Collins, 2002). Often, feminist scholarship has focused on ways mass media ratify unrealistic standards of beauty that undermine women's self-esteem and self-confidence. Sociologists and feminist scholars have identified a wide range of contexts where women experience pressure to conform to unrealistic standards, including the consumption of skin lightening products (Glenn, 2008), elective cosmetic surgery (Gimlin, 2000), and aerobic exercising (Collins, 2002; Maguire and Mansfield, 1998; Markula, 2001). Researchers (e.g., Fredrickson and Roberts, 1997; Groesz, Levine, and Murnen, 2002; Hamilton, Mintz, and Kashubeck-West, 2007; Want, Vickers, and Amos, 2009; Wilcox and Laird, 2000) have documented the unhealthy psychological sequelae that derive from media presentations of unrealistic standards of beauty, a tendency that is probably exacerbated by a tendency to engage in social comparison with celebrities (Chae, 2014). Recent research has shown that exercise DVDs use slim models clad in revealing attire (Cardinal, Rogers, Kuo, Locklear, Comfort, and Cardinal, 2015).

On the other hand, feminist scholars have also proposed that the fit female body can challenge conventional representations

of women by illustrating a model of femininity that includes strength, muscular definition, or a more imposing physique. For example, Kagan and Morse (1988, 167) wrote, 'Searching for self-esteem through physical exercise is not a misguided effort...exercise...can indeed promote self-esteem in a powerful, coordinated body.' By this perspective, then, women who engage in body work can be seen as challenging conventional views of femininity.

Whereas sociologists and gender scholars have identified detrimental social and psychological consequences of the trek toward beauty and fitness, another group of scholars has focused on the physical, psychological, and social benefits that accrue to those who engage in body work. Health and sport scientists have promoted regular exercise as source of physical health, through lowered blood pressure and cholesterol and a reduced chance of heart disease or diabetes (e.g., Fontaine and Barofsky, 2001; Pi-Sunyer, 1999). The value of body work is often presented in tandem with demographic information that approximately two-thirds of adults in the United States are classified as overweight or obese (Ogden, Carroll, Curtin, McDowell, Tabak, and Flegal, 2006), with about 400,000 deaths per year attributed to obesity (Sturm, 2002). Similar patterns are beginning to emerge in lower-income and transitional countries, as well (Popkin and Doak, 1998). In addition to health benefits, in a meta-analytic review, Blaine, Rodman, and Newman (2007) showed that weight loss is associated with an increase in self-esteem and a decrease in depression. From this health perspective, obesity is a national epidemic and a media focus on physical fitness is a valuable public service.

The present paper examined how fitness infomercials valorize an exercise system as the tool required to resolve the

tension between what are construed as incompatible motives of selfless motherhood and physical fitness. Unlike much of the literature on women and beauty I do not assume that the desire to exercise represents a *de facto* acceptance of a patriarchal conceptualization of beauty. At the same time, I also recognize that advocating exercise because of the health benefits (regardless of how medically justified) will influence the way in which people commodify their own and others' bodies.

Infomercials, Motherhood, and Identity

Analyses of motherhood and exercise are often conducted from a common assumption: There is a causal relationship between the body and identity. As noted by Bailey (1999) in her study of mothers, the bodily changes women went through were seen as physical indicators of inner changes to the self. The idea that exercise and fitness are an expression of identity (Cole and Hribar, 1995) encourages the idea that altering the body will lead to subsequent changes in the self and self-concept. In speculating why weight loss is associated with increased self-esteem, Blaine et al. (2007) suggested the effect was due to the extent to which weight loss 'prompts us to internalize the more positive body-related appraisals we imagine others have of us' (75).

As noted by Fullagar (2002), the health movement has shifted the meaning of exercise from becoming physically fit to a means of self-expression. Lupton (1999) suggested that school exercise programs were being presented in terms of identity maintenance, ie, as means of building self-esteem, rather than purely in terms of the physical effects of exercise

Infomercials are an important tool for reaching the market for health and fitness products. Estimates (e.g., Donthu and Gilliland, 1996) place the revenues

generated by infomercials at over \$1 billion annually. Blaine and McElroy (2002) found that 53% of infomercials focused on improving physical appearance through body modifications such as dieting, exercise, cosmetics, or vitamin supplements. Another study (Elliott and Lockard, 1996) reported that 16% of infomercials marketed exercise equipment.

Infomercials are usually 27 minutes long and contain two distinct components (Hope and Johnson, 2004). In the direct response segment, detailed purchasing information is provided. The second component, the program segment, which is central to my argument, is a faux documentary that examines the 'true-life success stories' of people who have benefited from the product. I examined the persuasive messages contained in the program segments, especially with regard to how mothers negotiated between motherhood and the achievement of an idealized standard of feminine beauty as exemplified by Western images of actresses and fashion models.

A sensitizing concept can be viewed as a reference frame used by a researcher to interpret empirical data (Bowen, 2006). In my content analysis, I used the concept of sacrifice as a sensitizing concept to interpret women's statements regarding motherhood. I also used the concept of mind-body dualism to discuss how women described their experience of motherhood in terms of the consequences it had on their bodies. I considered the emotional states that women report in response to these bodily changes. Finally, I examined the way in which women present exercise as the cure for the ills to their bodies and minds created by motherhood.

METHOD

Infomercials were obtained on Youtube by pairing the term 'infomercial' with the terms 'fitness' and 'exercise.'

Because of the huge number of potential infomercials available, I narrowed my search by using several criteria. Given the popularity of products like *P90X* and *Insanity* (Martin, 2011), I chose to emphasize workout systems developed by Beachbody. As such, I included infomercials for *Hip Hop Abs*, *Insanity*, *Slim in 6*, *Turbo Jam*, *10 Minute Trainer*, *ChaLEAN Extreme*, and *P90X*. To try to provide for a balanced perspective, I also included less popular products from other companies such as the *P.I.N.K. Method* and the *Spinning Program*. Because I was interested in exploring the representation of motherhood in infomercials, it did not make sense to include infomercials that did not touch on motherhood. Thus, workouts that appeared heavily geared toward men, such as *Body Beast*, where the emphasis was on building bulk, were not included. Only infomercials that featured exercise as a major component were included in the final data set. As such, I did not include infomercials where the focus was on dieting alone rather than exercise.

The full set of exercise infomercials I examined were: the *Spinning Program*, the *P.I.N.K. Method*, *Zumba*, the *Firm Wave*, *Hip Hop Abs*, the *Ab Coaster*, *Insanity*, *Slim in 6*, *Turbo Jam*, *10 Minute Trainer*, *ChaLEAN Extreme*, the *Air Climber*, the *Total Gym*, *Leg Magic Plus*, *Malibu Pilates*, *P90X*, and the *Ab Circle Pro*.

Given that the final data set could be viewed as a convenience sample, it is important to refrain from overgeneralizing the results. However, it is important to recognize that I made an effort to include a wide range of types of exercise products in the final data set. As a result, while not representative from the perspective of sampling theory, the wide sample of videos did possess at least a face valid high degree of representativeness.

I used an analytic inductive process (Miles and Huberman, 1984) to examine the contents of my sample of exercise infomercials. I used the concepts of maternal sacrifice and mind-body dualism as sensitizing concepts. In the first flow of data, I identified emergent themes in the customers' comments. In the second flow, I organized themes around the sensitizing concepts. I determined the extent to which comments addressed issues regarding beliefs about motherhood and femininity, beliefs about the benefits of exercise, and the degree to which exercise was attributed with the ability to change the consumer's identity. In the final flow, I examined the data again in order to verify my conclusions.

RESULTS

The Motherhood Dilemma

Motherhood was valorized in every infomercial I examined. A client in the *Spinning Program* infomercial stated, 'I'm really happy to be a mom. I've always wanted to be a mom. I've always wanted a little girl.' Part of the valorization consisted of mothers recognizing their own self-sacrifice. For example in talking about the *P.I.N.K. Method*, Jennifer Perkins defined motherhood as, 'you're giving, giving, and I love that. I wouldn't trade that for anything. But you forget about yourself....' A *Zumba* client--Chrissy P.--said, 'I was someone who always does--I do everything for my family. I love my family more than anything in the world.'

Although women expressed great joy that they had children, they also lamented the effects pregnancy and raising children had on their bodies. One of the bluntest statements came from Audra, on the *Zumba* infomercial. She said, 'I love my baby, but I do not like what she did to my body.' The adversarial relationship between motherhood and beauty, manifested in the form of weight gain, was presented as a

near universal consequence of pregnancy. In the *Firm Wave* infomercial, Emily Walsh, described as a Master Instructor/Firm gym owner, said, 'Like many of you, when I had kids, I put on weight....' Barbara Lindquist, in representing the *Total Gym*, stated, 'Since I've had the twins, as all women know, you put on your weight for the twins and all that weight is not gone when you give birth to them.' At one point in the second *Hip Hop Abs* infomercial, the announcer said, 'No one struggles with their weight like new moms, so we put Shaun's program to the ultimate test with this group of new moms.' This is a rather bleak message for women with children. It implies that new mothers--as the ultimate test of a fitness system's potential benefit--have a harder time losing weight than any other comparison group in the world.

Infomercials present women who assume that their weight gain is permanent. In the second *Hip Hop Abs* infomercial, a woman said, 'I was enormous whenever I had my daughter...I gained like 44 pounds...I just kind of thought this is how I'm going to be forever...you're never going to wear a bikini again, just deal with it. It's just how it is.' A woman on the *Ab Coaster* infomercial bluntly said, 'After I had my son, I thought: This is it, you know. I'm stuck. I didn't go back to normal.' Alysia M., described as 40 years old, was shown in profile with an extremely large pregnant belly. In expressing her satisfaction with the *Insanity* workout, she stated, 'After having my twins, I never thought my stomach would be so taut.' The contrast between her pregnant body and her post-*Insanity* body is striking but her comment 'never thought' suggests that women believe the alterations to the body through pregnancy are permanent.

Infomercial clients also expressed their sacrifice in terms of the emotional

consequences of weight gain: sadness and self-consciousness. A woman on the first *Slim in 6* infomercial stated, 'With, you know, each pregnancy, I gained a little bit more, and then never lost it. Three kids in five years...It was a very sad time. Nothing made me happy.' Julie K., a mother of seven featured on the *Zumba* infomercial, said, 'After having seven kids, I was always very self-conscious about my midsection.'

Women nicknamed the weight they gained. In the infomercial for the *Firm Wave*, Karen Kaskal, identified as a mother of three, said, 'I had that mom pouch that everyone talks about....' *Turbo Jam* celebrity instructor Chalene referred to the 'dreaded pooch area.' Julie K., in the *Zumba* infomercial, referenced her 'post pregnancy pooch.' In the *10 Minute Trainer* infomercial, Jan R. portrayed herself as having a 'busy mom figure' characterized by a 'kind of pear shaped body.'

The apparent antithetical nature of sexuality and motherhood was embedded in clients' surprise that they could be a mother and yet attractive. On the second *Slim in 6* infomercial, celebrity host Julie Moran said, 'I'm in better shape now than before I had my kids.' In the infomercial for *ChaLEAN Extreme*, Julie M. stated, 'A woman came up to me and said, 'I cannot believe you have a baby that old. How do you look like that?''

Clients described their post-pregnancy weight gain as a loss of control. For example, Lisa from the *Air Climber* infomercial stated, 'I felt like my weight was going out of control, especially after having a baby.' A respondent from the *Spinning Program* stated, '...when I got pregnant the second time, I thought to myself: If I add on another 60 pounds, I will be out of control....'

In addition to the deleterious effects on the body caused by pregnancy, motherhood--the inevitable consequence of

pregnancy--is portrayed as robbing women of the time they need to perform routine disciplinary body maintenance. Women recognized that the time constraint that motherhood puts on women is a disincentive to have children (e.g., McQuillan, Greil, Shreffler, and Tichenor, 2008). Tanya, in the *10 Minute Trainer* stated, 'It's insane being a mom...for the average person, a busy mom, they don't have that kind of time. They need something...fast and...effective.'

Having created a perspective on pregnancy and motherhood that leaves women with the expectation that their weight will be forever beyond their ability to manage, infomercials then provide a cure: Buy the fitness product advertised as an easy and effective solution to your problems. In the first *Slim in 6* infomercial, Julie Moran said that in 'just six short weeks I got my body back' after being pregnant.

Because motherhood is presented as a demanding, but critical, job, giving less than one's all could be perceived as being a bad mother. To combat the idea that exercising is a self-indulgence that keeps mothers from properly attending to their children, infomercials frame exercise as a form of self-care that, ultimately, makes a woman a better mother. Jan R. in the *10 Minute Trainer* infomercial referred to exercise as 'a gift for yourself.' In talking about the *P.I.N.K. Method*, Jennifer Perkins said, 'I love my family...my girls...my husband, but I needed to do something to take care of myself.' She added, '*P.I.N.K.* helped me find me again.' While talking, she became teary and emotional. In the *Total Gym* infomercial, exercise and motherhood exist in a complementary balance through Barbara Lindquist, identified as a world champion tri-athlete. She stated that 'as a mother I want to be the best mother I can, and I've really realized

that to be a best mother I have to be a fit mother....I'm not training to be an elite athlete anymore. I'm training for life. I'm training to be the best mom that I can.' Similarly, in the *Leg Magic Plus* infomercial, Gloria, a grandmother 71 years of age, was presented as wanting to stay in shape in order to be able to play with her grandchildren.

The shame associated with failing to reach the socially constructed body ideal was intensified in some women who felt as if their weight interfered with their ability to perform the mother role. In the second *Hip Hop Abs* infomercial, Carol S. stated, 'I didn't play with my daughter...she wanted to get up and run around and play, and I just didn't feel good enough to get up and do it....' Ironically, although children are seen as the cause of weight gain, they can also become ultimately credited as the solution to weight gain. Carol S. attributed her weight loss to her daughter. She said, 'She asked me to make her a promise that I would lose weight and get healthy. I lost 80 pounds.'

Treating 'sexy' as an adjective for 'mom' suggests that under normal conditions, moms are not sexy. But infomercials position their exercise products as a means to create a linkage between the two, normally disjoint, concepts. A similar linguistic modification occurs with how women talk about jeans in exercise infomercials. Jeans are often portrayed as a casual but sexy form of attire. But when used to modify the meaning of jeans, 'mom' robs jeans of their connotative sex appeal. A participant in the *10 Minute Trainer* infomercial described her weight loss as, 'No more 'mom' jeans for me.' The importance of clothing in defining the antagonistic relationship between sexuality and motherhood was illustrated by a client on the first *Slim in 6* infomercial who viewed maternity clothing

as a stigma. She stated, 'I was so big, I was so heavy, the only clothes that I could find that looked good on me were in the maternity section. And I was not pregnant...I'm proud of what I look like now in a bikini.'

An Unworkable Standard

Whereas the post-pregnancy body is presented as anathema, the valued body in exercise infomercials is slim but muscular and shapely but firm (Markula, 1995). In the *Spinning Program* infomercial, the announcer defined a 'spinning body' as possessing an 'unmistakable look,' which can be characterized as 'lean and defined' with 'sleek, sexy legs,' a 'sculpted backside,' 'firm midsection,' and a 'toned upper body.' Similarly, the first *Slim in 6* infomercial promised that the system would reveal the 'long, lean, sexy body you've always dreamed of.' Carroll Krieff—creator of the *Malibu Pilates* chair—noted that her product works on 'areas that women care about the most. That would be the thighs, the hips, and the buns.' In the second *Hip Hop Abs* infomercial, a woman said about her weight loss transformation: 'I'm not a blob anymore. I'm finally somebody who actually has a waist.' The value placed on long, lean, and sexy makes people define alternative bodies as 'blobs,' a rather harsh self-characterization.

In infomercials, consumers are classified as 'before' and 'after' numbers: pre- and post-exercise weight and dress (or jeans) size. For example, in the *10 Minute Trainer* infomercial, a 49 year old woman stepped from a dressing room, yelled, 'Size 4' and struck a muscle builder pose. The total pounds or inches lost are often splashed on the screen next to before and after pictures.

Exercise and the Reinforcement of Gendered Presentations

Using exercise to take control of the

body after pregnancy could be viewed as a form of proactive empowerment. Some authors (e.g., Collins, 2002; Kagan and Morse, 1998) have suggested that exercise can be conceptualized as a form of empowerment-seeking that serves to dismantle, rather than reinforce, gender stereotypes. In practice, however, an empowerment perspective is nullified by the justifications women in exercise infomercials present for why they want to get fit. Most of the motives reify the notion that a woman's value stems from her physical appearance and the belief that women are consumed by being married and valued by a husband.

Pervasive stereotype reinforcement is illustrated by contrasting two customers of the *P90X* system. The significant age difference between Katie, 23, and Rod, 40, ratifies the notion that vigilance about appearance is a life-long obligation for women that begins at a very young age. Rod's profile featured pictures of him in military uniform. In explaining why he began the *P90X* regimen, he stated that he was 'probably in the worst shape of [his] life.' Having been a ranger and paratrooper, he lamented, 'Where did that discipline go?'

In contrast, Katie V. described her motivation for doing *P90X* as, 'I want to look good in my wedding dress. I don't want the dress to look better than me.' She also expressed assurance that doing *P90X* would not transform a woman into a body builder. 'I still looked feminine....So on my wedding day I felt empowered, and I felt like this is a day to celebrate...It's day 90, it's my wedding day, and I look great.' For Katie, empowerment took the form of conforming to two distinct forms of hegemonic oppression. The first was to adhere to one of the strongest cultural pressures operating on women: to become a wife. The second was to ratify a deeply

ingrained norm about physical appearance: to 'look great,' which took the form of slim muscularity.

Other women in infomercials explained their motives for exercise in terms of meeting their own marriage expectations. Tammy, a client on the second *Slim in 6* infomercial, said, 'A big highlight for me after doing the program was, um, I could wear my wedding ring. I hadn't worn it for years because it didn't fit. And my husband would ask, 'why don't you have your wedding ring on,' and I would make an excuse....So after I did the program and everything was big and all my clothes were falling off...I put it on and it slipped right on, and it was...a great day for me.' Rather than have the ring sized to fit, she chose to view her inability to wear her wedding ring as evidence of failed femininity. The message of the infomercial was that by exercise and weight reduction, she was able to reassert a proper femininity. For Kari, a client of the *Ab Circle Pro*, empowerment took the form of a favorable reflected appraisal from others. 'With my upcoming wedding it was very important for me to lose the weight and the inches because I wanted to have that 'wow' factor when I walked down the aisle.'

Men's opinions matter to the women who appear in infomercials. One important man in the lives of these women is a husband. Although women are sensitive to other women's level of physical attractiveness (Bleske-Rechek and Lighthall, 2010), within infomercials, acceptance through appearance was also manifested by being noticed by a spouse. Kristy Holman, of the *Firm Wave* infomercial, lost 41 pounds while her husband was in Iraq. 'When he got off the plane from Iraq, I blew him away. He picked me up and twirled me around and he just couldn't take his eyes off me. It was great.' Tanya, in the *10 Minute Trainer*

infomercial, said, 'My husband is so excited. Every day he sees me he's like, 'oh, my gosh, you look so beautiful,' and he's definitely loving what he sees.' Similarly in the second *Slim in 6* infomercial, one client said, 'My husband just can't seem to keep himself off of me...it's great having all the attention.' Lori, a client featured in the *ChaLEAN Extreme* infomercial said, 'My husband is just really loving the way I look.' Cindy's husband, also featured in the *ChaLEAN Extreme* infomercial, stated, 'It's been fantastic for our relationship.'

A theme that emerged in infomercials was a sense that weight gain represented a failure to meet a contractual obligation. By gaining weight, a woman has let down her husband. In the second *Hip Hop Abs* infomercial, Carol S. said, 'When I met my husband, I was a size 4...we get married and I instantly start gaining the weight. Within six months, I've already gained 60 pounds...I felt really bad about that...you want your husband to be attracted to you....' Although a husband represents an important other in a woman's life, infomercials suggest that women should derive validation of their own identities on the basis of random attention from men. For example, Kerry, 50, who was on the *10 Minute Trainer* infomercial said, 'I feel good about myself. And I get a lot of compliments and a lot of looks from gentlemen these days.' In the currency of the infomercial, the cat call becomes a badge of honor rather than a form of sexual harassment.

In contrast to an empowerment perspective that suggests exercise represents a way for women to challenge existing norms about and images of femininity (Kagan and Morse, 1988), infomercials present women as supportive of the *status quo*. Women in infomercials want to maintain their femininity and repeatedly stress that hormones prevent

women from developing muscles akin to men. Embedded in Katie V.'s assertion 'I still looked feminine' is the worry that the muscles exercise can produce will interfere with the performance of femininity (West and Zimmerman, 1987).

CONCLUSION

Most of the infomercials I examined marketed an exercise product or program that would improve fitness, defined in terms of cardiovascular endurance, muscular strength, or flexibility. The better programs included all three components, as well as providing sound advice on healthy eating. The infomercial stigma may create an impression that these exercise programs are 21st century versions of snake oils, but the better products emphasized hard work and daily commitment. Anyone who does a balanced workout of cardio, resistance, and flexibility training an hour a day for three months will show a significant change. It's exercise science, not magic.

But it is essential to recognize that exercise infomercials do more than market a fitness product; they frame fitness as a means to a variety of ends, many of which reflect psychological, rather than physiological, results, and, in the process, construct and advocate meanings for a woman's body. Pregnancy is portrayed as a necessary evil, a liability that damages a woman's body, but is mandatory to achieve the master status of mother. Motherhood is described as joyful self-sacrifice. These conflicted meanings portray women as ambivalent and confused about their own goals and identities as women.

Promised salvation from the deleterious effects of motherhood comes in the form of exercise. As valorized in infomercials, the benefits of exercise stem from its ability to give women a valued physical shape. This privileged physical shape, in turn, allows women to become consumers of new products--skinny jeans

and bikinis--that glorify their new slender body but ultimately act to further reinforce women's marginalized status. Fitness infomercials present exercise as a means to empowerment using appealing concepts like gaining control of one's life. In the process, fitness infomercials use feminist terminology to maintain the *status quo*. Rather than promote empowerment, exercise infomercials reinforced gender stereotypes of women as fat-obsessed, overworked mothers who fail to satisfy their husband's sexual interests by gaining weight.

It is important to recognize that the diametric opposition of the roles of mother and sexualized woman is a socially constructed dichotomy. It is only by the apotheosis of the young, slim, and muscular body that the pregnant--or heavy--body is viewed as antithetical to sexy. Given the essential role that sexual activity plays in the act of becoming pregnant, it is possible to imagine an alternative--better informed--cultural context where the pregnant body is viewed as sexually charged.

Infomercials illustrate a convoluted consumer cycle. Initially, weight serves as evidence that infomercial clients are guilty of excessive consumption in the form of eating and excessive slothfulness in the form of inadequate exercise. Fitness infomercials promise a new and better consumer cycle: Consumption of the infomercial's product will lead to weight loss, due, in part, to a restriction of consumption (that is, by eating less). The ultimate reward of this caloric restriction, however, is a new consumerism construed as a reward for losing weight: A new wardrobe, a new romantic relationship, or even a new life. Ironically, the consumer cycle is perpetuated in a way that resembles the unrestrained eating of a bulimic: binge then purge. Only now, instead of food, the object of excessive consumption is a

constellation of exercise products, such as workout videos, exercise equipment, comestibles such as protein powder, vitamins, and energy bars, and a new wardrobe. Whereas consumerism is often construed as a form of excess and gluttony, the message in infomercials is that by consuming the exercise program, one will become smaller, and slimmer, and therefore appear less gluttonous. The reward for restriction in one area is the liberation to consume in another area.

Although widely accepted that exercise has health benefits few would dispute, infomercials spend very little time describing those benefits. Only rarely was an effect like lowered blood pressure mentioned. Rather, infomercials promote exercise for its effect on physical appearance and its ability to influence mood and self-esteem. Exercise is presented as a cure for the ills of motherhood.

Infomercials repeat images of women holding up too-big-now jeans and feature testimonies of satisfied customers who state that through exercise and weight loss, they discovered a 'true self,' a 'real self,' or the 'self they were meant to be.' Although finding one's true self would seem to be the very definition of an empowering action, it is also possible to view this supposed quest as conforming to standards maintained by women in the discipline of other women's bodies (Li, Smith, Griskevicius, Cason, and Bryan, 2010) that could stem from their treatment as adolescents or teenagers (Lunde, Frisén, and Hwang, 2006). Further, as actualized by the fitness infomercial, this empowerment quest becomes a doctrine of conformity to patriarchal standards.

The emphasis on finding a true self through exercise positions the underlying philosophy of the exercise infomercial against mind-body dualism. Many of the clients featured in infomercials express a belief that by altering the body, an

individual can create a change in the mind, specifically in terms of greater self-confidence and enhanced mood. Exercise is elevated from a means of transforming the body to a process of self-discovery by reflexively recreating the self.

But the new self most often reifies a traditional image of women. A woman with children can use exercise to travel back in time to her pre-baby body. By slimming down, a married woman can rekindle the romance she had ten or twenty years earlier. An unmarried, unattached woman can finally catch the attention of a suitor and transition from singleton, to girlfriend, to wife. The paradoxical conclusion suggested by my analysis is that enlightenment comes by embracing the superficial. Change what you look like in order to conform to a mass media ideal and you will improve who you are. The search for meaning becomes reduced to a quest for visible abs.

Whereas it is easy for feminists to criticize infomercials and the products they hype for promoting a 'cult of thinness' (Hess-Biber, 2007), it may be more important to focus on their more covert messages. In the present research, I identified pronatalism as a value that would seem to uniquely benefit women. But as my analysis has demonstrated, within exercise infomercials, motherhood is used to promote and exploit anxieties women may have about their bodies. Pronatalism is reduced to a value used to sell exercise products by ratifying patriarchal views of women.

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