

Fitness: a Negotiation tool between Feminine Identities and Social Dictates?

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Abstract

Les pratiques corporelles participent des assignations et prescriptions aux normes d'appartenance à un sexe. De plus aujourd'hui, le corps est un objet de consommation qui façonne notre quotidien. La presse féminine en jouant sur les stéréotypes du masculin/féminin influence les mécanismes de construction de soi. Le marché du bien-être en plein essor est un moyen de modéliser les corporéités d'atteindre ces stéréotypes. Ainsi nous tentons de comprendre comment la pratique du fitness gère, entretient et influence quelque chose qui appartient au féminin. Par une démarche ethnographique, combinant observations, récits de vie et entretiens semi-directifs auprès de pratiquantes de fitness, l'objectif est de cerner les paradoxes entre les a priori et les expériences vécues des ces pratiquantes. Physical activities involve standard assignments and prescriptions according to the norms for belonging to a certain gender. More importantly, today the body is a consumer good which shapes our daily lives. Women's magazines, by playing on masculine/feminine stereotypes, influence the mechanisms for the construction of the self. The current boom in the wellness market provides a way to model the body to achieve these stereotypes. Our aim therefore is to understand how practicing fitness activities manages, maintains and influences something that is part of femininity. Using an ethnographic approach, and combining observations, real life stories and semi-structured interviews with fitness practitioners, our aim is to identify the paradoxes between the a priori and their personal experiences.

Fitness and the Female Body

Mauss (1934 : 5) shows that the gestures that seem the most natural are in reality the result of a true apprenticeship which is based especially on imitation and which comes from a selection of the most appropriate gestures for a given objective (walking for example). It is this dual process which permits him to state that body techniques correspond to traditional and efficient actions. This is why what he calls «body techniques» are *«the ways in which, from society to society, men traditionally know how to use their bodies»*. Our bodies are thus fashioned in terms of our society, environment and occupation; they are the mediators between the individual and the environment.

But the body is also something else. It is not just the product of domestication; it cannot be limited to technical-sports or even professional utilitarianism. It is an exhibition in the way it is shown and/or developed and is thus, the object of social stakes and domination.

Thus Kaufmann (1995), in « Corps de femmes, regard d'hommes » [Women's bodies, men's glances], shows for example that baring one's breasts is a practice which is subject to rules which explain a lot about the functioning of the body in society and the body itself. To be able to do this without causing a scandal needs art and skill.

Certain conditions must be fulfilled which include the place, which must be judged appropriate, and which would probably be the beach. He also shows that baring one's breasts is part of a subtle game within the couple. The conversations recorded during this survey show the importance of the representations and interpretations which are made of the very practice of baring one's breasts. Kaufmann goes on to reveal the contradictions in what the interviewees say. On the one hand they demand universal tolerance (« everyone is free », « there are no rules », etc.); on the other, they emit esthetic judgments which stigmatize the non standard bare breasts (too old, too fat, too hanging, too floppy, etc.). We would also find these elements in the conversations and the activities of the members of the fitness clubs when they spoke in general about their bodies and, in particular, about their breasts and buttocks. According to Kaufmann, the interpretation of baring one's breasts affects, in turn, three visions of the body. The first comes from a perception based on the notion of a perfectly normalized body, which due to rituals become so common and everyday that nobody would even notice. Going topless on the beach is an example. The second is based on an « exemption », a phenomenon, judged to be rare, which implies an esthetic body (totally standardized) which allows itself to be looked at within certain limits. The third, which continues to fascinate, is that of the sexual body, qualified as an object, which implies a more perturbed glance, that is almost too shameful to admit and that tends to be rejected as abnormal.

The notions of rites and routines play a major role in this theory of the three bodies. Thus the body needs to be understood and interpreted in direct relation to a system of norms and values prescribed by our societies. This analysis has served as the starting point for our study of fitness which has led us to ask ourselves about the hidden meaning of this activity for these women as expressed by their bodies. What can fitness offer them? Does it play a role in their way of being (for themselves) and of presenting themselves (to others)? And, in this case, what does that teach us about society, relations between men and women and relations between weight/social norms and the body (in this case of the women interviewed and observed)? Adapting for our own interests the affirmation of Elias and Dunning, we thought perhaps a little ideally, that knowledge of fitness was the key to knowledge, if not of a part of society, at least of the social relations between the sexes. Beyond the relations between the sexes it is identity which is at stake. And this is complex, multidimensional, and imprecise and has to be analyzed according to different dimensions (social, individual, collective, cultural). Identity is not given but constructed and sometimes even prescribed by a system of norms which are imposed on us. The practice of sports and physical activities is no exception. Elias (1939) talks about the shift from *sociogenesis* to *psychogenesis* to express the idea that norms are initially socially imposed before being psychologically incorporated, thus reinforcing sociogenesis. The individual becomes socialized and constructs his or her identity starting at birth and throughout life. This construction is part of an immutable process which is complex, evolutionary, paradoxical and changing. Interactions with others, beyond social demands, play a central role. For Dubar (1991: 113) « *Identity is nothing more than the results, both stable and provisional, individual and collective, subjective and objective, biographical and structural, of the different processes of socialization which jointly construct individuals and define their institutions* ».

A process of socialization corresponds to the way in which individuals interiorize the norms of their communities (Elias, op. cit.). For Bourdieu (1979), this socialization comes about through the *habitus* of class. It is therefore through the acquisition of norms and values that the identity of a social group endows itself with characteristics traits. Identity is subjective, abstract, multiple and changing. Nowadays it is difficult to distinguish individual identity from social identity. Even though this distinction survives in psychological approaches, sociology agrees on the dialectic between these two notions (Kaufmann, 2004). The system of norms and values in society constitutes identity, and it is not possible to belong to, enter or be integrated into a group, without interiorizing this system.

For Kaufmann this notion of identity is however open to criticism. The identity is a performative statement in which the affirmation of the word is enough to make it exist. However, for him it is a simplified injunction. It is not the definition as such which is difficult but the often abusive use which is made of it. To define identity, we will taken into account the notion of « self », which constitutes the individual, that is what makes him or her take their place and identify themselves in the society in which they are developing. This notion can bring us back to individual identity, to the image the individual has of him or herself, the image that he or she sends out to the other or that the other sends back. Goffman (1974: 9) talks about « *face* » to express the idea that the individual has to present an image of him or herself to others in a given social situation and be capable of continually adapting it.

In certain circumstances, he or she must also « *save face* », especially when in *face to face situations* where they are at a disadvantage. But it can only be done thanks to acquired social attributes. Individuals are therefore limited in their interactions, at least initially, until the latter help them to develop in turn other complementary social attributes. This concept of « *face* » takes up that of « *personality* ».

This article aims to show, analyze and understand what makes these practitioners take up this physical activity, fitness, in their leisure time. It comes from a research project which had as its main purpose to understand «how this practice (in its different forms) is involved in the process of constructing idealized femininities with their underlying masculine domination».

A « Multi-Scale » Qualitative Methodology

The analysis made use of a « multi-scale » methodology (Bromberger, 1995 : 10) applying principally two qualitative methods, which was carried out from the end of 2009 to 2013 in two commercial enterprises¹ specializing in fitness in Rennes and included observations of the participants in these two fitness gyms over two years. The aim, using total immersion, was to understand the particularities of the activity, to gain « familiarity as a member » (Garfinkel, 1967), but also to reveal the things left « unsaid » and the things left « undone ».

On site observations in these fitness gyms were made at different times of day, from the morning until the evening. The aim was to meet with women of all ages, professionally active or retired, coming alone or in a group. The observations were made in secret (Peneff, 2009) until the « poster campaign » inviting the women to tell us about their activities.

Semi-structured interviews were carried out with the fitness adepts (of different ages and from different social environments) with the aim of collecting data on their individual experience while practicing the activity, but also their point of view on the way in which they understand their practice of fitness training as well as their respective and mutual representations of this physical leisure activity. Given the lack of free time of the practitioners (family and professional obligations, etc.) and the irregular attendance of some of them, we decided not to make a sample of the interviewees; so they were volunteers who offered to meet with us and answer our questions after having seen the poster campaign.

The interviews were structured around three main topics: 1. Their perception of the activity; 2. The reasons for choosing this activity; 3. The way they related to their bodies. We decided not to make a fixed section about the other topics, but to leave the interviewees room for maneuver so that they could talk free from « inhibitions » (Morin, 1984: 220).

The face to face interviews took place in the locations chosen by the practitioners; mostly in their own homes or in public places. This made it possible to discover the main elements used by the participants to explain their practice (Demazière, 2007).

Following the system proposed by Blanchet and Gotman (1992), the series of interviews was considered finished when no new information was contributed (« saturation point »).

These conversations were processed using a « horizontal » (Ghiglione, Matalon, 1978; Blanchet, Gotman, 1992) or « transversal » (Bardin, 1995) analysis of the thematic contents in order to find a thematic system among the interviews and thus deconstruct the individual coherence of the conversations.

Attracting and being Attractive

Looking after the body involves the practice of self-modeling, which is governed by a search for estheticism, directly related, on the one hand to the influence of the media, and on the other, to the man/woman game of attraction which exists in all societies. The women who practice fitness activities are interested in their body image. Are they the only ones? Probably not, but it is a common characteristic of all the women who practice fitness activities. This activity seems to them to be a way to construct an ideal body. If the female body is subjected to certain esthetic norms, it is also constrained in other specific situations, outside of the professional framework.

¹Offering almost identical commercial services, although they were opened in different years and located in different places, the oldest one in the centre of the city, the modern one in the suburbs.

Although this activity may appear harmless, it is not exempt from judgments and a priori which lead the women to enter into a negotiation process. We can state that the constrained body, proposed by Kaufmann (1995), is also present in the world of fitness.

For Vigarello (2003) to attract someone, is in some way to put them in a position of dependence. But how one presents oneself and one's body, the way it is done and the relation with the other can « mean that the individual is more or less valued, more or less integrated, but also determines success or failure».

« But of course it's important. I think that it is part of being young, it's the game of attraction and then it's always pleasant to talk with someone when you know that you fulfill expectations, a criterion for example, a criterion to be slim or friendly, smiling, all of that. To attract yes, it's important that the other person remembers you favorably. » (E1, 62 years) The question is to know if the target of the act of attracting is the other person or whether what is most at stake is oneself?

With regard to attraction, the body has a privileged and important place. Pillar and pivot of the individual, the body incorporates emotions and reveals its actions according to the norms prescribed by the society. Rivière (1995: 147) explains that rituals of the body are destined to inhibit « behaviors which would not be in line with the collective code of exchange founded on the presentation of a socialized and gendered body». The individual body-subject integrates rituals and norms in order to perfect nature, to take away the ephemeral and illusory to become part of the cultural order. According to Sansot (2004 :21) : « charm, as I understand it, seems to me preferable to attracting to which it is in some way opposed. The latter implies a calculated, intelligent undertaking at the service of a will which has fixed its aim and the apparent moments of abandonment of which are part of a strategy. Charm appears to assume the interference of a strange mysterious force coming from we know not where and with what intentions ».

Different customs like good manners (Picard, 1996), eating, adornment or artistic activities (Roland, 1992) are part of daily rituals. They produce repeated and socially significant behaviors. Following on from Goffman (1959), Baudry (1992) talks of ritual attitudes in social interactions that need behavioral codes depending on the status and social relationship of individuals. These ritual attitudes are based on practices and representations which define « the image of oneself and of the other and which carry the sense of a relationship» (Baudry, 1992: 149). The notion of attracting is scarcely defined in the human sciences. The historians explain it using the image type of the seductress or the seducer like Don Juan (Sansot, 2004).

According to Canto-Sperber (2001), attraction is a construction based on an invention on the part of the individual of the image he or she wants to assume in order to give rise to a bond with the other. Attraction is a mode of communication that implies the need for a ritual, which is constructed at times in words, in language and in appearance, that is, the body. In the end it is a question of norms which have to be shared by the individuals. The ritual of attraction is a staging of the individual. He or she constructs an identity to please. The clothes, the make-up, the chosen posture reveal the staging of a strategy to please.

« So my body is slimmer, but I don't like my appearance. I've also spoken to Greg about it, and he said as long as you don't like your appearance, carry on, but you have to be careful not to become anorexic or something like that. In fact, I tell myself that at 75[kg], I will have more than one kilo to lose and I will be very surprised if I like my appearance. [...] People are already saying, yes, you are prettier and all that. After all, I'm not looking to attract someone, because I have someone. But it's true that you like the way you look, I'm looked at more. And sometimes I tell myself, hey; maybe you are giving a wrong impression with your clothes! But it's true, I ask myself sometimes, you know, someone looks at you and smiles and I think shit... Suddenly I'm aware of my body, because one tends to generalize, it's stupid, but when you see a girl with a skirt, you say : ah well, she must be ...and suddenly when you are round you can wear things and people aren't going to look at you, necessarily. [...] So, he is super jealous! When I was big, he used to tell me you would look good if you weighed 75 kg. If you got to 75 kg, you would be fine, you know, even for your health ... Now that I have got slimmer, it's why are you doing so much sport? Why are you slimming? Now you are fine. In fact for him I am now slim ... So, I explain that if I want to keep my weight down, or lose a bit more, I have to continue to practice a sport!» (E4, 26 years).

Fitness is part of this strategy. Women go to fitness activities to construct a body, fashion it, transform it to attract, to please others but also themselves.

According to Baudrillard (1998), the construction of attracting goes through a vast system of representations which will be incorporated. Attracting is founded on a body image fashioned by cultural traits, norms of beauty and esthetic norms which can imply the use of particular physical techniques like fitness training.

Attraction is not a state. It is part of a process, which implies a developmental character. It is subjected to esthetic canons and different socio-esthetic norms which are transformed over time depending on numerous factors (Vigarelo, 2004). Attraction is constructed on rites of appearance which are defined as « a set of codified attitudes associated with complementary or substitutive emblems of the personal or collective representation» (Bromberger, 1990: 6).

Attraction and sexuality are linked because attraction is constructed on the enhancement of parts of the body. Femininity like masculinity is staged through adornment and dress customs which emphasize sexual attributes. Individuals construct the images of themselves from canons and images mostly conveyed by the media. Even if the women interviewed state that they are not affected by the established canons we have seen that their esthetic criteria correspond to those that are conveyed. Thus E1 states:

« I think that I have my own norms, because I am often... No, my own norms, it's true that I don't like ... [...] Because in fact, it's true, I am always giving things up. It's unusual for me to eat as much as I want, because I want to keep, I want to appear slim, and all of that, to reflect the image that society expects of me. [...] Society has evolved a lot now, like when you used to see Spanish women who were much fatter, much rounder, but that can change with society. Perhaps in 20 years time the fashion will be to be fat and then I will be able to eat everything I want, except that I'll be 80 and I expect I'll already be dead. » (E1, 62 years).

Baudrillard (1970) and Lipovetsky (1987) analyze attraction as a set of techniques to market models by means of certain phenomena, like women's magazines. The media define the esthetic norms of femininity (and masculinity), which act as « a transcendent pressure with which different values of a socio-cultural, political, economic and even ethical order are associated» (Faivre, 1989: 107). Under the influence of the media, clothes and caring for the body transform women's activities to correspond to an ideal of beauty which is based on health and youth. For Giddens (2004 : 107), the emancipation of women has reinforced this aspect. « What we are accustomed to calling attraction has in fact largely lost its meaning in a society like ours (modern), where women are now much more sexually accessible to men than ever before».

An Identity « Judged by Others »: being for Others

The way others see us is indispensable for evaluating ourselves. In taking care of the body, we can distinguish both « being for ourselves » and « being for others ».

Already developed, identity for oneself depends on the individual him or herself. Women understand their bodies as a body for themselves, which cannot however, be totally independent from the way it is seen by others. Each individual develops from the starting point of the judgments that others make of him or her within the context in which they interact. For Mead « the self is something which has a development; it is not initially there, at birth, but arises in the process of social experience and activity» (Mead, 1963: 135). The group the individual belongs to will serve as a reference in the construction of the self. Cooley (1902) talks about the « looking glass self » in the sense that the feeling of self value is a social construction produced by interactions with society and more particularly with others. It is the way others look at us which sends us signals, symbols which permit the individual to know the opinion others have of him or her. For Cooley the others are the self's looking glass. In the same way that we perceive our face, our features, our figure, our clothes and/or our appearance in the looking glass, and we are satisfied or not with what we see, we project in the imagination, in the mind of others, some ideas about our « look » or our appearance, of our way of being and acting, our character traits etc., and we are more or less affected. The real question is what do others think about me? How should I present myself to be judged positively and to favor my integration or, at least, avoid stigmatization? For to deviate from the norms produces stigmatization (Goffman, 1963) and being pointed out (Becker, 1963) for deviating as this subversion appears as non-conforming to the dominant social norms. The awareness that each individual has of him or herself is the reflection of the ideas and opinions they imagine others have of them.

And sometimes I tell myself, hey; maybe you are giving a wrong impression with your clothes! But it's true, I ask myself sometimes, you know, someone looks at you and smiles and I think shit... Suddenly I'm aware of my body, because one tends to generalize, it's stupid, but when you see a girl with a skirt, you say : ah well, she must be ...and suddenly when you are round you can wear nice things and people aren't going to look at you, necessarily.» (E7, 33 years)

The imagined judgment of others is important in the construction of the self; the image that each person makes of him or herself is the results of this « imaginary » individual which develops from the standpoint of the way others look at him or her in the process of social interaction:

« Now I see that I do my nails and I finally am beginning to enjoy it. I'm not going to say that I find myself beautiful, but I find myself prettier. My face, before I had a double chin with fat cheeks and I'm rediscovering myself little by little, even if I don't realize it and also it's the other people, because without paying attention, it is nice when someone sees me and it's a long time since they have seen me. You've changed, haven't you? You look fantastic, keep it up. And then, even the people here, when they saw me arrive they saw me at the very beginning. But, they don't pay a lot of attention of course, because they see me every day or almost every day. But Greg, he says: yes, it's amazing the face that you had when you arrived and the face you have now, it's another person. » (E4, 26 years)

« I think that it's the fact of having to be in front of the whole group, well, there weren't many of us in the summer of 2012. By going, by going in front of a group I told myself there are a lot of people looking at me at the same time. I don't know, perhaps I wondered what they could think about me. So that influenced me to try to change things. » (E6, 26 years)

The construction of self under the judgment of others is in the end a subjective process, as it is based on the interpretation of what we imagines the others think about us. The first phase of the process consists in imagining our appearance, our image in the eyes of other individuals. The second phase consists in imagining the judgment or the appreciation which others have of our appearance or image. The third phase consists in adopting an attitude towards ourselves, which can vary from respect to shame, linked precisely with the judgment that the other individuals send back to us. The symbolic interactionists consider concepts of self as being determined by their symbolic interactions with others. In this system, a person acquires characteristics during the process of interaction with his or her social environment especially on the basis of the roles which he or she plays. But they also begin to feel a sense of self. Thus women who go to fitness activities construct their identity as a woman in relation to the image than the other reflects back. They gradually perceive that the others react to their presence and to their own acts and personal qualities according to their expectations. The casual glances exchanged during the class in the mirrors when the gym is equipped with mirrors or in the changing rooms are a source of questioning as to the identity which the women convey:

« So, was the way others looked at you important? Yes, totally, and that necessarily is of interest!!!! [...] On the other hand, I have a granddaughter of 25 who is anorexic. And I wonder if that doesn't come from this, one day when we were at the swimming pool, she was really small, and she said: « Oh, granny you have big breasts. » (E5, 73 years)

To adopt the point of view of other people and consider oneself as an object, produce beliefs and attitudes about oneself, in short « a concept of self».

The Body « under the Microscope»: A Permanent Anxiety?

The way we present ourselves seems to equate socially to a moral presentation of ourselves. It is an implicit classification system which bases a sort of moral norm on appearances. The staging of appearances, of bodies, subjects the individual to the evaluating glance of the other who places him or her in a defined social category according to their physique, their body, their appearance. Shape, youth, figure are the aspects of appearance that one makes an effort to maintain, to preserve (going to gyms, fitness centers, body building, dietitians) and make the body an object of permanent concern. The fear of not conforming, the fear of not satisfying the judgment of others and/or having to bear the consequences can be tremendous. Individuals, and more particularly women, are still meant to satisfy a society based on attraction, which integrates the way others see us. The body is the assertion of the individual who is aware that it is the basis on which the judgments of others are founded. This judgment also implies the one we make of ourselves and which perhaps is more severe.

If they are important to us, the way others see and judge us can be the cause of anguish and fear. Even subjectively and open to interpretation, the fear of the judgment of others occupies a primordial place in our relationship with our body. Positive judgments are obviously less problematic. It is pleasant to be told that one is beautiful, that one doesn't look one's age or that one is in good shape but, in contrast, negative judgments are more difficult to accept or to hear (and to say). They can be hurtful and cause evident discomfort. « Too fat » or even « too thin » are criticisms which were regularly mentioned during the interviews:

« No, at the beginning I was perhaps a little embarrassed because of the fact that I didn't know what to expect. Because I told myself perhaps there will be girls making fun of me, saying what is that fat woman doing here, things like that. » (E4, 26 years)

The ridicule mentioned here shows how much the judgment of others is a source of anxiety. E4 would not have continued to attend the activities if the environment in the gym and, more especially, the comments or glances of the others had stigmatized her and labeled her as fat. The negative judgment of others constitutes a brake to personal development. E4 said she is able to wear more things now that she feels more able to be looked at. The fact of finding clothes to fit her and liking her body more distances her from the judgment of others and currently helps her to become more independent:

« Well now I can dare to wear things that I didn't dare to before. I mean boots with a skirt, before I wouldn't even have been able to get the boots on. Now, trousers without a tunic on top, normal leather jackets, before, before that would have been an overcoat down to the knees to hide me. Now I'm more daring. » (E4, 26 years)

« For me it's being able to, for me it's being able to no longer hide myself. Well, because before I wanted to be more... Not be noticed in fact ... and yes, more discrete and now, I don't want everybody to look at me either, but I want people to see me. And yes, but in the gym I don't know... » (E6, 26 years)

E6, like E4, uses clothes as a way of hiding. The fact of wanting not to be noticed is a way of avoiding the judgment of others or at least, of thinking that one avoids being looked at by others.

We can see that the women we interviewed are permanently seeking health, wellness and esthetics. They perceive their bodies according to their appearance, but at the same time also, physiologically.

Conclusion: To Become a Woman is a Social Performance under Male Domination

Observing fitness clubs has permitted an understanding of the paradoxes which women are confronting nowadays to be or become a woman. Centers devoted to the cult of the body, they reveal important information. If these places are attractive to the practitioners who approach them as a leisure option, they are also well organized permissive places which reveal the place of the body in society, and more precisely, the representations that women have of their bodies. The freedom and the autonomy of the practitioners mean they are individually taking charge of their body.

Attending fitness activities is experienced here as a pro-active approach, in fact, the women interviewed say that they continued to attend, at least at the beginning, for themselves. It is a personal approach. The search for wellness and personal development is an important motivation. It is a question not only of physical wellness but also psychological well-being. To feel good in one's head and in one's body, that is the main issue for these women. The adepts mention without hesitation the importance of the psychological well-being that the activity brings them. It is an important moment of the day for them. They are alone with themselves and separated from outside constraints like family, children, work; alone with themselves, even though they are with and in the midst of others. Fitness is, at this level, an ambiguous activity. It is individually practiced in the midst of a group which often represents no more than an ad hoc friendship. Except for those who come in a group, among friends, the majority come on their own but say that they are happy to be there at certain times with others who they know and get along with, here and now, and who they exchange some comments and impressions with without becoming friends or seeing each other outside of the center. « Free [but] together » (De Singly, 2000) at the heart of an individual activity in a group which, most of the time, is non-individualized. Fitness activities represent an escape from their everyday lives. They are happy to come and meet the staff and the other practitioners again, even if the conviviality remains superficial, because few of them maintain a relationship with the others outside the center. But physical wellness is also important. Giving oneself time to take care of one's body is part of an individual approach. The sensations which fitness activities provide are evidently physiological but they should be understood and interpreted as a sculpturing of the body.

These women are obviously constructing and fashioning themselves to « feel good », but above all, to exist, for themselves, in the eyes of others. It is in this spirit that the practice of fitness activities has become a physical activity, underlying a body which is influenced and partially constrained.

If the observations made reveal practitioners motivated by the activity, the conversations show the concerns and evident anxieties directly linked to the presentation of the self. What type of bodies do they want? Why? And who for? When the physical cannot be dissociated from identity, it must be said that these women, practicing fitness activities, that we were able to observe and interview, are constantly in search of a particular feminine identity in the relationship they have with their bodies. It should be noted, and this is what is significant, that these women, who were chosen from the two centers, are from different social backgrounds, are of different ages, and come to the classes or activities in different ways. They have however, essentially the same views although everything about them is different except their practicing fitness activities. We should not generalize however, and extend this concept necessarily « to women ». In fact, if our analyses are « transferable » in the sense understood by Marshall and Rossman (1989), they are nonetheless not generalizable. They are only the reflection of the conversations recorded with the adepts at two fitness centers in Rennes over the course of the last three years. Others will have to assert, in different contexts and places, their « falsifiability » (1972). The cult of slimness is omnipresent in their conversations. Even if this seems too gross a summing up of their motivations, the search for slimness is certainly omnipresent, although they do not mention it explicitly. But the simple fact of observing regular varied practices of skipping a meal, or taking a « meal » which consists of an apple, or a non-fat yogurt and of water or sometimes an energy drink, bears witness to this fact. Thus « what is said » « what can be said » and « what is observed to be done » oppose each other. It is often the case that in referring to those women who do not take enough care of themselves, or those who, in contrast, « take too much care », they are often referring to themselves as if they were talking about others. This opposition among “what is said”, “what can be said” and “what is done” goes straight back to the question of the Ego, of the “self” constructed with reference to the other. As Ricoeur (1990: 380) suggests « The Other is not only the counterpart of the Same but belongs to the intimate constitution of its sense ».

They also often deny being influenced by the prescribed canons of beauty, while all the time they respect them in a Draconian fashion: diet, at times excessive physical activity, sweat belt, etc. All means are good for being and/or staying slim. To sculpt one's body is not however limited to slimming or losing weight through exercise and sacrifice. But slimming is an integral part both of the cult of the body in contemporary societies in which the fat are vilified, and of the will to have a more beautiful body, with better proportions, less fat and a slimmer figure (Vigarelo, 2010, 2012). To present well, to present oneself well, to be desirable, to be attractive it is necessary to have a slim body or at least, not to have a fat body. Ehrenberg (1991) and Kaufmann (2013) clearly explain that one cannot conceive one's body without alluding to social performance. The body typifies individuals. The question of appearance is, from this point of view, essential. According to the practitioners we encountered, fitness activities are certainly a sports activity, but even more a tool to forge a successful body, or at least one that creates this illusion. To be socially successful, that is to be part of the socially prescribed norms and values which facilitate integration, or standardize the individual and make him or her invisible and/or anonymous and physically efficient as a tool against aging.

The standardization of bodies is just a utopia. In fact, if women are trying to conquer femininity, the analysis of their conversations makes it necessary to conceive not one type of femininity but several. These types of femininity are linked to the different representations which they have of their bodies. An attractive body is subject to individual norms but ones which in the end are not different from those dictated by society. To be more explicit, the search for slimness is the most recurrent. Nowadays one must be slim to be a feminine woman and to play on one's femininity. Fat is deviant, a synonym of bad health, of an unhealthy life style, of unhealthy eating habits. To be slim is to respond to the criteria of femininity which are expected and understood; and not to conform is to risk being labeled as having a non-standard body – deviant femininity.

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