

“Getting into Shape”: An Illustrative Case Study of Mothers’ Key Motivation for Participation in an Exercise Program, Sydney, Australia

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Abstract

Analysis of a community-based, illustrative case study investigating women’s main reason for exercise class participation accessed through qualitative data, revealed how intended goals of body shape improvement and loss of weight motivated them into taking part. Ninety-percent of participants joined the program because they were attempting to improve their body shape and lose weight. According to the respondents, when exercise classes are perceived as helping to improve body shape, respondents receive positive comments from others, feel body tone, notice weight loss, perceive a better personal appearance and body image satisfaction. When exercise classes are considered as not helping with body shape improvement, women notice that body tone remains flabby, no weight loss occurs, or the classes are rated as not focusing enough on problem body part areas. A theoretical model is recommended illustrating three possibilities across a continuum of individual body image. Those people in psychological harmony with their physical bodies are considered the healthiest.

Keywords: Exercise Class, Motivation, Women, Mothers, Body image

1. Introduction

Body image refers to an individual’s perception of her/his own body. It may include visualized images of one’s body as a whole or particular part, as well as the emotions, reactions and attitudes we hold. An individual’s perception of her body shape or appearance can be positive or negative, realistic or unrealistic, and may be contributed to by personal experiences or how we allow other people’s attitudes, reactions or comments about our bodies affect us (Grogan, 2016; McKay, Moore, & Kubik, 2018).

Women have been reported in the research literature as expressing greater negative concerns with their body image more frequently than men. Further, body image has been revealed as having a greater effect on women’s self-esteem than men’s (Cooke, 1994). A woman’s level of dissatisfaction with her own body shape has been generally reported in the literature as increasing according to her proportionate increase in size above the standard norm or average shape for women (Davis, 1985). The preferred ideal body shape is unrealistically thin for most women to achieve, and has become more fit and toned in appearance, so ‘thin muscular’, in the last 15 years (Bozsik, & Whisenhunt, 2018).

Women often perceive body shape as being more of an advantage to them in real-life situations compared with males (Sandoz, 2013). For instance, if they attained a thin body shape, the women in Paxton et al.’s study (1991) revealed:

- 88% stated that they would be happier;
- 90% said they would be more successful;

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- 81% said it would indicate how good looking they were;
- 80% stated that it would indicate how many friends they would have and dates they would attain;
- 89% believed that it would suggest how intelligent they were; and
- 93% thought that it would be a positive indication of how easily they would achieve what they want.

Exercise is viewed as a socially acceptable way to achieve a thin body shape ideal compared with more radical methods such as starving and fasting, use of diet and laxative pills, induced vomiting, or submitting to cosmetic surgery. However, many women who declare 'inner health' as their reason for exercising may be attempting to provide a legitimate excuse for their real motivation being to improve outer appearance and attain a fitter and more attractive body (Abramson, 2016; Cooke, 1994; Paxton et al., 1991).

Unfortunately, in their attempt to re-shape or sculpt their bodies, some women may develop an excessive preoccupation with exercise, diet and body image, or be motivated by less healthy or unattainable goals. Women are exposed to great pressures from advertising and from within the fitness industry itself, to conform to stereotypes about how they should look and behave. Women can feel anxious about their bodies, and exercise may be seen as merely a vehicle to losing weight, rather than a means of coping with stress, or as something to be enjoyed (Diaz, 2017).

Participation in exercise classes in a non-threatening, non-commercial setting has been demonstrated as effectively reducing the stresses and strains of the motherhood role (Currie, 2018a). Moreover, attendance at these exercise classes is considered to be valuable 'time-out' for the mothers, and therefore represents a form of resistance to the socially acceptable roles of wife and mother (Currie, 2018b). However, while many mothers may have a different story to tell when revealing their underlying motivations, there is a paucity of research in this area.

In this paper I explain how, similar to the intended effects of wearing a stomach girdle, many women participate in exercise chiefly in an attempt to normalize their bodies and bring their own body shape under control. Through analysis of a community-based, illustrative case study (Gerring, 2006) investigating women's key motivations for exercise class participation, my research reveals how self-disciplining technologies enabled attendance and influenced intended goals of body toning and loss of weight.

2. Method

2.1 Participants

Twenty-one mothers (mean age = 37.3 years) participated in twice-weekly, one-hour exercise classes for the duration of a 12-week program. The classes were low-impact in style, involving no running or jumping, and were conducted in a community hall setting with no mirrors. Following the purposeful sample techniques outlined by Patton (1980), all respondents lived in the same northern metropolitan region of Sydney, NSW, Australia. The mothers had an average of 2.2 children each, with the mean age of children 10.4 years old.

2.2 Procedures

Following institutional ethical clearance, using the techniques outlined by Brace (2018), I invited respondents to complete written questionnaires gain access to their views, opinions and perspectives regarding motivations for class attendance. The responses to the open-ended questions were transcribed verbatim. The coding procedures outlined by Strauss and Corbin (1990) were used to analyze the qualitative data. Open coding was used to break down the data and label discrete happenings and phenomena with conceptual headings. The concepts were examined, constantly compared and contrasted. Similar events and incidents (concepts) were then grouped to form major themes or categories. Once categories were established, axial coding was used to put data together in an attempt to study conditions, characteristics and consequences of particular categories. By using the mothers' own words and explanations, the findings were based on the mothers' own routinely constructed interpretations of their own social reality and lived experience.

3. Findings

3.1 Personal Motivation for Joining the Classes

An illustrative case study method was used to help describe the phenomenon of what motivated the women to participate in the classes. During the interviews, the respondents expressed to me how they had been relatively inactive after having babies or whilst pregnant and consequently experienced unwanted weight gain.

When asked for their main reason in joining the classes, the main theme to emerge was related to them being motivated by concerns with personal body image and wanting to tone up and lose weight. The respondents consistently revealed in the interviews how they especially wanted to use the classes as a means to “getting into shape”. Nineteen out of 21 class members revealed this was their prime motivator to taking part, with the remaining 2 chiefly desiring stress relief from caring for children. Typical statements illustrating the theme of wishing to improve body shape included:

Yes, I'm always trying to look better. Like I think I used to. Plus, to give me self-confidence.

Yes, I mainly come to the classes to try to change my body shape and lose weight.

Yes, I did come to the class in an effort to improve my figure and I started a diet on the same day I started the classes and I feel I have toned as well as lost 7 kilos.

The lower part of my body is overweight. If I were a stone lighter I know I would look better in clothes. Being overweight tends to make you a bit self-conscious when in bathing costumes or shorts.

I think if I am within my weight for my height, say, 50-55 kilograms, and not too flabby, if I toned up, I'd be happy. If I can handle a long brisk walk or an exercise class without too much strain then I would be more or less happy with my shape. I am trying to work towards this and with regular exercise and it seems to be working.

3.2 Did the Exercise Classes Help to Reach This Goal?

In terms of personal evaluations of whether or not respondents fulfilled their goal of “getting into shape”, all of the 19 women joining due to body image concerns revealed to me that they felt the exercise classes had helped to improve their personal body image in some way. Typical responses included:

Yes, especially the stomach. I feel the muscles are getting back to their old self after the birth of my baby.

Yes, I feel the classes are working, combined with a diet I have lost 5 kilograms and find that I have toned up a bit. I am feeling more fit.

However, 7 of these respondents wished to clarify that while they believed they were improving, to some extent, overall body shape, they felt they still had “a lot more work” to do:

This class has been good for all aspects. We may need a few more thigh exercises.... I would like to have a flat stomach, be my correct weight, lose about 1 stone, and be able to perform energetic activities without effort.

I think if I am within my weight for my height, about 50-55 kilograms, and not too flabby, if I toned up. If I can handle a long brisk walk or an exercise class without too much strain then I would be more or less happy with my shape. I am trying to work towards this and with regular exercise and it seems to be working.

I need a lot more work on my stomach, wish we had more stomach toning specifically.

Yes, very much so. My stomach does not seem to be getting toned up. I have had 2 Caesars through, the second being twins.

Yes, it helps tone, but fat in these areas is difficult to move, my thighs, stomach, bottom.

I would like to be, at this stage, thinner. I am working on it. However, I feel relatively fit, especially in view of having given birth 5 months ago.

The lower part of my body is overweight. If I were a stone lighter I know I would look better in clothes. Being overweight tends to make you a bit self-conscious when in bathing costumes or shorts.

Therefore, according to the respondents, when exercise classes are perceived as helping to improve body shape, the women:

- Receive positive comments from others
- Perceive a better personal appearance, according to evaluations in front of the mirror or in clothes
- Feel like the class helps to tone or tighten muscles as they feel firmer
- Experience weight loss
- Have a flatter stomach
- Feel greater satisfaction within oneself with areas of the body that normally cause concern or levels of dissatisfaction.

If the exercise classes are considered as not “helping” with body shape improvement either at all or enough, the features of this phenomenon included:

- Muscles are still “slack”, untoned or “flabby”
- No weight loss has occurred

- Exercises within the class itself are not viewed as focusing or working effectively enough on particular body parts or problem areas.

For example, respondents most commonly expressed the need for more abdominal exercises. Interestingly this corresponded with the stomach being nominated as the body part area they were least satisfied with.

4. Discussion

Overwhelmingly, ninety-percent of the respondents in this study were motivated to participate in exercise classes due to perceived personal body image concerns and wishing to lose weight. The findings confirmed those of the wider research literature which state that women who exercise regularly are able to experience improved body image (Vargas, 2015).

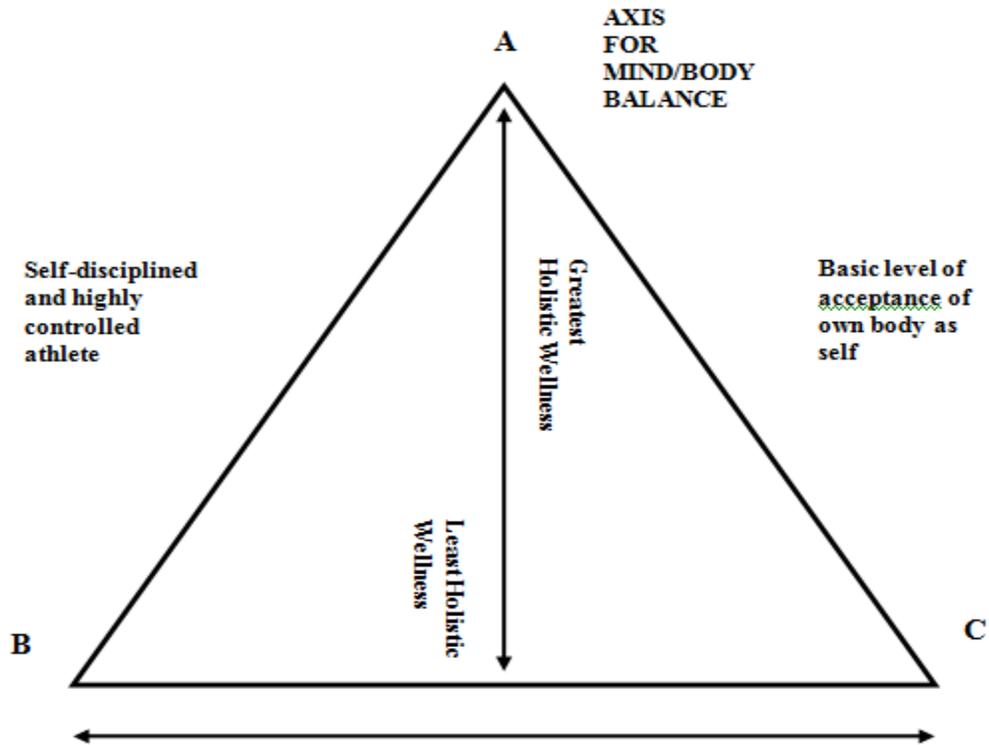
All respondents revealed they experienced an improvement in body image from taking part. However, if these women remain unduly focused on achieving a body shape closely resembling the societal slim ideal, they may suffer from anxiety and frustration in the process (Jobsky, 2014). This is due to the ideal societal standards of body image being genetically impossible for most people to realize. As a result, a woman can experience a pervasive feeling of bodily deficiency. In being motivated to “shape up”, to remain grounded and healthiest, individuals must not obsess about their body weight nor be seeking to attain an externally idealized shape or unobtainable ideal (Blood, 2005).

Women must not be fooled into believing that their body is infinitely malleable and can be changed at will using diet and/or exercise to achieve the socially constructed aesthetic ideal. The body is not so plastic that it can be shaped at will; we all have genetic and biological determinations that limit the amount of change possible. It is best to enjoy the exercise process and experience as much as possible and simply optimize our own individual body shape, health and fitness levels, without tipping into unreal expectations. When motivated to take part in exercise programs primarily to “get into shape”, it would be helpful if the participants asked themselves, *whose* shape?

The proposed model in Figure 1 defines three possibilities in a continuum of individual body image. Those people in psychological harmony with their physical bodies are considered the healthiest, outlined at Point A. At Point C in Figure 1, individuals are in a state of mind-body disengagement, and may be unfit, untrained person or take part in a lifestyle dominated by intellectual activities. While some individuals actually dislike exercise and may prefer engagement in less active pastimes, consistently high levels of physical inactivity or sedentariness can lead to chronic disease and lower levels of holistic wellness.

Self-esteem and body image are closely related. A major barrier to the achievement of positive self-image and body perception is unhealthy preoccupation with body weight and physical appearance, illustrated at Point B in Figure 1. Despite Point B in Figure 1 rating poorly in terms of wellness and personal health, western society as a whole tends to value the thin body shape often attained through excessive exercise and dieting. Much of the media and promotional material used for campaigns to increase women's participation in fitness activities typically emphasizes, either verbally or visually, the slim ideal.

A. Feeling in control of own body, achieving mind-body equilibrium. Exercising in moderation and for pleasure. Experiencing a balanced sense of body image motivation, feeling aware of the strengths and limitations of one's own body shape, optimizing one's own shape but relating to body as self, and in tune to the needs of one's own body. Accepts own body.



B. Actions, choices and attitudes are body-dominated. Obsessed with attaining the ideal body image or even a state of perfection. This image is most often an externally-driven, societal ideal; individual relates to own body & self as an object. Wants to be as slim as possible at any cost. Lacking wellbeing, holistic health status unattainable. Body may physically perform well. Time spent in intellectual activities and sense of relaxed, self-accepting body image are usually lacking.

C. Untrained body. Less balanced link exists between mind and body mainly caused by overall lack of physical activity participation. Often part of a mind-dominated lifestyle e.g. busy or workaholic. Body less strained and able to perform in exercise situations.

Figure 1. Healthy Body Perception Continuum for Women.

A certain amount of self-discipline is necessary in any exercise program in order to adhere to the level of intensity and involvement necessary to reach basic health objectives such as cardiovascular benefits. When individuals discipline themselves at moderate levels required to adhere to exercise programs, they are most likely to achieve improved body image, fitness and body tone. At this healthy participation level at Point A, Figure 1, levels of exercise participation are moderate and yet empowering enough to satisfy individual needs and build positive body image. It is oppositional to Point B, involving the individual slaving towards an ideal. When women attempt to normalize their body shape towards the social ideal, they then own docile bodies that are disciplined by the exercise in a more negative way. The respondents in this study could be considered as starting at Point C, feeling unfit and untrained. They moved towards Point A, experiencing a healthier individual body image, but some were at risk of sliding towards Point B, if continuing to obsess over the need for body shape improvement, or at worst, perfection.

Future studies investigating reasons for exercise adherence may utilize larger sample sizes and interview participants with more diverse sociocultural backgrounds and age groups. While this case study only reports unique experiences from one location, it does reveal a strong tendency for the desire to use exercise as a body normalization tool which warrants further investigation. The mind and body are linked, and so if women can feel good about their bodies during the exercise process, then they can potentially experience greater wellbeing. The findings of this study suggest that a certain amount of desire to improve one's body shape can motivate exercise class participation, which is a positive thing. However, it is recommended that for maximization of holistic health, motivation reflects a realistic optimization of individual body shape.

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