CHAPTER 3: WHAT DOES "FITNESS" MEAN TO YOU?

INTRODUCTION

As elaborated in Chapter 2, many members go to the gym first and foremost for exercise. A major reason for this is to be fit; fitness is a goal of exercise. In addition to appearing in myriad discourses in the culture at large, "fitness" is also a term that American Gym invokes in much of the media it produces. In so doing, the gym actively attempts to contribute to how "fitness" is defined and practiced and to influence how the meanings of this term are interpreted by gym members. Because fitness is marketed actively and taken for granted as salubrious, it is important to understand precisely what it means to people. Accordingly, in this chapter, I focus on what "fitness" means to gym members. This relates back to the central question of the study (how exercise is experienced at the gym) by examining the meaning of one of the primary goals of exercise. I analyze media produced by the gym and in-depth interviews with gym members to understand what meanings of fitness are presented by the gym and espoused by members. I will address the following research questions: *What does "fitness" mean to gym members? Do members' meanings reflect or reject "fitness" as it is presented in gym media?*

Identifying which potential meanings of fitness are most salient is important because some meanings have less benign consequences than others. If members understand fitness in terms of the appearance of the body, this might encourage people to pursue a certain look (e.g., via extreme dieting practices, over-exercising, or steroid

use) at the expense of their health and wellbeing. If fitness is understood as a biomedical or physiological construct, this might align commercial gyms more closely with medicine and science, perhaps making gyms more likely to be regarded as authoritative sources of information about health. If fitness means the ability to function in everyday life, to move comfortably and fulfill ordinary social roles, then this empirical case offers a promising, down-to-earth alternative to many popular beliefs about what it means to be "fit." I begin by reviewing previous scholarship on media representations. I then describe research on the three meanings of fitness – functional, biomedical, and representational – that will be addressed in the analysis.

MEDIA REPRESENTATIONS

Media and advertising aggressively promote representational understandings of fitness that buttress the association of gyms with sexy bodies. Bordo (1993) includes several print advertisements for gyms in her essay "Reading the Slender Body." Two ads for Bally Matrix gyms depict young, attractive, white women and draw obvious connections between exercise and (sexy, female) body display. In both, the models are slender, toned, and dressed in Jane Fonda-esque tights and leotards. In one, the model leans against a piece of exercise equipment; in the other, the model crouches in runner's stretch. Bordo contends, "the well-muscled body has become a cultural icon; 'working out' is a glamorized and sexualized yuppie activity….Muscles express sexuality, but controlled, managed sexuality that is not about to erupt in unwanted and

embarrassing display" (195). Such images imply that this gym offers a service that produces well-toned women. Consumers who go there, the ads promise, will see such incredible women, or perhaps become more like them.

Because my research design includes content analyses of gym media and my interview sample includes males and females, I review literature on how gender is represented in media. Generalized views of what is acceptable or desirable are publicly available. For instance, "emphasized femininity" and "hegemonic masculinity" (Connell 1987: 183-8) provide two ideal type models for consumers. Cultural producers recognize that not everyone has the same relationship to these normative definitions however (Black and Sharma 2001: 114). Thus, media representations of desirable appearances are sometimes designed to appeal to multiple demographic groups. This creates a situation where mass produced goods and standardized services are presented with the promise that their use will help consumers achieve a unique, individual appearance (Gimlin 2001: 4-5). For both women and men, an important aspect of body management is consumption, although the specific kinds of consumption that are encouraged are gendered. Print and television media about dieting and weight loss overwhelmingly target women (Wiseman et al. 1992; Wiseman et al. 1993). Studies comparing women's and men's magazines find that women's magazines are much more likely than men's magazines to emphasize appearance, body shape, diet, and weight loss (Andersen and DiDomenico 1992; Malkin et al. 1999). Instead of messages about appearance, men's

magazines focus more on entertainment and hobbies (Malkin et al. 1999: 647). When men's magazines do discuss appearance, the emphasis is on "bulking up" (Andersen and DiDomenico 1992). The recent proliferation of men's fashion and lifestyle magazines suggests that men are increasingly targeted as consumers of products to achieve "the healthy body, the stylish body, and the athletic body" (Morgan 1993: 97). If men's magazines are indeed increasing attention to body appearance, then they are becoming more similar to the media that target women (Nemeroff et al. 1994).

MEANINGS OF FITNESS

Reception theorists, including DeVault (1990), Griswold (1987), Hall ([1980]1996), Radway (1984), and Swidler (1986) argue that cultural products can be interpreted in multiple ways. (See Chapter 1, p. 21-28 for an extended discussion of reception theory.) Because many understandings of fitness are possible, what "fitness" means to an individual is likely to vary by social location. Here, I focus on three meanings of fitness that emerge from sociological literatures on health and bodies: 1) *functional fitness,* 2) *biomedical fitness*, and 3) *representational fitness* (Bordo 1993; Edgley and Brissett 1990; Featherstone [1982]1995; Freund and Martin 2004; Glassner 1990; Monaghan 2001). These three meanings are social science categories derived from the literature. They are *not* members' categories. However, as my analyses will later show, they match up well with the responses offered by my interview subjects.

First, a *functional* understanding of fitness involves being able to carry out

ordinary, everyday social activities such as working, traveling, and parenting. Here, fitness is the absence of conditions that impair social functioning (Freund and Martin 2004: 273-4). In other words, people are fit if they can accomplish things in their environment. It is simply the idea of "being-able-to" (274). Halliwell and Dittmar (2003) find that men focus on functionality to a much greater extent than women (679).

Second, *biomedical* fitness is the proper operating of physiological systems. A perfectly fit and healthy body has flexibility, "proper muscle strength," and "appropriate aerobic capacity (as measured by its maximum oxygen consumption)" (Edgley and Brissett 1990: 261-2). It is a body "that is biochemically, physiologically and autonomically balanced" (Edgley and Brissett 1990: 261-2). By this definition, medical examinations and vital signs taken by a physician provide reliable information regarding an individual's fitness. A person may be judged to be "fit" if bodily indices such as blood pressure, cholesterol, eyesight, and lipids fall within ranges that have been defined as normal or acceptable (Freund and Martin 2004: 274).[1]

Third, a *representational* understanding of fitness is based on appearance. The look or imagery of a fit body stands in for the actual possession of fitness and health (Monaghan 2001: 338). Edgley and Brissett (1990) argue that although, "Neither science nor medicine has ever found the perfect body….current popular culture most assuredly has. It is slender, fit, and glowing….It has the correct amount of body fat"

[1] I did not find literature reporting a gender difference in the extent to which men and women are likely to favor biomedical meanings.

(261-2). In affluent contemporary consumer cultures, being overweight has become associated with health risks and thinness has become associated with health and fitness (Featherstone [1982]1995: 185, Freund and Martin 2004: 273). Further, a body that appears slim and toned symbolizes good self-discipline and a "correct attitude" towards how to take care of oneself (Bordo 1993: 195). Applying this understanding, a person is fit if they appear fit – that is, if they appear slender, trim, and toned (Freund and Martin 2004: 273).

Representational understandings of fitness may be problematic because for some people, a slim or fit appearance is achievable only through practices that compromise physiological and social wellness. Risks are myriad and include injuries caused by overtraining, eating disordered behaviors (Bordo 1993), low self-esteem, and harsh self-criticism for not living up to unrealistic body ideals (Bordo 1993; Brumberg 1997). People may become obsessed with appearance at the expense of attention to personal relationships, political activism, career responsibilities, and educational advancement (Wolf 2002). As is the case with all surgeries, there are medical risks associated with procedures like stomach stapling, liposuction, and other weight and fat reduction surgeries (Bordo 1993: 248-50; Rothblum 1990: 15, 19).

Glassner (1990) and Monaghan (2001: 338) have found representational fitness – fitness defined in terms of appearance – to be the meaning favored by many fitness enthusiasts. "The crucial point is the *symbolism* of a strong looking, fat-free body which *signifies* health, rather than whether a fit-looking body is healthy"

(Monaghan 2001: 338). (And indeed, an avid exerciser may look fit even if they are not necessarily healthy by other measures, such as eating a nutritious diet, getting enough rest, and having good blood pressure.) Monaghan's (1999; 2001) findings on the importance of appearance are based on interviews with predominantly male samples of gym users. In contrast, Halliwell and Dittmar (2003) find that women focus on appearance ("looking good" and the "importance of the body as an object of display") to a much greater extent than men (679). Other studies draw the same conclusion: that women tend to be more invested in appearance than men (Cash and Hicks 1990; Jackson 1992: 179-205; Muth and Cash 1997; Oberg and Tornstam 1999; Pliner et al. 1990; Rozin and Fallon 1988). Gill et al. (2005) and Halliwell and Dittmar (2003) add the finding that men are more likely to direct their body concerns and energies towards more functional considerations like building strength and athletic ability.

To address the question of what fitness means to gym members, I rely on member's accounts in in-depth interviews. To elicit information about how members understand fitness, I began with the open-ended question, "What does fitness mean to you?" I then followed up with several specific probes such as: What does a person's body have to do with fitness? What does it mean to have a fit body? How can you tell if a person is "fit"? Can you tell if someone is fit just by looking at them? What about a profile of vital signs based on medical tests – does that tell you whether someone is fit? Is a person fit if they have lots of energy and can comfortably do everyday things

like carry their groceries or walk up a flight of stairs? To examine whether these members' meanings reflect or reject the meanings of fitness presented in gym media, I analyzed gym media. Specifically, I analyzed the content of posters, pamphlets, and advertisements inside the gym. I also analyzed commercials from this gym's television advertising campaigns and internet media like the company's website and daily "motivational" emails that people may register to receive.[2]

EMPIRICAL IMPLICATIONS

As I discuss below, my content analysis shows that representational fitness is vividly and prominently depicted in media at the gym, whereas biomedical fitness and functional fitness are not. Given this finding, plus the saturation of media and advertising with images of ideal bodies (Featherstone [1982]1995: 177-81; Glassner 1988: 31-33) and wider cultural tendencies to associate fitness with appearance (Bordo 1993: 185-212), it is reasonable to predict that people exposed to these influences would formulate fitness in representational terms. *However, they do not.* They think primarily about functional fitness. Many respondents state their belief that they are not affected by, do not notice, or actively dismiss the representational meanings of fitness offered by the gym *qua* company. Moreover, even in the absence of media that promote functional fitness, functional understandings are the ones respondents most frequently espouse unprompted. Prompted, people agree that biomedical indicators of fitness are reliable. Despite a deluge of representational

[2] Please see Appendix A for additional details about the research methods.

fitness messages, two-thirds of respondents flatly reject appearance as a reliable indicator of fitness. This holds true for both women and men. Contra research that finds appearance to be more important to women (Halliwell and Dittmar 2003; Oberg and Tornstam 1999; Pliner et al. 1990; Rozin and Fallon 1988) and functional fitness to be more important to men (Gill et al. 2005; Halliwell and Dittmar 2003), I find that neither women nor men emphasize representation, and both cultivate functional understandings instead.

A top-down perspective, informed by mass culture theory and other theories that emphasize the influence of institutional structures (Adorno [1938]2003; Altusser 2001: 96; Gramsci [1971]1999: 260-3; Klinger 1989: 4-5, 10) predicts that the gym *qua* company would use media as a vehicle for espousing dominant views about fitness and bodies, and that gym members would uncritically accept these views. This top-down perspective aptly captures the gym's attempts to indoctrinate members and shape their experiences and perspectives regarding fitness. However, it is inaccurate in assuming that indoctrination will be easy or successful. Even when exposed to a high volume of representational media, members do not define fitness for themselves in these terms. A bottom-up perspective offers a better account of gym members' responses to gym media. A bottom-up perspective posits that multiple interpretations of cultural texts are possible such that people may "read" those texts in ways other than the cultural producers intended (DeVault 1990; Griswold 1987; Hall [1980]1996; Hunt 1999; Radway 1984; Schudson 1989; Swidler 1986), even if they fully

comprehend the "dominant or preferred meaning" (Hall [1980]1996: 134). Gym members may recognize that representational fitness is being marketed by American Gym, but then decide that "fitness" means something else (e.g., comfortable functioning in everyday life) to them personally. In sum, local, individual bottom-up processes, such as members' own activities and readings of gym media are more influential in this case than centralized mandates coming from the top-down, from the gym *qua* corporation.[3]

The following analysis matches the structure of the literature review, beginning with a discussion of gym media. I then analyze members' meanings of fitness, examining whether and how members draw on each of the three fitness categories from the literature – functional, biomedical, and representational – to make sense of what fitness means to them personally. Finally, I discuss what these analyses imply about the effect of gym media on members.

GYM MEDIA: PROMOTING REPRESENTATIONAL FITNESS

As described in the methods section above, gym media include print advertising inside the gym (e.g., posters and pamphlets), promotional advertising such as television commercials that air outside the gym, and internet media (e.g., company website and "motivational" emails). The gym's environment and marketing campaigns both inside and outside the facility proper emphasize representational fitness first and

[3] See Chapter 1, p. 15-28 for an extended discussion of top-down and bottom-up perspectives. See Emigh 2002, Fullan 1999, Fullan 2003, Hignett 2001, and Panda 2007 for additional empirical examples of top-down/bottom-up dynamics.

foremost. In contrast, biomedical fitness and functional fitness are far less commonly presented in these media. Specifically, of the 134 commercials, posters, and motivational emails coded, representational fitness appeared in almost 60%. In contrast, biomedical fitness and functional fitness each appeared in only 19% of the media. Additionally, in approximately half of these occurrences of biomedical and functional fitness, these kinds of fitness were merely *mentioned*, as opposed to appearing prominently in the media's message.

Representational Fitness in Gym Media

Many examples of representational fitness appear in media inside the gym to advertise house-brand products and services. For instance, a poster for a house-brand weight loss system hangs outside the locker rooms. In large, dark text at the top of this poster is the phrase "Transform Yourself." Below that, on the right, there are two photographs – "then" and "now" – of a twenty-three-year-old black woman who has lost 14 pounds. On the left, the text reads, "Discover how [name of diet system] can help you turn your life around." There is a picture of the diet system in the center of the poster: a large box with smaller packages and envelopes arrayed around it. A comparison of appearance prior to and following weight loss is a tactic used repeatedly in American Gym's advertising. The woman is visibly thinner in the "now" photograph. Weight loss is assumed to be desirable and literally life-altering ("transform yourself," "turn your life around"). The advertisement provides a simple directive for achieving a slimmer appearance: buy the diet system. The results offered

by this product seem attainable and realistic, as the woman on the poster is a "regular" person, as opposed to a fitness model. Though a "regular" person, she is relatively young and attractive, and has a figure that appears curvy but certainly not fat even in the pre-diet image. In this advertisement, the gym is selling a way for members to change their appearance (and transform themselves and their lives) by decreasing their body weight.

Another poster, near the aerobics studio, advertises a weight loss program consisting of a series of personal training sessions and nutritional counseling. The poster features a photograph of people standing a few feet apart in a staggered line, as people might arrange themselves for a group exercise class. They are smiling, dressed in fitted, brightly-colored exercise gear, and appear to be in the midst of activity. Five people are clearly visible in the photograph: two white women, an Asian woman, a black woman, and a black man. They all look youthful (20s?); their faces are smooth, wrinkle-free, and conventionally attractive. The women's upper bodies are all slender and toned. The male has a more muscular upper body than any of the women, but he does not have a bulging, body-builder type of physique. There are other people in the photograph, but they are in the background – blurry in the distance, or partially obscured by one of the main people. The name of the program appears in bold letters above the photograph. Below the photograph, in smaller font, the program's details are given. These images promote a representational understanding of fitness by portraying gym exercise as something in which conventionally attractive people with slender,

toned bodies enjoy participating.

American Gym is even less subtle in its television advertising campaigns. One commercial defines fitness outright as follows:

Female voiceover 1:	Total fitness is losing weight, losing inches, and gaining strength.
Male voiceover:	Total fitness is being pumped about life.
Female voiceover 2:	American Gym. Exercise, nutrition, support, even a free online weight loss program…
Female voiceover 1:	Summer is the season for fitness…In summer, there's just no place to hide.
Male voiceover:	It's all out there.
Female voiceover 2:	Call now to get your body in shape for summer. Experience total fitness…
Female voiceover 1:	It's feeling powerful, sexy, confident, even in a bikini.

The commercial repeatedly states that fitness literally *is* weight loss ("losing weight," "losing inches," "weight loss program"). Interestingly, becoming lighter and smaller is not assumed to be associated with becoming weaker, as promises of "losing weight" and "inches" are immediately followed by the promise of "gaining strength." Though the resultant body can be physically strong, the commercial provokes other anxieties. For instance, there is the worrisome the threat of bodily exposure: "there's just no place to hide," "It's all out there." It would be unsafe and stressful to display a body that is not "in shape." Insurance against this threat is to join the gym and "experience total fitness." This action promises to produce positive feelings – "powerful, sexy, confident" – all of which are connected having a body that appears attractive in a revealing swimsuit.

There are a few undertones that do not necessarily pertain to physical

appearance: “gaining strength,” “being pumped about life,” and “feeling powerful, sexy, confident.” These can even be interpreted as potentially progressive: for instance, it is progressive for women in particular to become stronger, and feel exhilarated (“pumped”), powerful, and confident. However, this interpretation is overshadowed by the much more prominent message that “total fitness is” all about physical appearance. The message given by the voiceovers is underscored by the imagery in the commercial. One attractive black man and several attractive white women engage in various exercise activities such as jumping rope, running on a treadmill, participating in a group exercise class, and using weight machines inside the gym. The man is visibly muscular (a marker of strength) and the women are thin and dressed in tight workout clothes. In some shots, a lithe, slender woman drapes her body provocatively over a large exercise ball or lies on the floor in a bikini. In other shots, the man is shirtless (shown from the chest up only) and standing in a spray of water, as if in the shower. His eyes are closed and his hands are behind his head, a posture that showcases his muscular arms and shoulders. This ad unequivocally announces that fitness is representation.

Two additional examples of recent television commercials emphasize representational aspects of fitness and gym use. In one commercial, people in casual street clothes stand against a photo backdrop and speak directly to the camera. Their testimonials appear in rapid succession:

> *A woman touching her stomach:* I think my stomach is definitely like a pillow.
> *A woman touching her upper arm:* Soft and mushy.

A woman jiggling her triceps: I'd really like for that to stop moving.
A man moving his hands across his midsection: My pants are tight. I look kinda frumpy.
A woman with hands on hips: Things bounce that never bounced before.
A woman squeezing her triceps: I have flab.
A man sucks in his stomach, draws shoulders back, and entire posture up: My stomach needs to be this way.

These comments are presented as grievances related to physical appearance. Flab, tight pants, and being "frumpy" and "mushy" are all lamented as problematic. Members frame their current state as deficient compared to a personal previous state ("Things bounce that never bounced before."), or an imagined ideal ("My stomach needs to be this way.") These "before" comments are followed by a brief montage of the same people exercising at the gym with the assistance of trainers. The juxtaposition of the "before" testimonials with the montage of gym exercise conveys the message that the primary reason to exercise is to correct body flaws. None of the testimonials relate to biomedical or functional concerns; all are about appearance. The exercise montage is followed by the results, the "after" shots, again in rapid succession, like the "before" shots:

A man holds his arms out to the sides and looks down at his midsection: It looks good.
A man grabs his shirt to show how loose it has become and then pats his stomach: The best thing is losin' my gut.
A woman in tight jeans stands sideways and points at her rear end: I lost that little double butt.
A woman: Even my skinny jeans feel big.
A woman runs her hand over her belly in circular motion and then makes the a-okay sign: And I like my stomach. It's hot.

A female voiceover says, "Create your own success story. Join American Gym

now." Success is explicitly defined in terms of improving one's appearance. Getting "in shape" is synonymous with becoming more slender and toned. The ad also suggests a specific course of action: to join this gym. A problematic *appearance* can be corrected by using the service this company offers. Again, biomedical and functional meanings are completely absent from this commercial.

Another television commercial follows the same formula, but focuses on one individual rather than a montage of many. The commercial opens with a "before" shot of a young woman dressed in a frumpy denim skirt and a top that seems to squeeze and showcase fat on her stomach. Her hair is pulled into a ponytail and she is wearing glasses. She complains to the camera: "I don't like anything about my body. My arms have gotten flabby, my belly's gotten bigger. I need to get in shape." This testimonial is followed by shots of her (and other people) exercising, working with trainers at the gym. The "after" shot shows her thinner, wearing a flirty green baby doll dress. Her hair is down; it is long and styled in soft curls. She is not wearing the glasses anymore. She reports, "Thirty days later, I'm one hot mama. American Gym has been great. I've lost fourteen pounds, almost four inches on my waist, and four dress sizes." This commercial promotes a representational understanding of fitness by connecting her gym use to a transformation of her appearance. Gym use has changed her body from "flabby" and "bigger" to "hot" and smaller, as measured by weight, waist circumference, and clothing size. The message is clearly that gym use improves physical

appearance. Completely absent are any mentions of other effects of gym use, such as improvements in physiological health or daily functioning.

American Gym emphasizes representational fitness in promotional media on the internet as well. For example, the company's website is filled with images of slender, conventionally attractive (usually but not always visibly youthful) women and men in workout gear. Members can also sign up to receive daily "motivational" emails from the company. The content of many of these messages focuses on the physical appearance of the body. One such email reads:

> Many of us spend so much time looking back to our "thin" days, or forward to finally fitting into a smaller size, that we lose sight of the here and now. When you stop to think about it, you can't lose weight in the past or in the future, only in the present. So focus on today! Start creating some positive thoughts about yourself as you are now. These thoughts will serve as inspiration for the journey ahead.

This message is accompanied by an image of a young, slender, attractive woman looking at herself in the mirror and smiling. She is dressed in jeans and a t-shirt, and her hands grab the waistband of her pants. Both text and image place emphasis on being thin and losing weight. It differs from the television commercials that suggest that body dissatisfaction should be remedied immediately through gym membership. Instead, this includes a message of developing "positive thoughts" and satisfaction with oneself in the present, even if one weighs more now than in the past or future. That people must be reminded to feel good about themselves *despite* not losing weight suggests that "thin" is the default body type for being happy and satisfied. Moreover, the ultimate course of action ("the journey ahead") is implicitly to continue to attempt

weight loss.

Biomedical Fitness in Gym Media

Occasionally, media produced by the gym includes messages that promote biomedical fitness. These are far less common than the messages about representational fitness, but they do circulate. For instance, one television commercial that emphasizes biomedical fitness tells the story of a man who makes a lifestyle change after his father's death. The commercial opens with a heavy-set white man in his late thirties speaking directly to the camera. He says, "My father passed away at the age of forty-six." The commercial intersperses medical images (e.g., a heart beating inside a rib cage, the man lying on a hospital table and being moved into an MRI machine) with shots of the man speaking to the camera. He continues, "Men in my family, for whatever reason, um, don't live very long. I'm thirty-eight years old, but according to tests, my body's real age is almost fifty. I've gotta get healthy." The commercial then shows the man at the gym, in workout clothes, standing on a scale, exercising, and walking on a treadmill, assisted by a young black male trainer. The last exercise shot shows the man sitting on a chest fly machine, with his arms out to the sides. A heart and ribcage appear on his shirt, and then camera zooms in, as if to zoom into his body for a close-up of his heart. The man says,

> All of the changes that have taken place have come from the inside out. I feel younger today than I've felt in twenty years. I've been workin' out for two and a half months. I lost thirty pounds. My cholesterol's down from 220 to 190 and my body's ten years younger.

In the next shot, he is standing against a blue photographer's background in a black

polo shirt and dark jeans. He turns to demonstrate his thinner body and flexes his arm to demonstrate his bicep. A female voiceover says, “Look great, live healthier, and feel younger. Join American Gym now.” The man says, “I have definitely added years to my life, without a doubt.” More than most other American Gym advertising, this commercial emphasizes biomedical fitness: it touts the health benefits of exercise (e.g., longevity, “liv[ing] healthier,” lowered cholesterol), and shows medical imagery (e.g., a beating heart, a hospital exam room, an MRI machine). Representational fitness is also a theme of the commercial, though it is positioned less prominently compared to biomedical fitness and compared to other American Gym ads. Representational fitness is presented as a pleasant side effect of increased attention to health through gym use. The man reports weight loss and looks thinner and more toned. The voiceover’s message still includes, “*Look* great,” a reminder that the gym is selling a service that ostensibly improves physical appearance.

The motivational emails rarely include messages of biomedical fitness. When these messages appear, they usually relate to nutrition. For example, one email recommends, “Add barley to your food plans…Research shows that barley can reduce the risk of heart disease by lowering cholesterol and may help maintain blood sugar levels.” The message is accompanied by an image of grains and a roll in front of a basket weave background. Another daily email asks, “Do you see the light? If so, it’s probably because you have eaten your yellow and green fruits and vegetables. Certain families of fruits and vegetables can help protect your vision.” This message is

accompanied by a picture of grilled vegetables on the right and a picture of a white male performing a bicep exercise while a black female trainer stands beside him, apparently coaching him on. These emails connect gym exercise and biomedical fitness by positioning images of exercise adjacent to images and text about foods that lower risk of heart disease, lower cholesterol, maintain blood sugar levels, and protect vision. These benefits all pertain to the biomedical and physiological condition of the body.

Functional Fitness in Gym Media

As was the case with biomedical fitness, there are few examples of functional fitness in the gym media. Although I could not find any television commercials that emphasize functional fitness, a few ads include short quotes that can be classified as functional fitness. In a commercial where the theme, as stated by a male voiceover, is, "No matter what your fitness goal, American Gym can create a program to fit you," two people mention "fitness goals" that relate to functional fitness. A young black man says, "I mean, in life you just need to look good and, ah, *number one, just feel good about yourself*. Workin' out does that for me" (emphasis added). A young white woman with two children says, "I work out for me. Keep some balance in my life and some energy for them." As she says this, an image of the children appears on the screen. These are (rare) examples of functional fitness because both people mention how working out improves basic functioning in their everyday lives: using the gym helps the man "just feel good," and gives the woman "balance" and "energy" for

parenting. A primary message of this commercial is functional fitness, but even here, there are elements of representational fitness. The man mentions that "in life you just need to look good," and both the man and the woman are (as usual) young, slender, and attractive.

In another television commercial, four gym staff members gather excitedly around a young black woman who has just announced that, "Havin' weight on you is kinda like messin' with you emotionally. I try to play it off and say it doesn't, but it does. I hate it. I'm ready for it to change." A male trainer says, "We're gonna get those arms cut, trim that waist." Then, a female trainer says, "We're gonna boost your confidence and you're gonna feel wonderful." The female trainer's comment is an example of how the gym can improve functional fitness and make this woman's daily life happier and more comfortable. The company promises to "boost…confidence" and make the member "feel wonderful." In both of these commercials, functional fitness is mentioned, but so is representational fitness – "you need to look good"; "we're gonna get those arms cut, trim that waist." Functional fitness does not stand alone, but rather is positioned as the outcome of changing one's appearance. Feeling confident and wonderful is a result of losing weight and toning body parts such as the arms and stomach.

Finally, here is a rare example of a motivational email with a message of functional fitness:

> Don't forget to stretch. Stretching after a workout can reduce soreness after exercise, decrease the risk of injury, improve athletic performance and help reduce

> stress. Don't run out of the gym right after your workout. Take a few minutes to stretch to help prevent injury in the long run.

The message is accompanied by a photo of an attractive, slender, middle-aged, blond, white woman, dressed in form-fitting workout clothes, and stretching in a butterfly position. She looks calm and peaceful. Here, the message is that engaging in a specific practice at the gym, stretching, will have functional fitness benefits. Reducing soreness, stress, and risk of injury will ostensibly make ordinary everyday activities easier and more comfortable. Here again, even when the primary message relates to functional fitness, there are representational undertones, such as an image of a conventionally attractive woman.

Given members' exposure to these media specifically and wider cultural tendencies to place tremendous value on physical appearance, it is reasonable to expect that members would associate fitness with appearance.[4] As I will demonstrate, this is not what happens.

MEMBERS' MEANINGS OF FITNESS

I now analyze members' meanings by examining whether and how members personally understand fitness in functional, biomedical, and/or representational terms. Table 3.1 shows members' responses by gender: whether people brought up particular

[4] This could conceivably happen via at least two mechanisms: 1) Selection: It is possible that people would see the gym's promotional advertising, with its emphasis on representational fitness and select this gym because they agree with the emphasis on appearance; or 2) Influence: It is possible that people would join the gym and during the course of their membership develop an association between fitness and appearance due to exposure to representational media inside the gym.

meanings unprompted and whether they agreed or disagreed with prompted meanings. Proportions are given in parentheses.

Table 3.1. Number of Respondents agreeing with various Meanings of Fitness, by Gender

	Unprompted			Prompted		
	Function	Biomed	Represent	Function	Biomed	Represent
Males	12 (0.75)	6 (0.38)	4 (0.25)	10 (0.63)	12 (0.75)	8 (0.50)
Females	15 (0.94)	8 (0.50)	6 (0.38)	6 (0.38)	10 (0.63)	2 (0.13)
All	27 (0.84)	14 (0.44)	10 (0.31)	16 (0.50)	22 (0.69)	10 (0.31)

Note: N=32 (16 males, 16 females)

Table 3.1 shows that women and men are quite similar in their understandings of what fitness means. The "unprompted" columns give an indication of how *salient* a meaning is to members. They reflect what issues people raise when I ask the open-ended question, "What does fitness mean to you?" The "prompted" columns show how people respond to specific queries designed to test for agreement with the three meanings (functional, biomedical, and representational) from the literature. They show whether people agree or disagree with a pointed prompt, such as "Do you think you can tell if someone is fit from the way they look?" to gauge agreement with a representational understanding of fitness. To analyze responses to the open-ended question ("unprompted"), I coded for the presence or absence of each of the three meanings. To analyze responses to the pointed probes ("prompted"), I coded for agreement or disagreement. Thus, it is possible for a single respondent to be "counted" as understanding fitness in multiple ways. For instance, if a given respondent raises

both functional and representational considerations, they are included in both categories.

I present results by gender to highlight a gender similarity where previous research predicts a gender difference. Work by Gill et al. (2005), Halliwell and Dittmar (2003); Oberg and Tornstam (1999), Pliner et al. (1990) and Rozin and Fallon (1988) find appearance to be more important to women than to men, and function to be more important to men than women. However, my data suggests otherwise: neither men nor women emphasize representation, and both espouse functional understandings instead.

For both genders, functional fitness is the most salient meaning of fitness: it is mentioned, unprompted, by almost everyone in the sample. In other words, there is little difference by gender in the extent to which members think of fitness as meaning everyday functioning. When prompted about specific meanings of fitness, many respondents express agreement with biomedical understandings of fitness. The proportion of respondents mentioning biomedical fitness unprompted is considerably lower than the proportion agreeing when prompted. This suggests that biomedical fitness is not as salient as functional fitness, but that when asked, people agree that biomedical indicators are good measures of fitness. Representational fitness is both the least salient and least agreeable understanding of fitness. Both prompted and unprompted, less than one third of the sample understood fitness in representational terms. Although the *n* values are quite small, it should be noted that men and women

may differ in their agreement with representational understandings when prompted. When I ask, "Do you think you can tell if someone is fit from the way they look?" only two female respondents said "yes," but half of the male respondents said "yes." Given that the content of affirmative answers to this question is quite similar for men and women and that the *n* values are small, this data is inconclusive regarding whether there is a "real" gender difference in the extent to which people conceptualize fitness in terms of representation (appearance).

Functional Fitness: The Meaning Members Espouse

When asked the open-ended question, "What does fitness mean to you?" functional understandings of fitness emerged repeatedly. It is the most salient understanding of fitness: without specific prompting, 84% of respondents described fitness in terms of meeting the requirements of everyday life. Interestingly, an exploratory analysis shows that similar percentages of older and younger respondents espouse a functional understanding of fitness. 89% of respondents under 25 had functional understandings, compared to 83% of respondents 25 and older. The sample is not large enough to yield reliable comparisons of these age groups,[5] but these percentages suggest functionality is important to respondents of all ages. Here, I discuss some typical examples of *functional fitness* that people offer in response to the question "What does fitness mean to you?" Jeremy (age 35) says,

> Fitness: having my body function the way I want it to function. If I want to be an opera singer, I'm going to need endurance, and I'm going to need lung capacity. If

[5] Nine people in my sample are under age 25. Twenty-three people in my sample are ages 25 and over.

> I want to be a swimmer, I'm going to need endurance and overall body strength. Um, whatever I choose to do, I want to gear my body to do that. Right now, I'm trying to fix my back problems, and that will mean working on certain muscles that I never knew existed before, that are actually tied into keeping the correct posture. So that's function for me. That's fitness. In my old age, hopefully, my fitness will be evident by the fact that I'm not crouching or slouching or having trouble looking over the steering wheel, that I'm still able to perform sexually, that I'm still able to get a good night's sleep.

Jeremy's response indicates that he sees fitness as a means to enhance his everyday functioning. Fitness practices can improve his singing and swimming and correct injuries. His body will demonstrate his fitness if ordinary activities like standing up straight, sleeping, driving, and having sex do not become difficult as he ages. Freund and Martin (2004) point out that some discourses define fitness "as being able to carry out social roles…Fitness is constructed as the absence of any physical or mental impairment that interferes with social functioning" (273-4). This is exactly the kind of fitness Jeremy is talking about. Marjorie (age 60) raises similar functional considerations when I ask what fitness means to her:

> Fitness to me means my muscles- my body muscles [are conditioned so I'll] be able to have the strength enough to do the things I want to do, regarding my job, taking care of my house, being able to stand without having any pain or being able to function without pain. That is fitness to me.

Though Jeremy is a 35-year-old man and Marjorie is a 60-year-old woman, their ideas about what fitness means are strikingly similar. Both Jeremy and Marjorie mention muscles and strength as an important part of fitness, not in terms of hardcore weight lifting or the appearance of the body, but in terms of being comfortable in daily life. Fitness means being able to do what you want to: "whatever I choose to do, I want to

gear my body to do that," (Jeremy) and "able…to do the things I want to do" (Marjorie). Both are specifically concerned about their ability to stand and to be free from injury and pain. They understand fitness in functional terms. When asked what fitness means to them, neither one describes the appearance of the body or biomedical health.

William's (age 26) response begins much like Jeremy's and Marjorie's, but then turns toward a more explicit focus on the relationship between fitness and being physically active in everyday life.

> If you can accomplish everything you need to accomplish throughout the course of the day without having any problems with it, I'll say you're fit, you know what I mean? I also think that people who live in places where you're not so dependent on an automobile- I think, ah, you know, like, if your day consists of getting up and walking to work and then walking home from work and then walking to wherever you need to go at night and then carrying groceries home, then, um, you know like ah, it's like I think that promotes a more healthy, more fit lifestyle.

Like Jeremy, William clearly connects fitness to the capacity to function from day to day. People who "can accomplish everything [they] need to accomplish throughout the course of the day without having any problems with it" are fit in William's estimation. Functional fitness is closely connected to physical activities. These activities are not exercise in a gym, but they are physically comparable. Walking as transportation is similar to walking on a treadmill or around a track. Lifting and carrying groceries is similar to lifting and carrying weights. Indeed, "the physical fitness industry provides expensive technical equipment that reproduces natural movements: treadmills, stairmasters…that simulate the conditions of running/walking [and] climbing stairs."

(Freund and Martin 2004: 280). William suggests that the capacity for and practice of movement, activity, and exercise both yields increasing fitness but is also evidence of existing fitness. Specifically, he believes that a daily life that requires more physical activity is "more healthy, more fit" than one that requires less. Freund and Martin (2004) agree:

> The U.S. is the most motorized of nations…We live in societies that are increasingly structured to support motoring and to discourage walking…The decline in walking and the rise in motoring are having a significant impact upon public health….The connection between decreasing walking and increasing weight is supported by a study that found fewer people were overweight in local places where people walked more, a relationship that stood after controlling for age, race and income (STPP 2000: 18). (276-7)

When motoring replaces walking, negative health consequences may include sedentary lifestyle, less exercise, overweight and obesity, spinal problems, and other musculoskeletal problems incurred from driving (278). "Motoring can be made more or less comfortable, but it cannot be made conducive to good physical fitness" (279). Concordant with William's assessment, studies like these suggest that having a lifestyle that requires more walking and less driving may help people be more physically fit.

Some respondents identified fluid movement, bending, and an absence of pain during daily activities as indicators of fitness. When I ask Marjorie if she can tell whether someone is fit just by looking at them, she replies:

> Yeah…A person who is fit…they walk much healthier. I don't know if you have seen a healthy walk and an unhealthy walk. The healthy walk- they walk straight, you don't see any sign or symptom of pain in their face. And ah- and they are capable of fast bending over, picking up something. Rather than someone who is

> not fit that just bends over and they pant. They, you know, respiratory-wise, they come so- so- like panting, rather than, you know. It's just totally different, someone who's fit and someone who's not. They can walk without, you know, getting tired, or they can walk without their heart racing so high.

Here, the look of fitness is not one that can be captured in a static image, like a picture of six-pack abs in a magazine. Rather, it is something that can be seen as an individual moves about in ordinary ways like walking and bending over.[6] A person looks fit if they do not show pain or fatigue during these everyday movements. Other respondents gave similar descriptions of what a fit person looks like when walking and moving.

> *T: How can you tell if someone is fit?*
> C: By the way they move….You can tell because their bodies look different. Their bodies- they may not be skinny, but you see muscle mass, you see how people move. They seem to have a little lighter step. (Carmen, age 63)

> *T: Can you tell whether someone is fit by looking at them?*
> A: Ahm, most of the time you can. And it's not necessarily the body shape itself, it's more the swagger, as you call it. The way they carry themselves. (Adam, age 30)

Both Carmen and Adam explicitly reject a representational understanding of fitness when they state that looking fit is not about a body's slenderness or shapeliness: "they may not be skinny", "it's not necessarily the body shape itself." Marjorie, Carmen, and Adam all emphasize fluid movement in activities like walking as a visible hallmark of fitness. Carmen and Adam additionally suggest that the walk of a fit person embodies a sort of easy confidence: "a lighter step", "the swagger." These respondents describe how they can see if someone's ordinary functioning and movement is comfortable as

[6] Because this description of "looking fit" pertains to everyday functioning as opposed to appearance, it (and similar descriptions that I discuss in this section) was coded as an example of "functional" fitness, *not* "representational" fitness.

opposed to impaired. If comfortable, that person seems fit to these respondents. As the previous examples illustrate, functional fitness is salient and important to the large majority of my respondents, men and women alike.

To these members, fitness is about maintaining the body in a state where "my body function[s] the way I want it to function," "you can accomplish everything need to accomplish throughout the course of the day without having any problems with it," and you can "function without pain" or fatigue during normal daily activities. Functional definitions are given by many men and women. My findings contradict Halliwell and Dittmar (2003), who report that function is more important to men than women, among the individuals aged 22-62 that they studied. In my sample, respondents of both genders bring up functionality as an important component of fitness. Female and male gym members discuss functional fitness in qualitatively similar terms, suggesting that women have the same worries about functionality as men.

Some respondents disagree that being able to function in everyday life is enough to qualify a person as "fit." For instance, Emma (age 33) explains why she does not think fitness is should be understood as having the energy and ability to accomplish tasks in everyday life:

T: If someone had lots of energy and can carry their groceries and do their chores comfortably, does that mean they're fit?

E: Definitely not. I have a friend who's hyper as shit. She's so hyper. Tons of energy. But she's not in shape at all. She won't work out. She's very lazy. But she'll make efforts to- like she'll buy an elliptical machine and then work out on it and then she'll sell it. [*laughs*] But she's got a ton of energy and she can

> definitely- she can go for miles, like it's crazy how she can stay up late, she can do a lotta stuff, and she's really just got a lotta energy, but she's not like strong…she has endurance, but not strength.

Emma describes a friend who can comfortably accomplish everyday tasks who she does not consider fit. This is in stark contrast Marjorie's functional definition above – fitness to her is being able to "do the things I want to do, regarding my job, taking care of my house." There are some people who Marjorie would consider "fit" that Emma might not.

Here is another example of a negative response to the question: "If someone has lots of energy and can carry their groceries and do their chores comfortably, does that mean they're fit?":

> My grandmother, that's probably a hundred pounds overweight could, you know, do those things too….So I would say that's less of a good indicator. (Justin, age 19)

As Justin illustrates here, sometimes respondents bring up weight even when not directly queried about it. Like Emma, Justin does not believe that normal functioning in daily life is enough to qualify an individual as fit. However, unlike Emma, his reasons relate to weight. Emma uses the example of her "hyper" friend who can stay up late and accomplish a great deal. Though this friend "won't work out" and "is not in shape at all," her body size is never mentioned. In contrast, Justin explicitly mentions body size and disqualifies "overweight" people from being "fit" even if such people (like his grandmother) can function comfortably. As I will explain in the biomedical section below, for some respondents, fitness

and fatness are incompatible. This section has shown that although the majority of respondents have a functional understanding of fitness, this meaning is not universally accepted, as illustrated by exceptions such as Emma and Justin.

Biomedical Fitness: Accepted, but not Salient

A majority of the respondents (69%) agrees that biomedical information offers a good indication of fitness. However, they agree with this assertion only after being prompted. Interestingly, when asked whether information like vital signs (e.g., blood pressure, heart rate) reveals an individual's fitness, several respondents spontaneously introduced body fat and its supposed relation to physiological health as a topic of discussion. Though it might be reasonable to discuss body fat in the section on appearance and representation, I include it here with biomedical meanings of fitness because this is how *respondents* understand fat.

I begin with a typical example of a respondent who agrees that biomedical information is an appropriate gauge of fitness. Fred (age 48) explains why he believes that vital signs provide valuable information about whether a person is fit. When I ask him, "What do you think is good or trustworthy about that kind of information?" he says:

> It's usually carefully researched and they often have studied people- groups of people for long periods of time. They calculate things like mortality rate and sickness rate, and so you know, for example, like high cholesterol, for example, is pretty well correlated with heart disease. Uh, so you're getting more of a factual fix on whether- on fitness and health.

Fred believes biomedical measurements are trustworthy fitness indicators because they are "carefully researched" and based on "groups of people" who are studied for "long periods of time." In Fred's estimation, taking such an approach provides "more of a factual fix" on fitness. Reliable facts can be derived from medical research.

Other respondents mention the trust they place in medicine in general and their own physicians specifically as a reason for valuing biomedical information as an indicator of fitness. For example, Geoffrey (age 32) says, "I subscribe to Western medicine generally speaking….I trust that my doctor is *really* concerned about my best interest. I don't trust that American Gym really gives a shit about whether I'm in shape or not." Similarly, when I ask Everett (age 23) about whether he trusts biomedical information, he replies, "Yes, I do. I trust a doctor. They would know better. And I'm not going to say I'm a doctor or educated in that sense, but I would trust them because they are a doctor and that's their job." Although these respondents did not spontaneously volunteer an understanding of fitness in terms of vital signs and medical analyses (suggesting that this meaning is less salient than functional fitness), when prompted, they do agree that biomedical information is a reliable indicator of a person's fitness. Respondents say they believe in "Western medicine" and doctors' education, professional training, concern for their patients' best interests.

Support for biomedical indicators also sometimes comes from respondents' professional or personal experiences. For example, Marjorie (age 60) is a nurse. When asked if a profile of vital signs would tell her if a person is fit, she responds:

M: That's definite. People who are- have a good fitness of their body, they usually have much healthier test results in medical science. Their heart rate is within normal, or even below normal. Because of, you know, taking care of the patients, sometimes, when the patient is a young person, I check their pulse, and I see that it is below normal or it is below average. And the first question I say- I say, "Do you exercise?" And the person says, "Yes, very much." Because when they are fit, their body, um, their vascular systems are so efficient that the heart does not need to compensate with the high rate, you know, that you transfer the blood to the brain and to the cells of the body.

T: As a nurse, what test results do you think are the most important ones for knowing if somebody's fit?

M: Their blood pressure is usually within normal- or at least their systolic blood pressure is pretty good, is very good. Um, their heart rate is good. They don't have irregular heart rate. They actually come out of anesthesia better than those who are fat and floppy.

Marjorie draws direct connections between fitness, bodies, health as measured by medical tests, and exercise. The fit body is substantiated through medical examination (of pulse and blood pressure, for instance), as well as through an individual's practices: people with normal and low pulses tell Marjorie that they exercise. Interestingly, she also connects biomedical fitness to a person's appearance, but switches to informal language to do so. People with good blood pressure, she says, recover from anesthesia "better than those who are fat and floppy." Compared to the rest of her speech, which is formal and medical in tone, "fat and floppy" is distinctly different: colloquial and vernacular, with a negative valence. Additionally, the phrasing of her assessment that fit people with good cardiovascular health are distinct from "fat," "floppy" people makes it logically impossible for a person to be both fit *and* fat.

Another respondent, Anthony, a 20-year-old male and an avid runner, also believes vital signs such as resting heart rate, blood pressure, and cholesterol levels to be good indicators of fitness:

> That's definitely pertinent. I mean, a lower resting heart rate means your heart is having to work less to pump the same amount of blood. Um, as far as cholesterol levels, that says a lot about diet. So you know, you have normal cholesterol levels, that means you're not eating things too high in fat or anything like that. So that can be a good health indicator and as well, a fitness indicator. Body fat levels, like you know, if you're really low, that can be really dangerous to your health and the safety of your body, as well as you know, like really high, um, body fat indexes, that can be bad for your health as well, 'cause it can lead to heart attacks and things like that. So I would say that those can be really important.

Like Marjorie, Anthony chooses words that evoke science and precise measurement (indexes, levels, rates) to discuss fitness and deems heart rate specifically to be an important measure of fitness. He raises the issue of fat, in two different ways – 1) fat in one's diet, as it relates to cholesterol levels, and 2) fat on one's body. Unlike Marjorie, Anthony acknowledges that both very high and very low levels of body fat are undesirable. Interestingly, low levels of body fat are "dangerous" and threaten a person's "safety" whereas high levels of body fat are "bad." Danger and safety carry connotations of things that are hazardous, from which an innocent person might require protection. In contrast, "bad" has more moral connotations and is more closely associated with blame or misconduct (as in "bad behavior"). Saguy and Elmen-Gruys (2008) make the analogous argument that overweight individuals are often "villanized," but underweight individuals are perceived as "victims" (3). Whereas fatness is "bad for your health" (Anthony M20) – associated with health risks

(Featherstone [1982]1995: 185) and presented in news media as reflective of blameworthy "personal choices" (Saguy and Elmen-Gruys 2008: 2) – slenderness symbolizes good self-discipline and a "correct attitude" towards how to take care of oneself (Bordo 1993: 195). While Marjorie and Anthony directly emphasize the importance of heart health, both also obliquely raise the issue that fitness and fatness are incompatible. This attitude puts Marjorie and Anthony in agreement with the stance of "antiobesity" researchers and activists, who maintain that "obesity is an urgent health crisis…[and] an important health problem that needs to be fought" (Saguy and Riley 2005: 875). This claim has been challenged by "fat acceptance" researchers and activists who question "conventional wisdom that overweight and obesity cause ill health" and instead argue that it is possible for an individual to be simultaneously fit and fat, that there can be "Health at Every Size" (Saguy and Riley 2005: 879). Some medical evidence suggests that being "overweight" is not associated with higher levels of mortality (Flegal et al. 2005) and "regular physical activity has health benefits at any weight" (Blair and Church 2004: 1233). Although the terrain of "excess" weight as a social problem is contested, these respondents seem to accept without question the more mainstream position that fatness and fitness are contradictory.

Some respondents drew more explicit connections between biomedical and appearance indicators. According to one respondent, "If they're fat, chances are, they're probably gonna have poor cardiovascular health and they're also gonna have

poor muscle health" (Justin, age 19). Similarly, when asked, "Do vital signs like cholesterol or blood pressure tell you whether someone is fit?" Abby (age 18) replies:

> Yes and no. Because I- like I know there's some overweight people that have high blood pressure and everything, but they could outrun a lot of like skinny, unhealthy people, I guess. So I mean, you can- I guess they're kind of like- what is it that? Directly related. Like most people that are overweight and stuff, they have the high cholesterol, high blood pressure and they're usually not as fit. So I guess you can tell, but it depends on the person.

Both of these respondents articulate a direct connection between fatness and poor physiological fitness. However, both of their statements suggest a tendency rather than an absolute certainty: "chances are," "probably," "most," "usually," and "it depends on the person," are all phrases that suggest a strong but, again, not absolute relationship. They believe it is probable, but not definite that a large-bodied person will also have poor biomedical fitness in various forms: "poor cardiovascular health," "poor muscle health," "high cholesterol," and "high blood pressure."

If such medical measurements are problematic, exercise may be the remedy. One young male respondent, Eddie (age 23), views exercise as an effective way to purge "toxins" from the body.

> It's like, you know, you work out, you sweat it out, you burn fat. You rid yourself of all that nonsense and madness, you know, the toxins. So if they're in your body, you haven't been working out.

He believes that medical tests and vital signs will reveal a person's fitness because a failure to exercise results in the accumulation of unhealthy toxins. The tell-tale sign that a person has not exercised is that "toxins" are present and detectable. Although I ask him about cholesterol and blood pressure, the only specific toxin Eddie names is

"fat." This process of expelling "toxins" helps Eddie establish himself as a clean(sed) and upright individual. He is trying to eliminate "fat" which, although it is part of his *body*, he does not see it as rightly part of him*self*. Rather, it is "nonsense" and "madness" that should be deliberately eliminated. Scholarship on abjection and the boundaries between order and disorder (Douglas 1980; Grosz 1994: 192-8; Kristeva 1982; Weiss 1999) suggests that such a process of purging helps "create the boundaries that will individuate the self" (Weiss 1999: 44) and establish the self as being orderly, rather than disorderly.[7]

A few respondents resisted the idea that biomedical information is central to the meaning of fitness. These respondents offered examples of individuals who fall outside of the range of normal, healthy medical measurements despite having good fitness practices. Here are two respondents who express reservations about biomedical information when I asked them whether such information can be used to determine whether someone is fit:

> To some extent I think that there are people that are fit that still have cholesterol problems. Um, I do think that there are some people who just have hereditary problems. Like my boyfriend's parents are on cholesterol medication, but they go walking for miles and miles and miles every day. They're extremely fit. And they eat healthier than anyone I know. I don't really know much about like the heart thing. I know that I have a girlfriend who had like irregular heartbeats and she's totally physically fit….Then there are people you hear, "They had a heart attack" or whatever, or they have high blood pressure and they're like super healthy and they work out all the time. So I can't- I'm not really sure. (Lindsay, age 32)

[7] This process is similar to the initial phases of the "anorexic career" wherein an individual makes a commitment to transformation and develops a program for "taking charge" of oneself (Darmon 2008: 7-9). The anorexic girls achieve this through controlling food intake and body weight, but also by making over their wardrobes and attempting to excel scholastically. For both Eddie and anorexics, the effortful elimination of fat is assumed to lead to an improved, more orderly self.

> Mmmm. Maybe? But not necessarily, I would say. I dunno, maybe somebody might just have, somehow, some freakish way, happen to have very good heartbeat and circulation and everything else, but whether or not it means that they're, um, doing about twenty laps in a swimming pool every day, or not, I wouldn't be able to tell. (Ruben, age 37)

Lindsay and Ruben do not completely reject the value of biomedical measurements, but rather they offer exceptions to the rule. To challenge biomedical meanings, both respondents present examples of real or hypothetical individuals whose biomedical measurements are inconsistent with their exercise practices. The assumption embedded in both quotes is that people who exercise will tend to have good vital signs and that people who do not exercise will not. The surprising exceptions are a boyfriend's parents who exercise a lot and eat healthy foods but also face hereditary cholesterol problems; and the "freakish" circumstance of someone having a healthy heart whether or not they swim everyday. Rather than positioning this kind of knowledge as flawed or necessarily incorrect, they simply say that it is not definitive – "I'm not really sure," "I wouldn't be able to tell" – precisely because of exceptions such as the ones they just described. These respondents imply that fitness is better evaluated by looking at someone's practices – specifically, whether they participate in regular exercise, than by looking at medical measurements or outcomes.

Overall, biomedical fitness as defined by Edgley and Brissett (1990) and Freund and Martin (2004) – flexibility, aerobic capacity, "normal" blood pressure and cholesterol levels – is widely accepted by respondents as a very important aspect of "fitness" in general. People point to the authority of science, statistics, and western

medicine as reasons for their trust in biomedical measurements as signifiers of fitness. When queried about vital signs, many people bring up weight and fatness, unprompted, suggesting that when people speak explicitly about biomedical fitness, they may simultaneously have a visual image of a fit body in mind.

Representational Fitness: Members Reject the Institutionally-Favored Meaning

Representational fitness is the meaning that members are least likely to embrace. Two-thirds of respondents rejected appearance as a good indicator of fitness. Only one-third of respondents claim that appearance can be reliably used to discern whether a person is fit. These respondents described a fit-looking body in terms of slenderness and muscularity. For example, Justin (age 19) says:

T: Can you tell whether someone is fit by looking at them?
J: I would say you get 75% of a good reading. So I'm gonna go ahead and say yes. Just because you can obviously see um well, their muscular appearance, they must be doin' somethin' if they're muscular. If you can *see* that…they're muscular, that's fifty percent of it, and chances are fifty-fifty chance that they're cardiovascularly fit as well. Or at least you can assume that. So I'm just gonna go ahead and say yes.
T: Does a slim appearance tell you a person is fit?
J: I would say that they're most likely- I mean again, I'm not gonna give you a yes or no, but if I had to give you a yes or no, I'd say, yes, and I'd say there's a better chance that they're gonna be more healthy than ah, you know a big, heavy person. So I'll just go with, if I have to give you a yes or no, I'll go with a yes. But again, it's a majority type thing.

Justin believes that a "muscular appearance" suggests that a person is taking active steps – "doin' somethin'" to be (or at least seem) fit, and that such a person may also be in good cardiovascular condition. Additionally, he supposes that slender people are

probably “more healthy” than heavy people. Yet, his discussion of what a fit body looks like does not evoke the images of ideal bodies that circulate in the gym media and wider culture. It is a rather vague, non-representational understanding of representation. To look fit, a person need not be attractive, slim, or toned in the ways conventionally touted as “looking good.” Rather, a fit-looking individual (possibly) has “a muscular appearance” and is not a “big, heavy person.” Moreover, his commitments to these evaluations are not absolute. He remarks that he is reluctant to say yes or no, but if he must decide, he will say yes, appearance does reveal a person’s fitness. This may mean one of two things. First, perhaps he truly does believe that, with some exceptions, people who appear fit generally are, in fact, fit. (And his understanding of fitness seems to include things like being active, in good cardiovascular condition, and generally “healthy.”) Second, he may have an inkling that it is stigmatized or unpopular to judge fitness by appearance – to judge a book by its cover or make assumptions about people based on what they look like. He might be downplaying his own representational understandings of fitness by saying that he is only saying yes because the question requires such a choice. (It is possible that other respondents also feel that it is socially undesirable to say that appearance matters to them, but were just less candid about it than Justin.)

In contrast to Justin, who repeatedly hedges his statements about understanding fitness in representational terms, James (age 27) does not consider it at all problematic

to do so. When I ask him if he can tell whether someone is fit just by looking at them, his response is immediate, definitive, and simple: "Yeah." I ask him to elaborate:

T: Yeah? When you see somebody who looks fit, what do they look like?
J: …Guys. Big shoulders, like things like back here. [*Points to his lats*] You know what I mean? Your lats. You know, your traps. Um, defined. You know what I mean? You know, a lotta guys can get big, it's not a problem. But getting cut, getting defined, that's where- that's hard work. And when you see that, you're like, "Wow. That guy is spending a lotta effort. Eats really well." Same thing with girls. Not so much into big, burly lookin' girls. Not for me. I dunno. [*laughs*] Like I'm always really impressed with someone that has a six-pack that's really chiseled. 'Cause that's not easy. That's very, very hard to get. You know? Girls' legs. Their back. Especially their back. That's hot…
T: How about slenderness? If someone is just slim?
J: Kinda the yoga- the yoga vibe thing going? Yoga? That's- that's, you know, yeah. Kinda like the 'V' here in the stomach. Yeah. I dunno. It's really hard to tell sometimes, particularly when they have clothes on. [*laughs*]

Whereas Justin's description of a fit appearance was very general – "muscular" and not "a big, heavy person" – James gives very specific details about the aspects of appearance that he believes show fitness. He also makes gender distinctions. It is not enough for a man to simply be "big" ("a lotta guys can get big, it's not a problem"). For James, a fit-looking man is "cut," with well-defined muscles, specifically, a well-defined back, lats, and traps. Muscular definition, minus a large, "burly" build, is key to a fit appearance for women. Shapely legs and back, and a "chiseled" midsection sculpted into either a "six-pack" or a "V" shape are also evidence that a woman is fit. Appearance of the body itself is equated with fitness in James's discussion. Additionally, he places a high value on a fit appearance: "I'm always really impressed," it is "hard work" to achieve such a look. In women, a fit appearance is respected, but also sexualized, as evidenced by James's comment that it is "hot" and

his joke that it is more difficult to discern fitness when clothing covers up muscles (and skin and the surface of the body). James's clear sense of what he thinks fitness looks like is in some ways is similar to the "look" advertised by the gym, with emphases on muscle definition – "cut," "chiseled" – and "six-pack" abs. However, it is somewhat different in other ways. For instance, he places great emphasis on the appearance of a person's back (a body part that is not prominently displayed in gym media), and looks for muscle tone (and not simply thinness) to assess women's fitness. Thus, even the respondents whose understandings of fitness are informed by representation (one third of the sample) have a different view of what it means to look fit than what the gym is advertising.

Two-thirds of all respondents reject the idea that fitness is discernable just by looking at someone. Both men and women give explanations of why it is not possible to tell if someone is fit just by looking at them. Here are two examples of male respondents considering the question: "Can you tell whether someone is fit by looking at them?"

D: You can *look* that way, but that's not always the case. You know, I mean, just like they say, appearances can be deceiving. Just 'cause you look like you're fit, doesn't mean that you *are* fit.
T: If somebody is slender, does that tell you if they're fit?
D: Mmm, no. Not really.
T: How about muscles? If someone has visible muscles, does that tell you if they're fit?
D: Ah, it's kinda hard to gauge it. But, you know, I mean to the average person, they would say, "Yeah, he's fit." But the guy could have two clogged arteries and is about to drop dead, you know? And if he's ridiculously ah huge, chances are he's probably been taking steroids and now that's got some weird side effects. (David, age 36)

> No, not always. There's- it's a great surprise to see someone who doesn't look like they're in that great shape, but they can do fifty pushups, you know? Go you, "Whoa, this person's strong!" You know? I think, ah, like the older you get too that really shows. When you age well, it's like, this person's taking care of himself. Doing something right, you know? Eating, you know. Exercising. (Aaron, age 41)

Both of these respondents maintain that fitness cannot be discerned by looking at someone. They also each give specific examples of people whose appearance and "actual" fitness are mismatched. David points out that a muscular man "could have two clogged arteries and is about to drop dead." Aaron says that "someone who doesn't look like they're in that great shape" might be able to do fifty pushups. These men can conceive of situations where someone *looks* fit but is not *in fact* fit because their health or functioning is compromised. Here, they reject a representational understanding of fitness, which prioritizes *outward* appearance, in favor of gauges like the condition of the *inside* of the body ("arteries") or physical abilities ("pushups"). This finding differs from Glassner (1990) and Monaghan (1999; 2001) who find representational fitness to be of great importance to fitness enthusiasts (Glassner 1990) and to male gym users in particular (Monaghan 2001: 338). Contra Monaghan (1999; 2001), the males in my sample did not consider appearance to be a reliable indicator of whether a person is fit.

Women in the sample were similarly reluctant to use a person's appearance to evaluate their fitness. Again, the argument takes the very specific form of giving an example of someone who fails to conform to standard expectations. Here, women give

examples of people who look fit but, in fact, are not. As Cara (age 27) asserts, "You could look fantastic and…be masking a terrible lifestyle and a horrible diet and, you know, terrible habits." An attractive appearance may effectively hide the things that are perhaps better measures of fitness: "lifestyle," "diet," and "habits." It may not be apparent that these fitness practices are "terrible" if a person "look[s] fantastic." Similarly, Uma (age 23) says:

> No, no. I don't think so. Because I've met a lot of girls, they're in brilliant shape. They could not run a mile. They- sometimes it's just like they have a really fast metabolism. They look good. They are not fit. Or, for example, I've worked out all my life. I was really fit. And that trainer that killed me- so I guess I wasn't as fit as I thought, or- you can- I still looked the same, but I was at a totally different fitness level then. And a year when I did not work out, I still looked the same.

Uma uses her experience of her own body to inform her sense that appearance is a poor indicator of fitness. She feels she has "looked the same" at different points in her life regardless of her "fitness level" or how much she worked out. She also gives the example of girls who look slim ("brilliant shape," "really fast metabolism," "they look good") but cannot complete a basic, straightforward fitness activity like running a mile. Kat (age 29) gives a nearly identical example when asked if she can tell if a person is fit just by looking at them:

K: No. Um, 'cause I know people who are super, like, skinny or, like, the perfect body size and they can't run. They have no stamina. They have no endurance. Their lungs are in crappy shape. You know? Because some people just have biological high metabolism, you know? They just burn through calories faster…
T: How about muscles? If someone has visible muscles, does that tell you if they're fit?
K: I don't think so. 'Cause I would say that they're, you know, if someone's using steroids, they're not fit, and yet they're gonna have incredible muscle tone.

Like Uma, Kat points to how metabolism affects body size. Certain people with "high metabolism" may appear to be "the perfect body size" but are unable to run and are unfit. Like David, discussed above, Kat argues that a person using steroids is "not fit" even though they possess defined muscles. A representational understanding is rejected because appearance (specifically, looking skinny or muscular) is not a convincing proxy for fitness practices. Though Cara, Uma, and Kat reject appearance as an important indicator of fitness specifically, this does not mean that they reject the notion that an attractive body can be a valuable asset for women. The appearance of the unfit women they discuss is described in positive terms: these women look "fantastic," "good," "brilliant," "skinny," and "perfect." Such an appearance is regarded as advantageous, even if it does not indicate fitness. Indeed, women may derive material and social benefits (e.g., higher income, freedom from weight-based discrimination) from maintaining a slim, attractive appearance (Averett and Korenman 1996; Conley and Glauber 2005; Puhl et al. 2008).

So far in this section, I have given examples of both men and women who are skeptical of the value of representational fitness. To make explicit what was previously implicit: there is a strong gender similarity in respondents' rejection of representational fitness. Few members of either gender brought up appearance as a reason for using the gym. Moreover, even these respondents mention it in passing, as secondary to other concerns. For example, Troy (age 37) says:

Well, mainly my motivation is just, you know, I feel better when I go. Uh, looking

> better's just a bonus…Feeling better and, I'm type-2 diabetic, so it helps keep my blood sugar down. So that's the main thing. But, health reasons, number one. Also, I wanna look better. But that's secondary to how I feel.

Similarly, Lindsay (age 32) says:

> To be in shape so I can live a healthy life. Um, to feel strong. I don't like to feel like I can't lift something or walk somewhere or run somewhere. Like, you know, if somebody was chasing me, I'd like to be able to like defend myself or fight them or something, you know. If somebody was attacking me, I'd like to be able to know that I am strong enough to do something. Um, and also because I like to eat and I like to drink and I wanna be able to continue to do all those things and still feel good and strong and healthy. So, you know, to look good, but also to feel good.

Both Troy and Lindsay begin their answer with a list of reasons for using the gym: feeling better, being healthy and strong, self-defense, etc. Appearance is mentioned at the end of the list, in vague terms of wanting to "look good" or "look better." Troy explicitly emphasizes that his reasons related to appearance are "secondary" to his other reasons for using the gym. Among my respondents, only a few people brought up appearance unprompted, and when they did, their comments did not differ by gender. This suggests that for most people, appearance is not particularly salient: it is not what they are actively thinking about and reporting when I ask them why they use the gym.

This gender similarity in how men and women reject representational understandings of fitness is an unexpected finding.[8] It is surprising given evidence that

[8] It is especially surprising given that my respondents reside in Southern California and are overwhelmingly single (78.1% of the sample) and relatively young (median age=31). Thus, they are potentially surrounded by "beautiful people" and perhaps on the dating and marriage markets themselves. These characteristics seem particularly likely to predispose respondents to worry about representation and appearance.

women derive greater material and social benefits from maintaining a slim, attractive appearance than men (Averett and Korenman 1996; Conley and Glauber 2005; Puhl et al. 2008), as this would lead to the prediction that representation would be more important to women than men. It contradicts studies that find women to be more psychologically and emotionally invested in appearance than men (Cash and Hicks 1990; Halliwell and Dittmar 2003: 675; Jackson 1992: 179-205; Muth and Cash 1997; Oberg and Tornstam 1999; Pliner et al. 1990; Rozin and Fallon 1988). It is also inconsistent with studies that find function to be more important to men (Gill et al. 2005; Halliwell and Dittmar 2003). Among my respondents, appearance was similarly dismissed by women and men as a good indicator of fitness. Instead, members of both genders (and all ages) understand fitness in functional terms.

These findings are surprising in at least two ways: first, that people are actually claiming that appearance does not matter, and second, that this holds true for both men and women. There are several possible explanations. One possible reason representation is less important to my female respondents than expected is that exercise might have a protective effect on the women in my sample. There is some evidence that women who exercise regularly or are involved in athletics are more assertive, confident, and able to discount their physical imperfections by focusing instead on the positive qualities (like commitment and willpower) that an exercise program implies (Colker and Widom 1980; Gimlin 2001: 50-1; Hayes and Ross 1986). It may be the case that my respondents can be more nonchalant about

appearance because they are regular exercisers who are, as a group, younger, slimmer, and more fit than the average American. A second explanation is that respondents may believe that it is undesirable to say that appearance matters a lot; they want to avoid seeming superficial. Sometimes what people believe they should express on the surface differs from how they truly feel inside (Hochschild 2003: 15-7).[9] Perhaps my respondents believe that concerns about representation should not guide their understandings of fitness or their evaluations of other people, but at a deeper level, appearance really does matter to them.

A third possibility is that appearance *generally* matters to respondents, but not as a salient component of how they comprehend "fitness" *specifically*. For instance, when asked how important the gym is as a place to maintain or improve appearance, members admit that this is an important factor, giving it an average rating of 3.6 (out of 5; males = 3.7, females=3.5). That is, people rank appearance as a more important reason for using the gym than socializing (rated 1.83), but as a less important reason than exercise (rated 4.42).[10] Though they might consciously reject appearance as a reliable gauge of fitness in particular, given that appearance is important in other aspects of everyday life, considerations about appearance remain as undertones in people's talk.

[9] The interview setting is an occasion for the presentation of self on the part of the respondent. While "doing the interview" people may be much less likely to vent sensitive frustrations – the kind that might arise after an argument with a partner, a day of "bad" eating, or criticism from a supervisor at work. During an interview, respondents might take particular care to present themselves as relaxed, calm, and collected, rather than distressed, unstable, or overly emotional.

[10] See Chapter 2, p. 56-58 for a discussion of the relative importance of socializing and exercising to gym members.

A final possibility is related to age. Though the sample as a whole rated the importance of the gym as a place to work on appearance as 3.6, the average importance for respondents under age 25 was 4.17, while the average importance for respondents ages 25 and over was 3.38.[11] Appearance seems to be a considerably more important reason for using the gym for very young adults compared to older adults. My finding that respondents are generally dismissive of representation as a crucial component of fitness may be driven in part by the ages of my respondents. Appearance seems to be less important (though not completely unimportant) to people ages 25 and older compared to the very young, and over 70% of my sample is over the age of 25.

Of the meanings of fitness examined in this chapter, representational fitness is the least salient and least agreeable to my respondents. The respondents who believe that fitness is discernable from a body's appearance (less than one-third of the sample) described a fit-looking body as one which is slender, toned, and muscular. This is consistent with characteristics that are generally associated with fitness in contemporary Western culture (Edgley and Brissett 1990: 261-2; Featherstone [1982]1995: 185; Monaghan 2001: 338). Respondents who reject representational understandings of fitness (that is, two-thirds of my sample) do so by citing examples of individuals whose appearance and "actual" fitness are mismatched. For instance,

[11] As mentioned previously, nine people in my sample are under age 25. Twenty-three people in my sample are ages 25 and over. This sample is not large enough to yield reliable comparisons of these age groups. The age comparisons I offer here are exploratory and speculative. It would be necessary to include more individuals under the age of 25 to carry out a comparative analysis of these age groups.

respondents noted that someone who looks unremarkable may be able to do "fifty push-ups," but a skinny girl who looks "brilliant" may be unable to run a mile. A final piece of evidence that representational meanings of fitness are not very important to these gym members is that only a few members bring up appearance as a reason for using the gym. When it is mentioned, it is framed as less important than other motivations. The rejection of representational fitness is somewhat surprising, given how heavily these understandings are promoted by the gym as well as in society at large. It may be attributable to a combination of factors: regular exercise may "protect" women from being preoccupied with appearance; respondents may be avoiding responses that would make them seem superficial; they may believe that appearance is important in general but not to their conception of fitness specifically; and the sample is comprised mostly of adults over the age of 25, who may be less concerned about appearance than younger adults.

IMPLICATIONS FOR THE EFFECTS OF MEDIA ON GYM MEMBERS

Whatever effect gym media may have on members, it does not manifest itself in members' reported understandings of fitness. People do not initially select this specific gym for its resonance with their own perspectives on exercise and fitness, nor do they consider their views to have been altered by the gym's influence after joining and spending time there. In the preceding sections of the analysis, I argued that the gym actively markets representational fitness, but markets biomedical and functional

fitness rarely by comparison. In contrast, functional understandings of fitness seem most salient and important to these respondents, followed by biomedical fitness. Representational understandings of fitness are actively rejected by many. Instead of uncritically accepting the representational meanings presented in the gym media, these members formulate alternative meanings of fitness that make more sense to them. This supports a bottom-up perspective over a top-down one. That is, members' experiences are shaped more strongly by the micro-level activities of individual members – e.g., individuals' inattention to and/or rejection of gym media – rather than by the more macro actions of the gym *qua* corporation – e.g., the production and circulation of mass media that emphasizes representation. In this section, I present additional support for a bottom-up perspective, in which members actively construct their own understandings of fitness rather than simply accepting what the gym happens to offer. They initially select this gym for its convenient location or because a friend or relative was already a member. When asked where they get their ideas about fitness, respondents commonly cite trusted friends and relatives, accumulated personal experiences, and popular books, magazines, and the internet as their primary sources of knowledge about fitness. Most respondents claim they have learned little or nothing from being at this gym. Some say this outright, others believe that they do not notice features of the gym environment such as media, and others recognize that the gym markets representational fitness but disagree with that meaning. A few respondents do believe their perspectives have been shaped by being a gym member, and their

accounts are discussed at the end of this section.

The majority of respondents do not believe their ideas about fitness have been particularly influenced by their time in the gym. In response to the question: "Have you learned things about fitness from being at the gym?" Justin (age 19) chuckles incredulously before replying:

> No. No…Maybe I taught myself, oh, you know, this machine works this muscle a little differently than this machine, hey let's switch it up. But other than that, no. Being a member of that gym did absolutely nothing.

Justin believes that the only information he has gained at the gym is that which he has taught himself about various ways to use gym equipment. Being in that environment, he claims, "did absolutely nothing" to shape his ideas about fitness. Hadley (age 19) also rejects the idea that she has learned about fitness from being a gym member:

> Um, no not really. The only time I talked to the gym staff besides like normal, friendly conversation was when they walked us around the gym like, "okay, here's the locker room, here's the weight machines."

Like Justin, who "taught [him]self" about different ways to work his muscles, Hadley's quote suggests that she has had minimal interactions with staff members regarding fitness specifically. Her response also implies that she considers the staff to be potential sources of information about fitness: if she were to learn about fitness, it would be from talking to the gym staff. Because she has not talked with them about fitness since her orientation, she cannot think of anything she has learned. Even during the orientation, she recalls receiving information about the locations of different amenities, but not information about fitness per se.

Justin and Hadley do not think that American Gym has taught them anything about the meanings of fitness, but they seem more or less ambivalent about this. Justin is satisfied to learn on his own, and although Hadley does not discuss fitness with the gym staff, she reports having "normal, friendly conversation" with them. In contrast, the next two respondents, Geoffrey and Sam, express somewhat more cynicism (and even bitterness) when I ask them about what they have learned about fitness from being a gym member:

> *T: Have you learned things about fitness from being at the gym?*
> G: Not really. I have a very cynical attitude towards American Gym….The program works for me, but it's…what I can get out of it is this like little slice and then the rest of it, I don't even think about it….I don't really get information from American Gym. I don't trust them. (Geoffrey, age 32)

> *T: What have you learned at the gym about fitness?*
> S: Nothing.
> *T: Nothing?*
> S: Right, not that they wouldn't be capable of it, but I don't look to them- I haven't looked to them or requested it. I'm sure they'd be happy to take more money from me and tell me things I probably already know, some of it. (Sam, age 30)

Compared to Justin and Hadley, Geoffrey and Sam are more antagonistic towards the gym as an authoritative source of fitness information. Neither of these members considers the gym to be a source they consult to learn more about fitness. Geoffrey says he has a "cynical attitude" towards the gym and does not trust them. Sam believes that information would be available if he sought it, but that it would basically be a scam and a bad value: they would "be happy to take more money from [him]," but he would not learn anything new. He is acutely aware that the gym is ultimately a

business as opposed to a more altruistic entity that exists to teach people about fitness for the sake of helping them. Though a profitable, successful business might also be one that treats its clients with honesty and care, these particular respondents do not feel that they are receiving such treatment from American Gym.

In addition to self-reports in response to a direct question about what they have learned, another source of evidence about whether the gym environment is influencing members' ideas about fitness is their awareness (or lack thereof) of what "fitness" might mean to the gym as a business trying to sell certain products and services. My respondents either claim to have no idea what "fitness" means to the gym or believe that the gym is marketing representational fitness (which they regard with disapproval).

Respondents seem largely inattentive towards media and advertising inside the gym. They are rarely able to recall ads or posters they may have seen, and they claim that if there is an approach to fitness that the gym attempts to sell, they do not know what it is. Here are several examples of how members responded to the question, "Do you think there's a particular meaning of fitness that this gym tries to offer to members?" Abby (age 18) says, "No. Probably not," and Celine (age 33) similarly replies, "Not that I can tell." After a long, frustrated pause, William (age 26) responds, "I don't know? Like, their mission statement, or no?" Fred (age 48) says:

> You know, I'm not really sure exactly what they try to present. It seems to me that they're more oriented towards the body building side of things. Other than that, that's my only impression. I mean, you know, I really have just used American

> Gym for the limited thing I do, and I really haven't gotten into, you know I really don't pay a lot of attention to what else they offer.

Abby and Celine are unsure of whether there is a meaning of fitness being actively marketed; they do not think there is. William hazards a frustrated guess. Fred is unsure, guesses body building (which I would classify as a variety of representational fitness), and then confesses that because he focuses on his own "limited" routine, he does not "pay a lot of attention to what else they offer." These members are unable to formulate a description of what "fitness" means as presented by American Gym. If they are absorbing meanings, they cannot actively recall them.

These respondents did not join this gym because they perceive it as business that actively accommodates their desires and preferences. People in my sample do not report initially, consciously selecting this gym because it suits their approach to fitness.[12] Rather, many are uncertain about what the gym's approach to fitness might be.

The members who do have an opinion about what "fitness" means to this company see the gym as marketing representational fitness. For example, Alice (age 32) believes that the gym markets representational fitness:

T: Do you think this gym has a definition of fitness they try to provide to members?
A: Looking thin. Either looking thin or muscular…
T: How do you know?
A: Oh, all the ads. All the ads. None of them say, oh, like "you'll live longer." Or, you know, "you'll be psychologically healthier." Or "you'll have self-esteem." They all just [say], you know, "you can look like this too."

[12] Instead, as mentioned above, respondents report choosing this gym because it is conveniently located near their home or work or because they have a friend or relative who was already a member.

As discussed in the section on representational fitness above, Alice mentions two of the most common and conventional ways "fitness" appears on the surface of a body: thinness and muscle tone. Her sense that the gym is marketing representational fitness comes from her impressions of advertisements in the gym, which convey the message "you can look like this too." The signifiers of fitness in the advertisements at the gym are looking thin and looking muscular. She contrasts the prevalence of representational fitness ("*all* the ads") with the complete absence of other meanings of fitness in the gym advertising. "*None* of them" offer messages of functional fitness like improving longevity or self-esteem. She distances herself from American Gym's representational approach by implicitly criticizing the company for offering just one meaning of fitness, rather than a variety. Tammie (age 40) gives a similar response:

T: Do you think there's an official definition of fitness that American Gym sells?
T: I think they're just more into thin and weight loss, you know, no matter how you do it. Weight loss…[But] a healthy body is not someone who is skinny, someone who is skinnier than me. Skinny is not always healthy. If that's your body type, that's healthy. But there's all kinds of people….I've got girlfriends who've got calves like gorillas. But that's their healthy body. They can do a push-up, pull-up, sit up. That's a healthy body…Either you're gonna lose weight in the process of learning how to do a push-up, pull-up, sit-up. Then you'll be able to do it. Or those muscles will just get strong enough to pull your body.

American Gym sells fitness as thinness and weight loss, but Tammie does not consider appearance, and specifically looking "thin" or "skinny," as a good indication that a person is fit or "healthy." Implicit in her discussion is a functional understanding of fitness: a person is "healthy" if they can move their own body weight around in

various ways. People who can accomplish such movements may be a range of "body types." Tammie rejects representational understandings (fitness *qua* thinness) when she says, "Skinny is not always healthy," and gives the example of her friends who have *both* "calves like gorillas" *and* "healthy bod[ies]." Alice and Tammie are typical examples of members who recognize representational fitness as the approach offered by American Gym, but actively distance themselves from that understanding.[13]

Similarly, Sam (age 30) also considers American Gym's advertising as promoting representational fitness, which he dismisses. To the query, "What do you think of the posters and ads you've noticed at the gym?" Sam replies:

> I tend to ignore them and consider them sort of for suckers. And by suckers, I don't mean like bad people, I mean like, for suckers. People who like will fall for like an ad that's to convince you that, like, you should be doing this and looking a certain way. I can't get one in mind right now other than the last American Gym commercial I've ever seen which was, you know, a lot of people in spandex doing step aerobics and like hip-hop, pop music playing and some voice narrator saying "Get in the best shape of your life!" and a camera showing you pretty people in spandex looking really happy bouncing around. And I tend to regard that stuff as, like, about as like worth taking serious as like your average like penis pill commercial. It's just, you know, the stuff that gets put out there because there's some people that are so insecure that they fall for it right away.

Sam describes an American Gym commercial that uses representational understandings of fitness to promote the company. The ad seeks to convince viewers that they "should be…looking a certain way" by showing "happy," "pretty people" "in spandex" enjoying the gym's facilities. He demonstrates his disdain for this

[13] Indeed, as discussed in Chapter 1, p. 12-13, some existing medical evidence supports Tammie's contention that it is physical activity (as opposed to weight loss or thinness) that bestows health benefits (Blair and Church 2004; Blair et al. 1996; Blair et al. 1995; Blair et al. 1989; Blair et al. 2004; Katzmarzyk et al. 2005; Wei et al. 1999).

advertising tactic (as well as for people who may be influenced by it) by saying that he does not take the commercials seriously and believes that it targets "suckers" who "are so insecure that they fall for it."

Respondents do not discuss a strong fit between their initial wants and needs when choosing a gym and the services this gym provides. When asked why they joined this particular gym, respondents most commonly said that the location is very convenient or that a close friend or relative was already a member. People do not report choosing this gym for its compatibility with their approach to fitness or even for providing resources that meet their needs as consumers. In fact, they much more commonly offer a variety of complaints about things that they do not like, such as poor sanitation, crowds, and having to wait to use certain equipment. Such evidence suggests that members have *not* specifically selected this gym for its consonance with their wants and needs as consumers and then felt satisfied with that selection.

As the previous examples demonstrate, most respondents believe the gym has not shaped their perspectives on fitness. A few respondents disagree. Here are examples of people who believe the gym has influenced them. In response to the question, "Do you think you have learned things about fitness from being at the gym?" these respondents replied affirmatively. For example, Carmen (age 63) says,

C: Oh yeah. I think that by being at American Gym it made me realize, I think, that I have to make a commitment…to myself to stay fit within a gym.
T: Can you say a little more about what you've learned at the gym?
C: That you have to have persistence. It's nothing that you just picked up for three months. It's a life commitment.

What she has learned does not take the form of exercise techniques or tenets of a specific program. Rather, she has learned that fitness involves a long-term (life long) plan to continue to exercise at the gym. Carmen has learned that fitness involves "commitment" and "persistence." Troy (age 37) says that he has learned an advantage of going to the gym regularly:

> I learned that the more I go, the easier it gets. Your body just acclimates to it and you kinda get ready for it, know what I mean? You know that you're gonna get tired- when you first start, your body's gonna startle and then your body says, "You know what? I'm kinda used to this."

He has learned that his body acclimates to gym exercise the more he does it. Like Carmen, Troy does not report learning discrete pieces of saleable fitness information, but rather a general attitude that fosters the reproduction of gym-going. Carmen describes this as learning about "persistence" and "commitment," Troy experiences this as feeling like the more he goes to the gym, the more prepared his body is to continue to go to the gym. Neither of these members point to a source within the gym (e.g., a trainer, advertisements, other members) where they specifically learned or acquired these attitudes.

Kat (age 29) has acquired a similar attitude from being in the gym, but unlike Carmen and Troy, she believes she has learned this from her trainer specifically.

T: Where do you get your ideas about fitness?
K: Um, I talk with my trainers. Um, I talk with my doctor. And I've read a lot online and a lot of books…
T: What have you learned at the gym from your trainers?
K: Well, I mean, a big part of it is that you've gotta work for it. And that was actually inadvertent. I mean [my trainer] always teases me, he's like, "You're my favorite client!" And I'm like, "Why?" And he's like, "Because you do

> what I tell you." And I'm like, "I'm paying you a ton of money. Why would I *not* do what you tell me?" And he's like, "But you *do*. Not everybody I work with does what I tell them to. They complain and they whine. But you have an attitude of fitness. You care about your health. You care about making yourself a better person. And so you're becoming more fit." So a little bit of it has been working with [my trainer] and having him encourage me and show me what it means to be striving to be a better person, like athletically as well as emotionally.

Kat has learned that she must work hard and follow her trainer's advice if she wants to "becom[e] more fit" and "a better person." Her "attitude of fitness" is manifest in her hard work, commitment, and striving. For Kat, using the gym has physical ("athletic"), emotional and moral dimensions. Again, the few respondents who believe that they have learned about fitness from being at the gym do not describe acquiring knowledge that has changed their appearance, lowered their resting heart rate, improved their flexibility, or expanded their repertoire of exercise activities. These respondents say they have learned something less concrete, but perhaps more valuable and widely applicable to their everyday lives. Having "commitment" and "persistence" (Carmen), making your body more comfortably prepared for physical activity (Troy), and "making yourself a better person" (Kat), are all potentially useful in a variety of ordinary contexts far removed from the gym. People who say that they gym has shaped their perspective on fitness say that they have learned the value of hard work. (These themes of productivity and hard work, as they relate to the experience of exercise as a moral obligation are developed further in Chapter 4.)

A majority of members reject the gym's emphasis on representational fitness. To understand why this is so, I asked members what (if anything) they feel they have

learned about "fitness" as a result of being in the gym. Respondents tend to believe that they have not been particularly influenced by the gym environment. Indeed, they struggle to recall advertisements or other media they have seen there, they report a lack of interaction with staff members who might have been sources of tips or guidance, and they are generally uncertain about whether the gym even offers members a particular vision of what fitness is or how it should be practiced. Respondents who do have an opinion about what "fitness" means to the gym *qua* company say that the gym markets representational fitness to members. Members who noted this immediately distanced themselves from this understanding – an explicit rejection of the gym's influence. The few members who do believe that their perspectives on fitness have been shaped by the gym report learning the value of "persistence" and "commitment" to fitness, and how to use the gym to become "a better person."

CONCLUSION

Though "fitness" almost always has positive connotations, its specific meaning is typically taken for granted. This chapter has explored the meanings of "fitness" as understood by gym members and considered the extent to which these understandings align with or reject those offered by the gym *qua* company. Previous studies by Glassner (1990) and Monaghan (2001: 338) have shown that representational fitness – fitness defined in terms of appearance – is the meaning favored by many fitness

enthusiasts. Appearance has been found to be quite important to both men (Monaghan 1999; Monaghan 2001) and women (Halliwell and Dittmar 2003). Additionally, images of slim, toned, "ideal" bodies are pervasive in contemporary American media (Bordo 1993: 185-212; Featherstone [1982]1995: 177-81; Glassner 1988: 31-33). Consistent with these findings, my content analysis of media produced by American Gym reveals that representational fitness is frequently and vividly depicted in gym media. Themes of biomedical and functional fitness are rarely depicted. Given previous research as well the prevalence of representational fitness that I find in gym media, it is reasonable to predict that gym members will associate fitness with representation and physical appearance. However, this prediction is not borne out in my study. Representational fitness is not particularly important to either male or female respondents in my sample.

Instead, gym members most commonly understand fitness as functional fitness. The ability to comfortably accomplish everyday tasks, fulfill ordinary social roles, and move about fluidly and free from pain is extremely important to gym members and central to what fitness means to many of them. Functional fitness is the most salient meaning of fitness for both males and females in the sample, a finding that differs from Halliwell and Dittmar's (2003) finding that functional concerns are more prevalent among males. Bourdieu (1984), Shilling ([1993]2003: 114), and d'Houtaud and Field (1984) associate practical concerns about the body's ability to function (for work as a manual laborer, for instance) more with the working class. However, my

study finds that such instrumental concerns about basic functioning are clearly not limited to working class individuals. To the contrary, functional considerations are extremely important to middle class gym members.

Respondents believe that biomedical measurements, such as cholesterol and resting heart rate, are reasonable indicators of fitness. However, biomedical understandings of fitness seem to occur to members for the most part only when specifically prompted. That is, biomedical meanings are less salient to these respondents. To the extent that they are trusted, biomedical measurements of fitness garner respect from their association with the authority and professional status of scientists, doctors, and researchers. When queried about biomedical fitness, some respondents spontaneously commented on the relationship between fatness and fitness. People viewed fatness as incompatible with good fitness. Though many doctors and researchers believe that being heavy is a health risk, other experts have countered that practices like eating nutritious foods and exercising regularly are more important for health than weight loss per se, and that healthy bodies come in many sizes (Blair and Church 2004; Blair et al. 1996; Blair et al. 1995; Blair et al. 1989; Blair et al. 2004; Brownell and Horgen 2003; Flegal et al. 2005; Katzmarzyk et al. 2005; Nestle and Jacobson 2000; Wei et al. 1999). Respondents seem generally unaware of these debates, offering instead the conventional, albeit increasingly contested, position that fatness and fitness are incompatible. (This theme emerges again in Chapter 4; see p. 187-202).

Though respondents have not abandoned their association of fatness with necessarily poor fitness, many fortunately, vehemently *do* reject "ideal" representations of bodies as barometers of fitness. Again, two-thirds of the sample resisted understanding fitness in representational terms. Many definitively rejected appearance as a useful gauge of fitness. The remaining third of people who do believe that it is possible to ascertain fitness from the appearance of a person's body described fitness in terms of slenderness and muscularity. Their descriptions of what fitness looks like are consistent with arguments by Bordo (1993: 185-212), Featherstone ([1982]1995), and Glassner (1988) about what bodily features are interpreted as fit in contemporary Western culture.

Given that American Gym's advertising and marketing campaigns heavily emphasize representational fitness, it is surprising that members' own understandings of fitness reject representation in favor of a functional understanding of fitness. This is consistent with the predictions of a bottom-up perspective and contra the predictions of a top-down one. Recall that the "object" I am using this framework to analyze is members' experiences. The gym may attempt to influence members' experiences from the top-down, via media that depicts and reinforces the corporation's representational understanding of fitness. However, this strategy appears to be at least somewhat ineffective. Members' own perceptions, individual readings of gym media, and the influence of decentralized sources outside the gym (e.g., talking with friends, independent internet research) seem to be exerting much greater influence over

members' reported experiences and perspectives regarding fitness. Even when exposed to a high volume of representational media, members do not define fitness for themselves in these terms. American Gym attempts to espouse dominant (representational) views about fitness, but does not appear to succeed in indoctrinating members to accept them. Rather, many members find the "preferred meaning" (Hall [1980]1996: 134) of gym media irrelevant and adopt a different meaning instead. Members are most likely to hold the least marketed understanding, and vice versa.

Gyms have considerable potential to shape popular ideas about fitness, and are likely to be guided by profit over and above other considerations, including those of peoples' "best interests" vis-à-vis health. If a gym emphasizes representational understandings of fitness, this may negatively impact people's capacity to enjoy exercise, feel comfortable and confident about their bodies, or think critically about what they personally require. Therefore, it is crucial to understand the extent to which gyms succeed in exerting pressure on individuals to adopt their vision of fitness. Fortunately, at American Gym, members are quite dismissive of dominant, representational messages, and overwhelmingly favor functional understandings of fitness instead. Finally, given that everyday functioning and biomedical health are important to many members, commercial gyms should consider providing more services directed towards these aspects of fitness.