# CHAPTER 4: OBLIGATION OR RECREATION?

## INTRODUCTION

The study as a whole explores how exercise is experienced in a mainstream commercial gym. Chapters 2 and 3 examined how members define the situation at the gym and make sense of the meanings of "fitness" per se. This chapter speaks to the study's central question of how members experience gym exercise by focusing on how members feel about exercise as an activity they may *need* or *want* to do. More specifically, this chapter explores the moral dimensions of exercise by examining how some members experience working out at a gym as a personal responsibility or obligation while others view it as fun, pleasurable, and recreational. To what extent do members feel like exercise is something they simply have to do and to what extent do they enjoy it? A perspective of personal obligation and responsibility may resonate well with members of a society that emphasizes individual accomplishments and celebrates the "hope that we can somehow exert meaningful control over what will happen to our health and lifespan" (Becker 1993: 4). Moreover, it can feel *good* to be in control: people may experience the practice of disciplining their bodies and fulfilling personal commitments to themselves as sources of pleasure (Dinnerstein and Weitz 1994: 11; Turner [1984]1996: 164). However, this perspective may also lead people to use health statuses, exercise practices, fat, and body size as moral measuring sticks against which to judge their own self-worth as well as the character and value of others (Becker 1993: 4). For other people, exercise may simply be fun. Monaghan

(2001) and Gimlin (2001) have interviewed men and women who experience physical exercise as a source of exhilaration and intense bodily pleasure. This chapter explores how these various possibilities emerge in the experiences of my respondents.

## LITERATURE ON OBLIGATION & RECREATION

Fitness has both been criticized as a form of oppressive vanity that distracts people from more important pursuits as well as championed as a vehicle for empowerment and bodily pleasure (Glassner 1988: 256-7). In contemporary American society, body work such as regular exercise is often viewed as a moral act, and the people who do it are seen as models of personal responsibility and self-control (Dinnerstein and Weitz 1994: 11; Glassner 1988: 246-254; Kilwein 1989: 9-10). Good fitness and health are often assumed to be the outcomes of "personal volition," "diligent effort," and "individual achievement" (Edgley and Brissett 1990: 258). For example, Conrad's (1994) respondents report that exercise helps them feel "better physically, especially after they exercised" as well as better about themselves (391-3). Conversely, people who fail to take "individual responsibility for health and lifestyle change" through such choices as smoking, failing to exercise, and eating foods high in fat or cholesterol (Conrad 1994: 387) are considered "sick" and face pressure to reform their bad habits (Edgley and Brissett 1990: 262). An unhealthy person's condition is deemed the result of "improper life-styles" (Turner [1984]1996: 209) and "individual moral failing" (Crawford 1980: 380). Because such a person is responsible

for their own failure, they are "a legitimate target of moral revulsion" (Edgley and Brissett 1990: 262). Like these other scholars, Becker (1993) is very critical of this emphasis on individual responsibility in movements that promote exercise, fitness, and health. He writes,

> One may speculate on the many reasons for the emphasis. For example, Western ideology has always placed great value on the individual, particularly with regard to the importance of personal responsibility for one's own successes or failures…It also caters to our hope that we can somehow exert meaningful control over what will happen to our health and lifespan, and to our Puritanical tradition. (Becker 1993: 4)

The point is that popular discourses about health and fitness frequently portray exercise as a personal moral obligation. Character and "personal worth" are seen as lacking in people who are "guilty" of failing to meet their personal obligations to take appropriate care of their bodies (4).

Some scholars emphasize the recreational, pleasurable aspects of fitness. For example, Monaghan's (2001) respondents describe exercise as a source of sensual bodily pleasure (331). They derive enjoyment from the sense of physical wellbeing, exhilaration, and feeling "pumped" that exercise produces (345). One interviewee said, "I feel as high as a kite when I come out of the gym" (347). People also take representational pleasure in exercise; they enjoy the way exercise makes their bodies look (338-9). Similarly, some of Gimlin's (2001) respondents enjoy exercise (aerobics classes, specifically) for a variety of reasons. They like the camaraderie of being with other women, they make friends, and the classes improve their energy and mood (70-71). They feel empowered and, through exercise, come to admire their bodies, their

stamina, and their physical accomplishments (Gimlin 2001: 146). These individuals "revel in the physical sensations" of exercise and experience it as "a source of pleasure involving physicality, sexuality, and activity….rather than a form of domination" (146).

Turner (1976) argues that as a society, Americans are placing an increasing emphasis on recreation, pleasure, and impulse gratification. He describes this as "a shift toward the impulse pole" (989), where "a person does something solely because he wants to – not because it is good or bad or noble or courageous or self-sacrificing, but because he spontaneously wishes to do so" (992). Impulse is contrasted to an "institutional" locus of behavior that seeks a "correspondence between prescription and behavior." (The institutional locus is roughly analogous to the idea of obligation in my framework.) But again, Turner believes that "impulse" and recreation are exerting increasing influence over individuals' behaviors.

Although I have discussed obligation and recreation separately so far, it is possible that these dimensions are not mutually exclusive. For some people, exercise may feel like *both* recreation *and* obligation. Weber (2002) is useful for understanding how obligation and recreation may be woven together. Weber observes that the Puritan conception of a calling was extended from vocations to "an ascetic organization of life" in general (112). Sports for the sake of "spontaneous enjoyment" were frowned upon; however, they could be included within an ascetic way of life if they "serve[d] a rational end" like "promot[ing] the relaxation indispensable for

further physical achievement" (112). Similarly, although Protestant asceticism opposed the spontaneous enjoyment of possessions and consumption, it supported rational acquisition (115). If possessions will be used rationally, then it is acceptable to have them (115). "If in the past individuals disciplined the body to control their passions and submit to God, nowadays individuals discipline the body to extend their lives and increase their pleasures (Turner 1984: 156, 161-3, 172)" (Dinnerstein and Weitz 1994: 11). Along the same lines, Bourdieu (1984) suggests that certain (middle class and affluent) individuals "find satisfaction in effort itself" when it comes to gymnastic exercise (214). Discipline, rather than interfering with pleasure, can itself be experienced as pleasurable.

If exercise is productive, requires effort, and enables rational acquisition, this begs the question of what, specifically, exercise produces. What does exercise enable people to acquire? Commercial gyms attempt to produce fitness as a "commodity" that consumers may acquire. Marx (2001) proposes two factors of commodities: 1) use value, which is the substance of value (quality); and 2) exchange value, which is the magnitude of value (quantity) (458). Commodities are "both objects of utility, and, at the same time, depositories of value" (466). However, when commodities are exchanged, use values and exchange values become independent of one another (460). If fitness is a commodity (i.e., it has both use value and exchange value), and the notion of physical fitness is inseparable from physical bodies, then it is important to examine the relationship between commodities and bodies. Sometimes, "commodities

produce bodies" (Faurschou 1988: 82). At the gym, a variety of body-shaping commodities are available for consumers to purchase. In this commodification relationship, money is exchanged for commodities (such as fitness services) that are used to create a particular bodily appearance. Images of bodies are often used to sell products or services that promise some improvement to a body – a more youthful appearance, relaxation, a stylish haircut, increased muscle tone, etc. Bodies themselves are commodities whose "total capital" (Darmon 2008: 15) may be leveraged in dating, marriage, and labor markets.

A body that is produced via fitness-related commodities may have different uses for different people. For example, working class individuals may have a more instrumental approach to exercise (e.g., to condition the body for a physically demanding occupation), whereas members of the middle and affluent classes are more preoccupied with health and asceticism (Bourdieu 1984: 212-3; d'Houtaud and Field 1984; Shilling [1993]2003: 114). Gymnastic exercise can potentially "produce either a strong body, bearing the outward signs of strength – this is the working-class demand, which is satisfied by body-building – or a healthy body – this is the bourgeois demand, which is satisfied by a gymnastics or other sports whose function is essentially hygienic" (Bourdieu 1978: 835). Members of the privileged classes also tend to focus on exercise as a means to cultivate "the appearance of the body as a perceptible configuration, the 'physique', i.e. the body-for-others" (Bourdieu 1978: 838). This proposed preoccupation with appearance may serve practical ends for middle class and

affluent people (and especially women) striving to maintain class position. For women, the cultural capital of the body translates into economic capital, as a lower BMI is associated with higher income, occupational prestige, likelihood of marriage, spouse's earnings, and spouse's educational prestige (Averett and Korenman 1996; Conley and Glauber 2005). Attention to appearance is unlikely improve a middle class woman's actual performance at work (in the sense that weight lifting, for instance, would improve a manual laborer's performance at work), but it may function to reproduce or increase her class position.

The analysis presented in this chapter is organized into three sections. In the first section, "Productivity & Guilt," I argue that many respondents experience exercise as a moral obligation because it is a productive activity. Productivity, in turn, is experienced as positive and pleasurable. Thus, for many respondents, exercise is *both* recreation and obligation. In the second section, "Fat & Morality", I explore the negative moral evaluation of fat – relative to thinness and muscle, which both have positive valences – and the role exercise is deemed to play in avoiding fat. In the third section, I examine "Gender Similarities & Differences" in whether people experience exercise as "recreation only," "obligation only," or "both."

## PRODUCTIVITY & GUILT

### *Feeling Productive*

Many respondents experience exercise as a "productive" activity. What is produced varies from person to person, ranging from vague, intangible "products" like feeling good, to concrete, embodied "products" like a slimmer physique. The need to feel productive lies at the core of members' senses that exercise is a responsibility and an important moral and personal obligation. At the same time, however, they derive pleasure and enjoyment from the outcomes that fulfilling their obligations produces. That is, exercise is often enjoyed precisely *because* it is productive. This orientation towards productivity leads to either pleasure and satisfaction if the person exercises or guilt if the person does not. People judge themselves and others harshly when they fail to engage in productive exercise.

During interviews, I introduce this topic by remarking: "Some people exercise because they think it's fun and enjoyable; some people work out because they feel it's a personal responsibility, like they have to. What about you?" When I ask Marjorie (age 60) whether she goes to the gym for fun or out of a sense of obligation, she replies,

> I have to….I go there mainly to maintain my fitness. I enjoy it because after I am done, my endorphin kicks in and I am happy that I have done two hours of work for myself.

Although Marjorie believes that exercising is something "I have to" do, an obligation, she also enjoys it. Her reasons for enjoying exercise are the physiological and

emotional benefits she derives right after completing a session of productive "work for [her]self." As a result of her accomplishment, she experiences pleasant physiological sensations – "endorphins" – as well as a positive emotional state – she is "happy." The recognition of certain somatic sensations as pleasant (or satisfying, unpleasant, disgusting, etc.) is learned by individuals who occupy specific social locations (Darmon 2008).[1] A person's physical state following vigorous exercise – possibly sweaty, smelly, hungry, fatigued, or sore – could potentially be an unpleasant somatic experience. But Marjorie, from her social location as a middle class gym member, has acquired a somatic taste for exercise, one that emphasizes pleasant post-workout feelings (i.e., endorphin rush, happiness).

Lindsay (age 32) is another example of a respondent who derives emotional benefits from exercise. Her desire to reap the benefit of exercising, which is, for her "feel[ing] good," is sufficiently strong to push her to exercise even when it feels like an obligation. She says:

> Sometimes I don't wanna exercise, but I always like how I feel afterwards, so I wanna enjoy that feeling and feel good about myself. I like how it makes me feel when I'm done with it. So even sometimes I don't wanna do it, I'll make myself do it anyway, and it always feels good afterwards…Do I enjoy it or do I just do it? Sometimes it seems like a chore, but once I get into the chore, I'm always a hundred percent there once I'm in it. I'm always glad I did it.

Compared to Marjorie, Lindsay uses slightly more negative language to express herself. For example, she repeats "I don't wanna," and calls going to the gym a

[1] Darmon (2008) makes this point with anorexic girls whose preference for light fare (consistent with their French middle class and affluent social location) fosters the development of specific somatic

"chore." However, she disciplines herself to do it, and likes the way that self-discipline feels: "I'll make myself do it anyway, and it always feels good afterwards." Like Marjorie, Lindsay enjoys how she feels *after* exercise. Bourdieu (1984) argues that middle class individuals often "find satisfaction in effort itself and…take the deferred gratifications of their present sacrifice at face value" (214). This fits well with the situation Lindsay describes when she says, "Once I get into the chore, I'm always a hundred percent there once I'm in it," and "I like how it makes me feel when I'm done with it." She derives satisfaction from expending effort, from doing this "chore," and knows she will feel even better as soon as she is done.

This sentiment is prevalent in my sample. Somatic learning, and specifically learning to interpret the feeling of the post-workout state as positive, may be quite widespread in the U.S. gym-going population. One fitness industry survey found that 63% of current gym members agree with the statement, "I usually feel better after a good workout than I did before" (IHRSA 2005: 80). Similarly, Conrad's (1994) respondents frequently reported that exercise helped them feel "better physically, especially after they exercised" as well as better about themselves (391-3). Gimlin's (2001) respondents say they feel "virtuous," and "physically better, maybe because of the endorphins," as a result of their participation in aerobics classes (62). The outcome (or "product") of exercise for these respondents is a general state of positive emotional wellbeing: it feels good to have done something for themselves.

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sensations tied to eating: they enjoy the feeling of having an empty stomach and hate the feeling of being too full (10).

Other respondents describe somewhat more specific and concrete valuable outcomes that they derive from exercise. For example, Fred (age 48) responds to my question about whether he feels like exercise is obligation or recreation:

> I'd say it's actually kind of fifty-fifty. Um, I mean, 'cause there are certainly times when I definitely don't feel like going to the gym, but I go out of a sense of, you know, responsibility and not wanting to ever lose my fitness, and stuff like that…Just on a psychological level, on an emotional level, on an energy level too, I just feel more energetic after I've worked out. It's a bit of a high, particularly with running. I mean, like, definitely, it alters my mood, *alters my thinking, alters the quality of my thinking. And I happen to have a lot of insights when I run. Whatever problems might happen to be up that day in my life, work issues or other issues, it's almost like a meditation.* For me, it's like a meditation. I mean, it definitely alters my state of mind. In a positive way….I enjoy the activity in itself for its own value.

It is clear that Fred exercises, in part, "out of a sense of…responsibility." He practices discipline by going to the gym even when he does not want to because doing so helps him to maintain his fitness. Part of him seems to genuinely enjoy it as well. Similar to Marjorie and Lindsay, Fred experiences a post-workout "high" and a positive state of mind as a result of exercise. Fred also "enjoy[s] the activity in itself for its own value." This is consistent with Bourdieu's (1978) characterization of "gymnastic" exercise as "the ascetic sport *par excellence* since it amounts to a sort of training for training's sake" (838). However, exercise is actually more than just its own end for Fred. Additionally, it adds value to his life above and beyond just a general sense of feeling good (as was the case for Marjorie and Lindsay). The concrete benefit he derives from exercise is that it improves the quality of his thinking and makes him more productive at work. Exercise sessions are meditative times for him, a context in which he has "a

lot of insights" and reflects on problems that he is facing. Physical exercise serves a rational end (Weber 2002): it promotes relaxation, which helps Fred resolve "work issues or other issues." This exercise may be reconciled with "an ascetic organization of life" (Weber 2002: 112) because it improves Fred's ability to perform his job. Fred's perspective is especially interesting because his reasons for exercise are both formally and substantively rational. He does it to control his fitness (formally rational) and as a "meditation," something spiritually enriching (substantively rational) (Cockerham et al. 1993). Exercise is a productive activity that yields valuable outcomes including fitness, increased energy, practical insights, and a relaxed state of mind.

Another "valuable" outcome of exercise may be weight loss and weight maintenance. For example, when I ask Aaron (age 41) if he exercises for responsibility or fun, he says,

A: Responsibility. Yeah. It's like, I really could be goofing off right now, but I'm gonna go to the gym. Because it's productive. And the results are like, oh it's actually working, so that inspires me to keep going.
*T: Can you say how you know it's working?*
A: ...Yeah, you like the compliments. It's like, I noticed my pants are all- I need to buy new clothes because of it. I'm like, "yeah!" You know, being a single guy too, getting attention from the opposite sex is always a big reward. And even when I get it from the same sex, I'm like, semi-flattered. I'm like, "hey thanks!"…I don't frown on it as much as I used to. Because um, it was more of a chore. But once you get into the routine of it, it's all- you- I heard someone say this recently: you never leave a gym saying, "Oh my gosh, ah, why did I do that?" You always go, "I'm glad I went." You're never sorry that you went to the gym.

He immediately chooses "responsibility" (over fun) as characterizing his attitude

toward gym exercise, and later, like Lindsay, describes it as a "chore." Going to the gym is explicitly "productive" and is contrasted to the implicitly unproductive activity of "goofing off." Significantly, Aaron uses the past tense to describe when he feels glad: he is glad that he *went*. Like the others, he describes feeling good specifically *after* exercising. It is a rewarding way for him to spend his time because it is a decision that he never regrets, as exercise yields several specific benefits for Aaron including weight loss, compliments, and attention from women. In addition to the emotional benefits Aaron derives from being a "productive" exerciser, he also derives a physical, embodied benefit. His (newly slimmer) body is a product of exercise. He experiences weight loss as a positive outcome: "The results are like, oh it's actually working, so that inspires me to keep going." He is pleased that his old pants are too big, and he must buy new clothes. This in turn leads to other benefits, such as compliments and attention from women, all of which are experienced as "always a big reward."

Kat (age 29) offers a similar response when I ask her to imagine that an "ideal body pill" has hit the market. The pill is safe and affordable and will give the person who takes it their "perfect body," however they conceptualize that. I ask, "If such a pill were available, would you still exercise? Why or why not?" Kat says,

> Yeah. I know this is a hypothetical and it's all safe, but you don't value anything that comes that easy. I've lost twenty-five pounds in the last two years, and I haven't gained a single pound back. And I could've lost fifty to seventy-five pounds, and it could have come off much faster, but I really value every pound and every inch. And I've like- because I've worked so hard for it, and I haven't gained a single bit back, so because of that, I really value it and I really treasure it and I

> don't take it for granted. Whereas the things that come that easy, people just don't value. It's like, "oh, I can just pop a pill and then I'll go and I'll pig out and eat everything I want because oh look, I can just take a pill tomorrow and I'll be fine." And I don't think- I don't think that's the way I wanna live my life.

Kat values her recent weight loss because she has "worked so hard for it." Here, exercise is experienced as hard work. Like Aaron, Kat considers her body to be a product of exercise. More specifically, her recently achieved slimmer body can be conceptualized as a product that has been imbued with the value of the labor she has invested in it. If a technology were to reduce the amount of labor required to create this product its value would be reduced. Marx ([1867]2000) gives the example of the introduction of power-looms in England. The looms halved the amount of labor need to "weave a given quantity of yarn into cloth" and this product, the cloth, "consequently fell to one-half its former value….[T]hat which determines the magnitude of the value of any article is the amount of labour socially necessary…for its production" (461). Kat's hard work has resulted in an outcome that she "treasure[s]" and does not "take…for granted." The "ideal body pill" is unappealing to Kat because reducing the labor required to produce a slimmer body makes that product less valuable: "things that come that easy, people just don't value." She identifies with her weight loss and implicitly draws a "symbolic boundary" (Lamont and Fournier 1992: 1) between herself and individuals who would rely on a pill for weight loss, rather than on hard work and self-discipline as she has.

Faurschou (1988: 82) argues that, in some cases, "commodities produce bodies." Bodies are presented in advertisements, for example, to provoke an

association between a product and a certain look. Commodities such as exercise equipment, fitness facilities, diet pills, cosmetics, and wrinkle creams promise to aid the production of a particular bodily appearance. Aaron and Kat both use American Gym as a commodity to produce their bodies. The gym is a commodity in the sense that the company is providing a fitness service. To provide this service, American Gym offers additional commodities: both Aaron and Kat use the exercise equipment available inside the gym, and Kat regularly works out with two different personal trainers there. The value of their product (their slimmer bodies) is socially recognized. Aaron is "reward[ed]" by compliments and attention from women. Kat prefers exercise (which she experiences as hard work that produces results slowly) over the hypothetical fast-acting commodity the "ideal body pill" because she sees hard work as a socially recognized value. Again, she rejects the idea of using a diet pill because "things that come that easy, people just don't value." This discussion links back to the question of obligation and recreation by showing that hard work is valued and rewarded. It can be recognized as a moral pursuit in terms of Weber (2002). Although exercise for the sake of "the purely spontaneous expression of unrestrained impulses" and "spontaneous enjoyment" may be frowned upon, it is compatible with an ascetic way of life if it "serve[s] a rational end" or demonstrates that a person "lead[s] an organized life anchored in asceticism" (Weber 2002: 112). Asceticism "viewed the acquisition of wealth, when it was the *fruit* of work in a vocational calling, as God's blessing" (Weber 2002: 116). The acquisition of a slim body when it is the "fruit" of

hard work at the gym is virtuous and an indication of ascetic practices. Indeed, a slim, toned body is socially valuable in contemporary American society, and the "acquisition" (achievement) of such a body demonstrates discipline, control over impulse, and asceticism (Bordo 1993: 195; Featherstone [1982]1995: 183; Glassner 1988: 246-254).

In all of these examples, respondents describe exercise using the language of labor and effort: it is "productive," it is not "goofing off," it is a "chore," it is "work." However, the result of this work is positive, generating good feelings.[2] People are "glad" and "happy," they experience pleasant physiological sensations like endorphin rushes and runners' highs. Exercise can lead to valuable outcomes such as insights about personal and work-related problems (Fred) and weight loss (Aaron and Kat). Thus for many respondents, these dimensions of recreation and obligation are not mutually exclusive. Exercise is experienced as *both* pleasurable and moral. These "individuals discipline the body to extend their lives and increase their pleasures (Turner 1984: 156, 161-3, 172)" (Dinnerstein and Weitz 1994: 11). Morality (vis-à-vis discipline) is not separate from pleasure, but rather, discipline itself is experienced as pleasurable.

[2] Fitness industry data indicates that this sort of experience is common in the broader population of U.S. gym members. The Fitness American-Style II study (IHRSA 2005) reports that 53% of current gym members agreed with the statement, "When I'm exercising regularly, it makes me feel like I've really got my act together" (80).

***Feeling Guilty***

The moral high people experience when they fulfill this obligation is counterbalanced by feelings of guilt when they fail to do so. In other words, an orientation towards productivity leads to either pleasure and satisfaction if the person exercises or guilt if the person does not. For instance, Cara (age 27) describes how she experiences this tension:

> Well, to a certain extent, it's definitely guilt-ridden. Like, I feel worse about a lot of things in my life when I'm not working out. Like, I feel like a lotta things are more manageable if I'm in better shape and I'm sleeping better. So in that sense, it makes me feel bad about myself if I don't go. But I also, you know, there are times when I absolutely enjoy going. It's what I wanna do when I get off work. So it kind of depends- depends on what else is going on in my life…I guess I just feel, like, really accomplished. Like, I'm really proud…It makes me feel good to know that I've been disciplined and I've been working towards something and I'm feeling great…I just think the whole thing is pretty healthy, like healthy mentally too, you know?...I'm not real big on forcing myself to do it when I don't want to. It's just like, "well, hopefully tomorrow I'll feel like it." But I'll do things, like for example, on a day when I've eaten In-and-Out Burger and a bunch of crap, I'm gonna be like, "oh, I don't feel like going." I'm like, "you know what, I'm gonna go tomorrow, and I'm gonna eat well tomorrow and it's gonna be a productive day all around."

During periods of her life when she is highly motivated to exercise ("when I absolutely enjoy going. It's what I wanna do when I get off work"), she feels "good," "proud," "accomplished," "healthy," and "disciplined." Through exercise, Cara feels she can satisfy what Bourdieu (1978: 835) has called the "bourgeois demand" of exercise – health and a healthy body. She says: "I just think the whole thing is pretty healthy." She experiences days where she both exercises and "eat[s] well" as "productive day[s] all around." In contrast to Fred, Aaron, and Kat, who focus

primarily on the positive benefits derived from exercising, Cara adds an account of avoiding negative situations that arise when she fails to exercise. When she does not exercise, she is "guilt-ridden," "feels bad about [her]self," and "worse about a lot of things in [her] life." Ruben (age 37) offers a similar account:

> There is a bit of a guilt involved, and the guilt is connected with…the number of times I used to exercise and go running and go biking and whatever, years and years ago. Whereas right now, just not so much. So that- that creates a bit of a guilt…There are times when I'm like, "oh, I shouldn't be sitting down here, I should be exercising or doing whatever." So that- there's a bit of guilt there. That turns into misery. I could be agonizing, "oh! What am I doing at this party? I should have- you know- I could have had two hours to myself." You know? But then, there are times when I'm often- I could have been there, running or whatever, and I'm not. So the guilt comes over and that turns into agony again.

He feels guilty for two specific reasons: first, because he used to exercise more often, and second, because sometimes he is not exercising when he thinks he should be. Instead of exercising, he is "sitting down" or attending a party. When he opts to do less active things like sitting, or more fun, social things like going to a party, he feels intense negative emotions including "guilt," "misery," and "agony." When he chooses against having "two hours to [him]self," he feels terrible about it. As the examples of Cara and Ruben show, some respondents are effectively in a state of constant vigilance and permanent self-surveillance (Foucault [1975]1995: 200-3) and often become self-critical when they fail to meet their personal obligation to exercise.

***Do you know people who don't exercise?***

Just as respondents judge themselves, they also judge other people negatively for foregoing exercise. People who have "unhealthy" practices such as cigarette

smoking, careless eating, or failing to exercise may be blamed for not "changing their bad habits" (Edgley and Brissett 1990: 262). In the contemporary context of "individual responsibility for health and lifestyle change" (Conrad 1994: 387), maintaining such habits is a person's "own fault, the unhealthy individual becomes a legitimate target of moral revulsion" (Edgley and Brissett 1990: 262). Some of my respondents draw "symbolic boundaries" (Lamont and Fournier 1992: 1) to distinguish themselves from people who do not exercise, for instance, by commenting that forgoing regular exercise indicates laziness and a lack of effort. I ask my respondents if they know people who never exercise. Alice (age 32) says simply, "Yeah. Um, they're either too busy or just lazy and they don't enjoy working out. It's too hard. It's too much work." She concisely offers several possible reasons that people she knows might not include exercise in their everyday lives. There is a slightly negative moral valence to her characterization of such people as "lazy"; exercise is too difficult and effortful for them. Overall, however, Alice basically lists some deterrents to regular exercise without judging those who get deterred particularly harshly. Jeremy (age 35) also knows people who do not exercise:

> Yes I do. Yes I do.…They don't have active lifestyles anyway, they don't have active jobs. My first thought is, "You don't know what you're missing. If you really gave it a month, and saw the positive benefits of it, I think you wouldn't quit"…These are people who, they find something very simple to fill their life with and it's usually sitting in front of a TV…I try not to criticize them about it, but I do make them wonder, "could your time be better spent? Go for a walk"…I think a lot of it is that they never played sports when they were younger. Um, they just don't know that feeling. To them, working out or doing any kind of, um, exhausting physical activity just feels like exhaustion. It feels like pain to them. And, um, you know, you've got that Homer Simpson mentality: "I have to *walk* to

> the kitchen to get a beer?" Yeah. It's- take pleasure in the walking! It feels good sometimes. Yeah.

Jeremy believes deeply in the "positive benefits" of exercise. He contends that people who do not exercise fail to do so for a variety of reasons that cast them in a negative moral light. They do not have "active lifestyles." They do not realize what they are missing; if they could see the benefits that he sees, they would do it too. His specific language establishes a symbolic boundary by suggesting that he knows better than they do. There's a "paternalistic cant" (Glassner 1988: 250) to his argument, reminiscent of when "wellness advocates" offer information to low-income individuals: "We're just telling them for their own good. Once people are given the facts about exercise and diet, they'll thank us for saving their lives" (250). The people Jeremy describes "fill their life" by watching television. Although he resists admonishing people ("I try not to criticize them") he does want them to re-evaluate how they choose to spend their time, for instance, by selecting walking over watching television. They have developed a "Homer Simpson mentality" that makes them experience walking to the kitchen for beer as excruciatingly effortful. He suggests that their experience of exercise as "exhaustion" or "pain" is a product of cultural conditioning, learned during their "upbringing." These "deeply-rooted somatic sensation[s]" (Darmon 2008: 10) of associating physical activity with discomfort stand in stark contrast to the conditioned somatic preferences that Jeremy and other middle class gym members in my sample have acquired – liking, rather than loathing, the feeling of exercise. Of course, Jeremy does not recognize his somatic sensations as

also culturally conditioned and arising from his specific social location. This interpretation of exercise, as it is part of his habitus (Bourdieu 1984: 208-211), seems natural and obvious to Jeremy. He also takes it for granted that a lack of regular exercise should be regarded critically, in a negative moral light.

This chapter asks whether members experience exercise as obligation or recreation. In this section, I have argued that members commonly experience exercise as *both*: they derive enjoyment from fulfilling a personal obligation. Many members describe this in terms of feeling "productive" when they exercise, in the sense that exercise generates myriad "products" for members, from positive emotional states like feeling "happy" to embodied outcomes like weight loss. Though people feel "proud" and "good" when they fulfill their obligation to exercise, they feel "guilty" and "bad" when they do not. Additionally, just as members judge themselves harshly for not exercising, they may judge others as well. One issue that provokes much judgment from members is fat, the subject to which I now turn.

**FAT & MORALITY**

In this section, I analyze quotes from respondents who connect fatness to a failure to exercise and use pejorative moral language to do so. I then contrast this with people's descriptions of thin friends and family members who do not exercise. Exercise is considered optional for thin individuals. With respect to the necessity of exercise, I find evidence of a clear double standard for larger compared to smaller

people. Different standards of productivity and expectations about the need to exercise are applied to people depending on their body size.[3] This relates to the question of whether exercise is considered as obligation or recreation as follows: when judging others, many of my respondents see exercise as an obligation for larger people, but as an optional activity that thinner people should do if they enjoy it. Though respondents tended to blame fat people for their fatness (if they would exercise, they would not be fat), I discuss two exceptions to this. One respondent (Jack) raises the possibility that body size is at least partially in-born and another respondent (Eve) acknowledges that she has both "overweight" and "tiny" friends who do not exercise. This section closes with a discussion of some people's resistance to the possibility that weight gain could be healthy, contrasted with some respondents' actual experiences of weight gain being healthy.

***Judging Body Size***

Many respondents associate failure to exercise with fatness. The connection is implicit in the following quote from Justin (age 19). When I ask him whether he knows people who do not exercise, he replies:

> I've just got a couple of friends from high school. They prefer ah playing video games, computer games…I feel bad 'cause a couple of them smoke too. Smoke, drink, never exercise. I mean, if people are out playing catch, they won't come join. I mean, they'd rather sit inside and drink a soda. But I'm probably more

[3] Although I did not sample respondents by body size, there does not appear to be a relationship between a respondents' own body size and whether they apply this double standard to others. In the examples I discuss in this chapter, the double standard is voiced by slim and heavy respondents alike. Interestingly, among my respondents who are themselves thin ("underweight" or on the low end of "normal" weight in terms of BMI), though they describe exercise as optional for enviable thin friends or for thin people as an abstract category, they consider exercise to be mandatory for themselves.

> extreme than a lot of people. I think about health as very, very important to me. I really feel bad for 'em. That would be my biggest emotion goin' on there. Like I'm not angry at them for not doing it. It's just like, you know, the future of the world is gonna be fat- fat Americans and it just seems like a dreary future if everyone's gonna be unhealthy, dying young, having to worry about things like that. I wanna go through life not having to worry about having a heart attack or something. There's things like cancer you can't avoid, that's all chance, but I'm gonna do everything I can to try and avoid the things that are under my control.

Justin's vow to "do everything I can to try and avoid the things that are under my control" suggests that he perceives himself as having some efficacy and control over the extent to which he is healthy. He can exert control via certain choices he makes. His position reflects a tendency in contemporary health promotion movements view individuals as personally and actionably responsible for their own health (even though that assumption is inconsistent with current medical knowledge of major determinants of health and illness) (Becker 1993: 3-4; Conrad 1994: 387). Ostensibly, others are faced with choices similar to Justin's, and it is their responsibility to make morally correct ones – ones that make a person less likely to be "fat," "unhealthy," and susceptible to "dying young." Like the individuals in Jeremy's quote who can barely motivate themselves to walk to the kitchen, Justin's friends will not play catch because they would rather sit inside and drink soda. He notes that these same people also smoke, drink, and never exercise. He feels sorry for them. Clearly, Justin sees his perspective on exercise as different from (and superior to) that of his friends, and describes the contrasting perspectives in ways that reinforce a symbolic boundary between himself and (inferior) others. Although he does not say whether these specific friends are fat, he follows his description of their habits with a prediction of a "dreary

future" where people will be fat, unhealthy, and die young. His judgment is relatively mild, however. He simply feels kind of "bad"; he is not particularly "angry" or condemning. Moreover, the connection he draws between fatness and a lack of exercise is implicit. I now analyze examples of respondents who stated this connection more explicitly and pejoratively.

Many respondents describe family and friends who are fat, which they believe to be associated with a lack of exercise. When I ask Celine (age 33) about whether she knows people who never exercise, she replies that neither her parents nor her brother work out. I ask her what she thinks of that:

> I think that…my mother definitely should. Um, she's tried, but I dunno what goes through her head to make her stop but, like, she- she's overweight, and my brother's kinda getting overweight. Um, my dad is- I'm definitely like my dad, where he's naturally thin. But he doesn't work out at a gym, but he's a very active person. Like he's always doing stuff on the house and, you know, strenuous activity, so he kinda does work out, I guess. In a different way, but yeah. I'd like to see my brother and my mom [exercise].…I think it's depression, really, I think is what it is. You know? She just doesn't have the energy….I don't think she really has the kick-in-the-ass kind of motivation.

Here, Celine describes two contrasting constellations of personhood. Her father is "naturally thin" but is also a very "active person" who is vigorous, busy, and productive, "always doing stuff" and engaging in various strenuous physical activities. The overall moral valence of her description of her father is positive, and Celine associates herself with him: "I'm definitely like my dad." In contrast, her mother is described in more negative terms, as depressed and lacking motivation and energy. Her mother is also overweight and does not exercise, although Celine believes she

"definitely should." This implies, again, that individuals can and ought to change their behaviors in ways that will enhance health (Becker 1993:3-4). Overall, positive character traits are attributed to the individual who exercises and is thin. Negative characteristics cluster around the overweight person who does not exercise. Body size and exercise practices thus become traits "by which character and personal worth are judged" (Becker 1993: 4).

When I ask Eddie (age 23) if he knows people who do not exercise, he responds by describing some of his family members as follows:

> Yup. I know a lotta people…I've already got pictures in my head. Alright. Like, when you get fat, right, you get fat and you become lazy, right? And once you become lazy, it becomes a part of your lifestyle, know what I mean? And once that's a part of your lifestyle, you don't wanna do nothin'. 'Cause I got- like I said, we've got diabetes in my family, so we're all fat. I got fat-ass cousins, dude. And they don't do nothing but smoke weed and fuckin' watch TV. And they don't wanna walk down the block. They don't even wanna go out and kick it with their friends anymore. They just wanna kick it at home and go to sleep. That shit is amazing, dude. I'm like, how do you live like that? That's so boring. Definitely.

Eddie is thoroughly critical of his family members for being "lazy" and disinterested in even such mild exercise as walking. He also associates fatness with illness, specifically diabetes. This assessment is morally loaded insofar as "health and health-promotion behaviors are frequently depicted as good while disease and putatively disease-producing behaviors are seen as bad" (Conrad 1994: 388). His reference to "lifestyle" suggests that he sees his family members as deeply entrenched in their sedentary practices. Eddie's perception that his "lifestyle" as different from and superior to theirs ("I'm like, how do you live like that?") offers another example of the

construction of symbolic boundaries. He blames these particular non-exercisers for organizing their time poorly and judges them negatively for preferring to spend time on "boring" activities like smoking weed, watching television, and sleeping, instead of on implicitly more worthwhile pursuits like exercising and being with friends. Although the specific descriptions vary among respondents, the common thread is that a lazy lifestyle and a rejection of exercise are tightly associated with being fat.

Respondents' descriptions of fat non-exercisers differ dramatically from their descriptions of thin non-exercisers. Whereas larger friends and family members "should" exercise, thinner ones "don't have to." Who "has to" exercise? It seems that it is compulsory or at least highly recommended for larger people, but optional for thin people. Consider the following three strikingly similar responses to my question, "Do you know people who never work out?"

> Yes, my sister. She does not exercise at all…I'm very jealous because she's very slim and she looks very fit. Though I know she doesn't exercise one bit and eats candy and macaroni every day….She's lazy. She has a gym membership, but she never goes. (Hadley, age 19)

> Okay, my sister is taller than me and slimmer than me. She never worked out. She eats chocolate and junk food all day long, and she looks like- I don't know- she doesn't have to work out if she doesn't like it. (Uma, age 23)

> Well, I have a co-worker that's a size zero, and she can eat Big Macs like every five seconds and never works out. So I think she just looks good and she, you know, keeps herself busy in other ways. (Cheryl, age 30)

All three of these quotes are from female respondents who describe women in their lives who do not exercise, but eat lots of stereotypically unhealthy foods ("candy and macaroni every day," "chocolate and junk food all day long," "Big Macs like every

five seconds") and still remain slim. As the respondents give these descriptions, their voices are tinged with jealousy and one respondent acknowledges this explicitly: Hadley says she is "very jealous." My respondents seemed to believe that for this kind of slim woman, exercise is completely optional. She might not exercise because she is "lazy" or because she "keeps herself busy in other ways," but a lack of exercise is not a moral problem per se. Despite the lack of exercise, she "just looks good," is "very fit," and most importantly, "doesn't have to work out if she doesn't like it." Saguy and Riley (2005) have studied competing frames for the issue of obesity. Overweight bodies are seen by some as evidence of personal irresponsibility and a moral failure to make "good" choices about exercise and diet (Saguy and Riley 2005). However, "fat acceptance" researchers and activists dispute this interpretation, claiming that the recommended diet and exercise practices do not always result in thin bodies (Saguy and Riley 2005). Thin bodies that do not exercise, like those described by the respondents above, challenge this assumption too, as these bodies are "irresponsible" (they make "bad" choices about food and exercise), but do not display the "evidence" (an overweight body).

In short, for the respondents above, fat is unhealthy, stigmatized, and assumed to be related to a failure to exercise. Although several respondents believed that thin people they know do not "have to" exercise, heavier people are blamed for their body size – as in, if they exercised, they would not be fat. Two respondents stand out as

giving somewhat more reflective responses. The first, Jack (age 33), invokes an in-born, familial component to body size:

> People that don't work out, it's kind of a lifestyle thing for them…They can tend to have a very unhealthy lifestyle, and they're not very healthy. They don't work out…One of my friends really doesn't ever work out. He goes to yoga every once in a while, not really that much though. But he's as skinny as a rail…he's the skinniest guy. And he- women actually adore him 'cause they think he's just- they love the way he looks, you know, for one. And his personality too, but um, but I mean he doesn't- he doesn't really work out. He doesn't have to work out. He was born that way, naturally. It pisses me off a little bit. [*laughs*] But um, you know, so he's just- he's already got the physique, the perfect physique that, you know, he's not worried about it. He just lives his life and everything's great. He doesn't have to worry about that at all. Other people do have to worry about that. But, you know, my roommate, who doesn't really work out or exercise too much, but he tends to watch what he eats a lot, but he's still in his natural comportment where he's a little heavy. But that runs in the family, like, his dad and his brother are big guys and that's just how it is in his family. I mean, he's not as big as those guys, 'cause he doesn't- he's just very careful about what he eats. Especially the amount. 'Cause he won't eat a huge meal. He'll just eat a little bit. Um, but he's still a little bigger. I know that he'd like to probably lose that, but he's got his lifestyle that he likes. And he doesn't, I think, want to take on a big workout lifestyle to get to that point, or, you know, whatever it would be that he has to do.…[Some guys] just smoke and drink and eat what they want and they stay skinny. Some guys just get big and fat.

In some ways, Jack's description of his thin friend is quite similar to the description the female respondents discussed above gave of thin women they know. Jack's friend "doesn't have to work out" because he has "the perfect physique." Insofar as middle class people tend to focus "on the appearance of the body as a perceptible configuration, the 'physique', i.e. the body-for-others," (Bourdieu 1978: 838), the thin friend simply *has* what many must *strive* for and "worry about." The effortless slenderness and considerable appeal to women make Jack somewhat jealous. The friend's natural thinness offers freedom from body worries. Jack contrasts his thin

friend to his heavier roommate, who must be "very careful about what he eats." Because being a "big guy" "runs in the family," the roommate must monitor himself in a way that the friend does not. Jack's description suggests that he believes that both thin people and heavy people become so through a combination of "lifestyle" and in-born factors. "Lifestyle" is perceived to be within an individual's control, whereas in-born factors are ostensibly outside of it. For example, both friends have made the "lifestyle" choice to exercise a little bit, but not much, and both are subject to in-born factors as well: "born that way, naturally," "natural comportment," "runs in the family." Additionally, to Jack, thinness is enviable but not necessarily healthy (the friend can "smoke and drink and eat whatever [he] want[s]"), and his larger roommate does make some "careful" choices such as eating smaller portions of food as part of an effort to not gain weight.

Like Jack, Eve (age 19) recognizes that exercise does not completely determine body size. However, she is also aware that she evaluates friends differently depending on whether they are overweight, and attributes a very positive moral value to exercise.

> I definitely have friends that never exercise but are overweight, and friends that never exercise that are actually tiny…As much as you know in your head they're both the same, there's a lot more tendency to say, "you're overweight. Just go to the gym, you know. Just do something about it."…I've always been such a fit person, it's hard for me to understand how someone, like, doesn't have that as part of their life. So I would never say it to them or anything. But of course, I don't think highly of people- I mean, I try to keep myself closer to healthy people that exercise. Partly naturally, you know, because if I'm gonna go out, those are the people that, like, wanna go for a bike ride with me, kind of thing.

There are both "overweight" and "tiny" people among her friends who do not exercise, and she never actually says that she thinks more highly of thin people. She says she prefers to spend time with "healthy people that exercise," people who will be active with her, (e.g., "go for a bike ride") but she does not specify whether she assumes such people would have a particular body size. However, her attitude towards overweight people is blaming, negative, and heavily moralizing: "just go to the gym…Just do something about it." Being overweight is presented as a personal problem that can and should be solved via proper individual actions (Becker 1993). On one level, she clearly sees people as personally and morally responsible for being overweight (Conrad 1994: 388; Dinnerstein and Weitz 1994; Nichter and Nichter 1991: 256; Saguy and Riley 2005). Moreover, her own commitment to exercise "can lead to denigrating those who appear to lack control" (Dinnerstein and Weitz 1994: 11); for instance, when she says, "I've always been such a fit person, it's hard for me to understand how someone, like, doesn't have that as part of their life." On another level, Eve recognizes that her thinking is flawed ("you know in your head they're both the same") and that it is inappropriate to actually subject her friends to this negative, moralizing stance ("I would never say it to them or anything"). Though this respondent acknowledges some of the problems with her perspective, negative and moralizing sentiments against overweight remain prominent in her account.

***Healthy & Heavy: Necessarily Incompatible?***

In this section, I analyze some people's resistance to the possibility that weight gain could be healthy, contrasted with some respondents' actual experiences of weight gain being healthy. Some respondents have such strong convictions that fat is unhealthy that they seem confused when I ask hypothetical questions about becoming simultaneously heavier and healthier. Such respondents – generally articulate, thoughtful, and on-point throughout their interviews – become unsettled and nervous when I propose scenarios where exercise leads to weight gain. Other respondents are willing to gain weight, but only in the form of muscle, not fat. Finally, I discuss respondents who offer examples from personal experience that challenge the often taken-for-granted assumptions that a higher body weight and better health are necessarily incompatible.

Bea (age 66) is one respondent who expresses confusion and resistance when I ask her, "Hypothetically, would you exercise if it made you healthier, but also ten pounds heavier?" She says, "Ah, nothing's gonna do that…nothing's gonna do that. These questions are crazy! [*laughs*] Who gave you these questions?" She resists the possibility that this hypothetical situation could ever occur. Her confusion and incredulity are underscored when she laughs nervously and inquires about the source of such a "crazy" question. It is inconceivable to her that weight gain and improved health could happen simultaneously. Cara (age 27) is similarly resistant to this idea:

> Healthier and ten pounds heavier. See, those two things just seem like opposite ends of the spectrum. They seem mutually exclusive, you know? Like, how could

> you be healthier and ten pounds heavier? That doesn't make sense to me. But, hypothetically, I would say, it would be a disincentive for me to work out. I don't know that I would absolutely cut it out, but it's definitely a disincentive.

Similar to the respondents in Chapter 3 whose talk implies an incompatibility between fitness and fatness, weight gain and improved health are "mutually exclusive" to Cara, they are opposites, and their co-incidence seems impossible and nonsensical. If exercise were causing her to gain weight, however, she would reduce her exercise, even if it was improving her health. The magnitude of weight gain as a "disincentive" to exercise is larger than the magnitude of improved health as an incentive to exercise.

In response to this same question, "Would you exercise if it made you healthier, but also ten pounds heavier?," several men immediately wanted to know whether this weight gain of ten pounds would be in muscle or fat, and had different answers, depending. For these men, fat weight was deemed necessarily unhealthy, but muscle weight was more acceptable. For example, when I ask Jack (age 33) if he would continue to exercise if it made him healthier but also ten pounds heavier, he wants to know whether I mean ten pounds of muscle or ten pounds of fat. I suggest that he answer each separately. Ten pounds of muscle? "Definitely work out." Ten pounds of fat? "No way." When I ask him to discuss why he feels so much more reluctant to gain fat than muscle, even if it means being healthier, he replies, "Because I feel like I already am healthy. So that would just be- I'd just take on ten more pounds of fat. And that would make me less healthy. So I wouldn't wanna do that." For Jack, weight gain is not necessarily undesirable. He would "definitely" continue to exercise

if it promised improved health and weight gain in the form of greater muscle mass. Gaining fat specifically is very undesirable, however, because it would "make [him] less healthy."

James (age 27) is similarly enthused about gaining muscle and confused about gaining fat. Muscle? "M- yeah. That's what I'm- yeah. I'm tryin' to get heavier, so that's cool for me." Fat? "That's a weird question. I don't know. Ah, probably not. Um. I don't know *how* you would feel healthier but be like ten pounds fatter. Is that a trick question, dude?" Like Bea and Cara, James resists the idea that this hypothetical is within the realm of possibility. The question is "weird"; he wants to know if it is a "trick question." Like Jack, he is pleased to exercise to gain muscle weight ("that's cool for me") but reluctant to do so to gain fat weight ("probably not"). For these respondents, gaining health and gaining fat are so antithetical that respondents have difficulty conceptualizing how this hypothetical scenario would ever be realized. These examples are consistent with previous research that suggests that women tend to want to lose weight and decrease size, while men want to develop muscle tone and mass, and are thus equally likely to want to lose or gain weight (Grogan 1999: 57, 79). This fosters an increasing disadvantage for women who, if they succeed in becoming smaller and weaker individuals, become less able to protect their own bodies or complete certain tasks for themselves. This also suggests that prejudices against large body size are gendered: women do not want to gain body weight at all, whereas some

men are happy to gain body weight, provided that it takes the form of muscle, not fat. However, in both cases, anti-fat sentiment is manifest.

Despite the confusion and anti-fat attitudes expressed by individuals such as those discussed above, more than a third of respondents say that they would continue to exercise if it made them both healthier and ten pounds heavier. Improved health is desirable even if accompanied by weight gain. A few respondents are even happy to gain the weight, and not just muscle weight specifically. When I ask Lindsay (age 32) if she would continue to exercise if it hypothetically made her healthier but also ten pounds heavier, she replies, "Sometimes I feel like it does. When I ran a marathon, I gained weight 'cause I had to eat more to have the energy to do it, but I still did it." For Lindsay, weight gain is neither problematic nor hypothetical. Her actual experience is that vigorous exercise requires the energy that food provides. Eating more both enabled her to run a marathon and, in her account, contributed to some weight gain.[4] Lindsay's BMI (based on her self-reported height and weight at the time of the interview) is 23.4. If she were to gain 10 pounds, her BMI would be 25.4. She is content to gain this hypothetical amount of weight if it improves her health, even though that would move her from the "normal" weight category to the "overweight" category in terms of BMI. She is an example of someone who does not assume that weight gain is necessarily unhealthy.

[4] Lindsay did not specify whether this weight gain took the form of muscle, fat, or both.

Another example of this is Anthony (age 19) for whom weight gain was included among his exercise and fitness goals. He reports,

> Yeah. I've actually gained weight since starting. So, that was actually a goal of mine…I actually have gained fat too. Which I- actually- that was another goal, so. I mean, I was really, really skinny when I started. I actually felt like I was much less healthy before I started working out…Just 'cause I was a lot skinnier, and I wasn't eating enough when I was working out.

In contrast to Bea and Cara who resist the possibility that exercise could cause both increased health and weight gain, Lindsay and Anthony actually experience this in a very positive way. Lindsay is content to gain weight because eating more gives her the energy she needs for marathon running. Anthony is actively striving to gain weight by increasing both body fat and muscle mass.[5] In contrast to Jack and James, whose comments implied that gaining fat was necessarily unhealthy, Anthony felt healthier after gaining some fat. Before he started exercising, he felt "less healthy," "a lot skinnier," and believed that he was not eating enough. To him, gaining weight in terms of both muscle and fat was an active "goal" of his exercise regimen, and not a strange, unlikely, or unhealthy hypothetical scenario.

Many respondents regard fat negatively and associate it with a failure to exercise. They judge larger friends and acquaintances harshly for not fulfilling their obligation to exercise. A double standard is often applied, however, as thin people are seen as enviable, regardless of their exercise habits. Respondents say that their thin friends and acquaintances should exercise for pleasure, if they like it, but do not *need*

[5] Anthony discussed his efforts to build muscle elsewhere in the interview.

to. Some members vehemently resisted the possibility that an individual could be both fit and fat, simultaneously healthy and heavy. This finding perhaps illuminates some of the importance of representation lurking beneath the surface of members' perspectives. It may suggest that people are actually more motivated by representational goals than they want to admit. They might be embarrassed to admit it, but the question about whether they would work out if it made them heavier lends some support to the idea that there may be a gap between the what they express on the surface and how they feel underneath (Hochschild 2003: 15-17). Many people *take it for granted* that exercise will make them look slimmer (or at least not fatter) and become nervous and confused when this important and fundamental assumption is called into question. Approximately one third of respondents did not believe that healthy and heavy are necessarily incompatible. Some of these members related personal experiences to show that improvements in health and fitness are sometimes accompanied by increases in weight and fat.

## GENDER SIMILARITIES & DIFFERENCES

The previous two sections show that men and women give similar accounts of the value of productivity and hold similar attitudes about fat vis-à-vis morality. As discussed at the beginning of the chapter, many of my respondents, regardless of gender, enjoy exercise *because* they like the feeling of fulfilling a personal obligation. They find it pleasurable to take responsibility for their health and wellbeing through

exercise. It was very common for people to discuss elements of both recreation and obligation. When I coded my respondents according to whether they mentioned recreation only, obligation only, or both, I confirmed my sense that "both" was the most popular answer, and also discovered an interesting and quite pronounced gender difference, presented in Table 4.1 below. Proportions are given in parentheses.

**Table 4.1.** Number of Respondents Reporting Obligation, Recreation, or Both, by Gender

| | Obligation only | Recreation only | Both |
|---|---|---|---|
| Males | 7 (0.44) | 1 (0.06) | 8 (0.50) |
| Females | 1 (0.06) | 2 (0.13) | 13 (0.81) |
| All | 8 (0.25) | 3 (0.09) | 21 (0.66) |

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

As Table 4.1 shows, approximately two thirds of my respondents experience exercise as both obligation and recreation. Men and women are similar in that it is very common to experience exercise as both. Though more women than men report "both," it is the most common response for both genders. Men and women are also similar in that almost no one reports experiencing exercise as purely recreational. However, men and women appear to differ markedly in the extent to which exercise is conceptualized as exclusively obligation. Although almost half of the male respondents mentioned only obligation, this was true of only one female respondent. Although these *n* values are small (seven males compared to one female), I argue that the particular ways these respondents discuss obligation is gendered. The content of their quotes reveals gendered understandings of what obligation means.

I begin this discussion by briefly presenting two quotes, one from a female and one from a male, that represent the most common kind of response in the data: experiencing exercise as *both* obligation and recreation. It was given by four-fifths of the women and half of the men. I discussed this sort of answer at length in the section "Productivity & Guilt" at the beginning of the chapter but give two additional examples here, as a reminder of what this kind of answer looks like. Uma (age 23) offers a standard example of a woman who experiences elements of both responsibility and pleasure in exercising at the gym:

> I would say responsibility. I have a lot of fun and enjoy it. I think it's hard if you have to work out if you don't really like it. But I really like it. But also, yeah, it's my body. I only have one body. And I take care of [it]…Once you start it, your body's used to it. And when I don't work out, I get, like, frustrated. I have too much energy in my body.

Uma clearly and simply states both elements. First, she considers it a responsibility to take care of her body. The importance of the task is underscored by her statement that she "only ha[s] one body." If something is unique and irreplaceable, it is advisable to take good care of it. Second, she expresses that exercise is also experienced in part as recreation for her. She has "a lot of fun and enjoy[s] it."

James (age 27) is an example of a man who experiences exercise as both obligation and recreation:

> Ah, a little bit of both. A little bit of both. I do it because I like to do it. If I didn't like to do it, I wouldn't do it. You know what I mean? But at the same time, I set goals for myself, and that's the only way that I can really achieve things, is if I write things down and I set goals. And then when you hit that goal, you're like, "okay, cool. I did that. It wasn't that hard." You know what I mean? And then you keep making gains...It takes consistency. It takes dedication. And once you do that,

> you- you'll see tremendous results…It's euphoric...I'm not in there goin' "Yippee! This is great!" 'Cause it's hard work, you know? But I would more say, it's like after the workout, you know what I mean? After the workout, or after you hit somethin' that you weren't quite sure you could…I would say it's probably, ah, maybe sixty-forty…Sixty-forty obligation. Forty fun. 'Cause that's the kinda person I am. I hafta take things like really, really serious…So it's like it has to be an obligation for me for the most part. But I do like doin' it.

James also states clearly that exercise is both a responsibility and a pleasure. He considers exercise to be "hard work," and sees his serious, driven, and goal-oriented approach to working out as part of his identity, the kind of person he is. At the same time, he likes to exercise, and describes it as "euphoric," and as "forty [percent] fun." Again, these are examples of the most prevalent answer to the question of whether exercise is experienced as obligation or recreation. The answer for the majority of my respondents (including many of the respondents in my discussion of "Productivity & Guilt" at the beginning of the chapter, as well as for Uma and James here) is "both." It is ascetic, obligatory responsibility *and* fun, recreational pleasure.

Another gender similarity was that very few people of either gender experience exercise as purely recreational. Previous research by Monaghan (2001) and Gimlin (2001) includes descriptions of respondents who experience exercise as intensely enjoyable. For example, Monaghan's (2001) respondents, (predominantly male) users of body-building gyms, describe exercise as a source of sensual bodily pleasure (331). They derive enjoyment from the sense of exhilaration and feeling "pumped" that exercise produces (345). One interviewee said, "I feel as high as a kite when I come out of the gym" (347). Some of the female aerobics class participants studied by

Gimlin (2001) experienced exercise as "a source of pleasure…Women revel in the physical sensations of body work" (146). However, less than ten percent of my sample (only two women and one man) described exercise only in recreational terms. Tammie (age 40) was one of the two women who discussed the enjoyment and pleasure of exercise without mentioning anything about personal responsibility or obligation. She says,

> I actually really love it…I wish people would find something that they like to do. I mean, exercise is not necessarily picking up a weight. Exercise is not necessarily a push up. Exercise could be dancing. Exercise could be just, you know, singing. Exercise could be laughing. I mean, exercise comes in all different areas. People need to find what it is that they like, what they enjoy, utilize it to their advantage because otherwise, it's the quality of life they're actually giving up.

Tammie loves exercising and wishes that other people could discover the same fun and pleasure that she derives from it. She believes that people can experience a better "quality of life" if they can identify forms of exercise that they enjoy. Tammie establishes exercise as enjoyable by expanding its very definition. She maintains that it is not limited to traditional (perhaps stereotypically not-fun) gym exercises like lifting weights and doing push-ups. Rather, for Tammie, exercise includes a variety of pleasurable recreational activities such as dancing, laughing, and singing. Her enthusiasm is apparent in her voice. William (age 26), the only male respondent who mentioned only recreation, gives a similar response. Like Tammie, William's enjoyment of exercise is palpable in how he describes it:

> I enjoy it. A lot. Just like Arnold said in *Pumping Iron*, it's like when you're in the gym, you feel the pump. You feel all the blood rushing into your muscles and you feel like you're about to collapse and [*laughing, then in "Arnold Schwarzenegger*

> *voice," quoting from the documentary*] "It's like coming. I'm coming on stage, I'm coming at the gym, I'm coming at home, I'm coming all the time. So I'm like in heaven." But it's such a good feeling when you're really doing it, and you can actually feel like every single repetition is building muscle. And now that I've incorporated more stretching into my exercises, when you stretch and you stretch deep and you hold it, and you can like breathe in and out and you can feel the oxygen flowing in and out, you can feel it get into your bloodstream, and it just feels good…I personally am kind of miffed about people who don't enjoy it, or people who- 'cause if you don't enjoy it, then I really don't think you're doing it right, or I don't think doing it for the right reasons. You know what I mean? It seems like when you see people who either don't enjoy it or people who just don't work out period…it seems like- how can you not pay more attention to this *amazing* mystery of the universe that you have complete control over? How can you *not* give more attention to something that has been given to you, that you don't even realize the power of?

William enjoys exercise. "A lot." He describes an intimate awareness of his body, as it is during exercise. He claims he can feel the muscle-building effects of each repetition and oxygen flowing through his bloodstream, and these experiences "feel good." He compares exercise to having sex and to being in heaven by paraphrasing lines from a famous body-building documentary. Like Tammie, William issues a sort of appeal to people who do not realize how enjoyable exercise can be. Tammie did this by maintaining that singing, laughing, and dancing are all examples of exercise. William is "miffed" by people who do not enjoy exercise; somehow they are missing the point. He exudes almost reverent wonderment when he describes the embodied experience of exercise as full of unrealized power: "how can you not pay more attention to this *amazing* mystery of the universe?"

The three people in the "recreation only" category spoke with a fervor and passion that other respondents generally lacked. They literally gushed about their

intense enjoyment of exercise. Their accounts were similar, regardless of gender. Additionally, men and women were similar in that almost no one of either gender fell into the "recreation only" category. This finding contradicts a prediction advanced by Turner (1976), who describes "institutional" and "impulsive" attitudes that are roughly analogous to "obligation" and "recreation." An institutional attitude involves "adher[ing] to a high standard, especially in the face of serious temptation to fall away" (992) and "correspondence between prescription and behavior" (994). An impulsive attitude "is revealed when a person does something solely because he wants to" (992) and when there "is correspondence between impulse and behavior" (994). Turner argues that "a shift toward the impulse pole seems to be underway" (989). My data suggest otherwise, at least in the context of the gym. My respondents are not concentrated in the "recreation only" category (at the "impulse pole"). To the contrary, this category is nearly empty. Instead, gym members are much more likely to say they exercise out of a sense of personal obligation than because they enjoy it.

A gender difference emerged in the extent to which men and women experience exercising as "obligation only." While almost half of the male respondents fall into this category, only one female does. Although these *n* values are small, the particular ways these respondents discuss obligation suggest gendered understandings of what obligation means. Troy (age 37) and Geoffrey (age 32) are two typical examples of men who experience exercise as obligation only. When I ask Troy whether exercise is fun for him or more like a personal obligation, he says,

> Personal obligation. Um, well, I believe that you gotta be obligated to your health and fit- I mean, you know, like with work and stuff, I'm more of an obligations person…so I look at it as you have an obligation to your body…to work out… 'Cause if you don't, you know, in the long run, I think it'll hurt you. So it's kind of like putting that health money in the bank as you grow older, so you're not, you know, so in the long run you're not feeling as bad…An investment. You have an obligation to do that.

Troy employs the metaphor of exercise as an "investment": "putting that health money in the bank." Troy believes that keeping this commitment to exercise will benefit him "in the long run," as he ages. Because of the exercise he is doing now, he will avoid "feeling as bad" later. Spheres of finance and investment have been traditionally male-dominated. The world of finance enjoys a certain amount of "macho mystique" (Hodgson 2003: 6). Daily operations in the financial and investment service industry are gendered, for example, "through the promotion of masculine characteristics such as aggression and competitiveness as essential criteria" for professional advancement (Hodgson 2003: 7). On a larger scale, women and men "have different levels of savings and investments" and compared to men, women have less access to banks and credit institutions, in part because such institutions "often have different attitudes towards female and male borrowers, and can be less willing to supply women with financial services" (van Staveren 2001: 10). Troy compares exercise to investing money; Geoffrey expresses his sense that exercise is an obligation by comparing it to a job:

> G: Going to the gym is something- it's like going to work. If I don't go to work, I don't get any money to go live my life and do what I wanna do. If I don't go to the gym, I won't be around long enough- I might- you know, I'm doing it for practical reasons. And that's the bottom line.

*T: So it's a means to an end?*
G: Yeah!....The gym is just sort of like, uh, you know, it's like the fast food of exercise.

For Geoffrey, going to the gym is like going to work in the sense that it is his duty and responsibility to exercise. He exercises for "practical reasons," rather than for fun or recreation. Working earns him money, while exercising earns him time in the form of longevity. He implies that exercising will extend his life when he points out that if he does not go to the gym, he "won't be around long enough." People who adopt a formally rational approach towards "health lifestyles" "attempt to maintain or enhance their health in order to use it for some end, such as work, a longer life, or enhanced enjoyment of their physical being" (Cockerham et al.1993: 416). Geoffrey's perspective is formally rational in this sense. He is pursuing a specified end (a longer life), agrees that exercise is a means to an end, and uses the gym because it is "the fast food of exercise": quick, efficient, and predictable.

While Troy uses the analogy of investing, Geoffrey uses a similarly masculine analogy to make sense of his obligation to exercise when he compares it to participation in paid employment. The trope of the breadwinner who provides for his family financially is deeply engrained in our cultural imagination. The "schema of devotion to work" is a "middle-class" and "traditionally masculine schema [that] calls men to consuming professional careers while expecting their wives to provide domestic care" (Blair-Loy 2001: 690). "Men concentrate on paid work outside the home, and are disproportionately numbered in paid employment" (van Staveren 2001:

10). As the examples of Troy and Geoffrey show, men liken their responsibility to exercise to their responsibilities in other traditionally masculine spheres, such as finance and the paid labor market. Exercise is experienced as a duty, devoid of elements of fun and recreation. Responses like Troy's and Geoffrey's comprised nearly half of all males' responses. The gender difference is considerable here: while almost half of the men describe only obligation, there is only one female respondent who does so.

Here is the response from the one woman in the "obligation only" category. For Hadley (age 19) exercise is:

H: Like an obligation type thing. I'd definitely say it would be more of an obligation to exercise than a, "oh man, I love exercise" type thing. So I would say that's more why I look at the gym. I feel the *need* to exercise rather than the *want* to exercise…Probably just the aspect of laziness I have. I don't know. I'd rather go outside and lay by the pool or read a book than go to the gym and lift weights.
*T: If you don't enjoy it, why do you do it?*
H: Probably just the, like, feeling like you don't wanna gain weight. I don't wanna gain weight. I didn't wanna get out of shape after I stopped playing soccer. I didn't want to, like, be unhealthy. Even though I'm not really a fan of exercise, I didn't want to stop exercising and turn into like- become out of shape.

Hadley's answer resembles the men's "obligation only" answers in the sense that her workouts are motivated by a need to exercise as a means of sustaining health. Just as Troy believes it is necessary to be "obligated to your health" and Geoffrey is doing it for the "practical" purpose of extending his life, Hadley "feel[s] the need" to exercise because she does not want to "be unhealthy." Beyond that, however, her response is different in several ways. She gives an account of why she is "not really a fan of

exercise." She treats not enjoying exercise as a stance that warrants some justification. She explains that she is lazy, and prefers reading and lying by the pool. While the men tended to focus on the positive benefits of treating exercise as an obligation, for instance, by comparing it to a good investment or a source of income, Hadley focuses on the negative outcomes, should she fail to meet her obligation. She keeps her commitment to exercise to avoid weight gain and "becom[ing] out of shape," which she deems undesirable.

Unlike men, who compare their exercise obligation to traditionally masculine spheres such as finance and employment, Hadley's obligation is connected to her body, and specifically, fears of "gain[ing] weight" and "becom[ing] out of shape." Feminist scholars have demonstrated that mind-body dualism is gendered and are critical of the fact that men are historically associated with the mind and ideas, while women are associated with bodies (review in Bordo 1993: 5). It is problematic that men may "stand clear of the flesh," whereas women are assumed to be hindered by the body's "mucky, humbling limitations" (Dinnerstein 1976: 133). The female body has also been assessed "as a hindrance, a prison, weighed down by everything peculiar to it" (Beauvoir 1952: xv-xvi).[6] Moreover, there is massive anxiety about excess weight and flab in our culture (Bordo 1993: 187-191). "We live in a culture that tells the average American woman, dozens of times per day, that the shape of her body is the

[6] Bordo, Dinnerstein, and Beauvoir are making theoretical arguments, not empirical ones. They are not describing how individual women and men interpret themselves. Rather, they are making the critical point that historical associations of men with the mind and women with the body have operated as a source of oppression and denigration of women.

most important thing about her, and that she should be disgusted by it" (Campos 2004: xviii). Women are encouraged to regard fat, bulges, and flab on their bodies as "unsightly," "unacceptable," and "embarrassing," an "enemy" to be "attacked" and "eliminated" (Bordo 1993: 187-191). Together, these factors suggest that Hadley's concerns about gaining weight and losing shape are clearly gendered, and specifically, feminized. Like Troy and Geoffrey, Hadley offers an interpretation of her own experiences that is consistent with gender stereotypes.

In this section, I have shown that my male and female respondents are similar in that the most common response to the question of whether exercise is experienced as obligation or recreation is "both." Almost no one in the sample, male or female, describes exercise in exclusively recreational terms. The few who do give distinctively and fervently passionate accounts of the embodied, physical pleasure they derive from exercise. More women than men included recreation as a *component* of their experience, however: nearly all of the women (93.75%) fell into the "both" or "recreation only" categories, whereas slightly more than half of the men (56.25%) fell into the "both" or "recreation only" categories. Men, in contrast, were much more likely to emphasize obligation. Whereas nearly half of the male respondents mentioned "obligation only," only one woman did so. More importantly, the particular ways that men and women discuss their obligations to exercise are gendered. Men tend to compare their exercise obligation to other typically masculine responsibilities

(e.g., financial planning, paid labor), while women connect their sense of obligation to their bodies (e.g., as a way to avoid weight gain).

## CONCLUSION

At first glance, obligation and recreation seem quite distinct. What people must do (putting gas in the car, taking out the trash, paying bills) is experientially different from what people enjoy doing in their spare time (spending time with loved ones, listening to music, reading a novel by a favorite author). However, when it comes to exercise, the boundary between obligation and recreation is much fuzzier. A large majority of the gym members I talked to experience elements of both in their exercise routines. Responsibility and enjoyment are often connected as follows: it feels good to fulfill a personal responsibility. Sensations of pride, accomplishment, and physical wellbeing all immediately follow exercise sessions. In this respect, exercise offers immediate gratification. It feels good. However, as so many critics of "health" movements (Becker 1993: 4; Glassner 1988: 246-254; Kilwein 1989: 9-10; Turner [1984]1996) and media that celebrate unrealistic body ideals (Bordo 1993: 185-212; Dinnerstein and Weitz 1994: 11; Featherstone [1982]1995: 177-81; Glassner 1988: 31-33) might predict, the respondents' experiences are underpinned by the enjoyment of feeling disciplined, virtuous, and morally superior to those who do not exercise. Moreover, these positive feelings are tightly connected to productivity. Exercise is pleasurable because it is productive. What is produced varies considerably across

respondents, from emotional "products" like feeling good to more embodied "products" like a more slender, toned body. An orientation towards productivity generates pleasure and satisfaction if the person exercises, but leads to feelings of guilt if the person does not. Many respondents judge themselves and others harshly for failing to engage in productive exercise.

Respondents' harshest judgments of others are directed at large-bodied people. Fatness is frequently and pejoratively connected to failing to fulfill an obligation to exercise. Exercise is widely regarded as a way to lose or avoid fat (as in: if people would exercise, then they would not be fat), and respondents imply that it is the responsibility of larger people to do so. In contrast, thin people are seen as enviable, regardless of their exercise habits. For "naturally" thin people, exercise is optional. A clear double standard thus exists for heavier and thinner people: heavier people are obligated to exercise, whereas thinner people should exercise recreationally if they feel like it. Respondents' views are consistent with conventional medical wisdom that is increasingly being called into question. "Excess" weight has long been perceived as a health risk in its own right, but recent evidence suggests that body mass may bear little relevance to an individual's health (Blair et al. 1996; Blair et al. 1995; Flegal et al. 2005). Flegal et al. (2005) find that although obesity (especially high levels of obesity, i.e., BMI $\geq$ 35) is "associated with increased mortality relative to the normal weight category," being simply "overweight" is not associated with higher mortality than being "normal" weight (1861). Regular exercise, *regardless* of whether it yields

or sustains weight loss, appears to improve health and mortality (Blair et al. 1996; Blair et al. 1995; Blair et al. 1989). Thus my respondents are mistaken if they believe that thin people can forgo exercise and still have optimal health. To the contrary, thin, sedentary people are likely to be less healthy by a variety of measures than people who are "overweight" but physically active (Blair et al. 1996; Blair et al. 1995; Blair et al. 2004; Katzmarzyk et al. 2005). As Campos (2004) argues, "Just as there is no reason that fatness precludes fitness, there is no reason to believe that slenderness necessarily indicates fitness, either" (219). Nonetheless, some respondents were confused by and highly resistant to the possibility that an individual could be simultaneously fit and fat. (This theme also emerged in Chapter 3, p. 132-140.) However, approximately one third of respondents did not believe that healthy and heavy are necessarily incompatible. These members offered examples from personal experience to demonstrate that improvements in health and fitness are sometimes accompanied by increases in weight.

A large majority of my respondents (approximately two-thirds) consider exercise to be both obligation and recreation. A pronounced gender difference emerged regarding the extent to which each orientation is experienced. Women were more likely than men to experience exercise as at least partially recreational. Related to this, men were more likely than women to experience exercise as exclusively obligatory, devoid of any recreational component. Though the *n* values in these comparisons are small, I argue that the content of the respondents' quotes is

suggestive of gendered understandings of obligation. Men offer analogies to spheres of finance and employment, whereas women report feeling obligated to avoid gaining weight and becoming out of shape. Finally, an interesting gender similarity is that almost no one, male or female, reports experiencing exercise as purely recreational. This finding contradicts Turner's (1976) prediction that society is "shift[ing] toward the impulse pole" (989). My data suggests that gym members are solidly oriented toward exercise as a fulfilling personal responsibility and commitment. While not devoid of enjoyment, exercise is not, for these respondents, pursued "impulsively" (Turner 1976) for its intrinsic value as a source of hedonistic pleasure.