THE PERSONAL IS PROFESSIONAL:
Personal Trainers as a Case Study of Cultural Intermediaries

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Citation:

Abstract
The article examines the discursive construction of personal training as a case study of the characteristics of cultural intermediary work. Based on an analysis of US personal training occupational texts from 1990 to 2000, the article employs a cultural economy (du Gay and Pryke, 2002) perspective to examine the importance of normative codes of professionalism, the investment of personal resources and aesthetic labour, and the tension between cultural and economic categories in representations of the work. Personal training is a particularly revealing case because of its explicit tensions between cultural factors (e.g. a professional, service-oriented ethic) and economic parameters (e.g. the entrepreneurial aspects of selling services). In response, trainers are encouraged to adopt a vocational attitude, suggesting how cultural intermediary work more generally invokes particular dispositions, which are the outcomes of negotiating between economy and culture, and the personal and the professional, in specific occupational contexts.

Keywords
Cultural intermediary · cultural economy · personal training · professional · entrepreneur · vocation

Introduction
Much academic attention has focused on the development of consumer culture and how this links to an increasing emphasis on individuals’ identity choices and lifestyle projects (e.g. Ewen, 1999; Featherstone, 1991; Slater, 1997). One theme within this stream of inquiry is the character and significance of the service class and, in particular, the cluster of occupations known as ‘cultural intermediaries,’ who are responsible for the production and legitimation of various images, experiences and lifestyles (Bourdieu, 1984: 359; also Featherstone, 1991; Lash and Urry, 1987; Wynne, 1998). Cultural intermediaries are taken as central in the promotion of consumption; not simply producing goods and experiences for sale in the consumer marketplace, they are also,
crucially, involved in mobilizing and motivating consumers to connect specific aspirations, fears and desires to particular product qualities, and to the realm of consumption more broadly (du Gay, 2004; see also Miller and Rose, 1997).

Those involved in cultural intermediary work are thus mediators in a double sense: they help to link consumers to specific cultural products and services, and to a more fundamental consuming mentality. While the former facilitates the reproduction of consumer economies, the latter dovetails with an attitude of reflexive self-production, considered emblematic of high or late modern capitalist culture (Giddens, 1991). Accounts of self-production stress the ways in which processes of modernity have given rise to an increased emphasis on identity as a lifelong task of ‘becoming’ oneself, accompanied by a de-emphasis on traditional, ascribed categories of belonging (Bauman, 2000; Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2002; Ewen, 1999; Featherstone, 1991; Slater, 1997). (Hence the interest—both everyday and academic—in the body, as both a vehicle of self-expression and a key site in the process of self-production.) Much as it raises the prospect for greater flexibility and self-determination, the process of self-production is fraught with risk, insecurity and uncertainty, as the responsibility for accomplishing an identity falls squarely on the shoulders of individuals. Out of these conditions develop the ranks of cultural intermediaries and other therapeutic experts, who offer guidelines and reassurance (as well as goods and services) to individuals in search of better selves (Lears, 1983; Rose, 1996).

This article examines personal training as a case study of cultural intermediary work, looking specifically at the discursive construction of the occupation in personal training texts. Paid to design and facilitate personal fitness programs on a one-to-one basis, personal trainers stand between their clients and the larger fitness and exercise industry, helping to forge profitable connections between consumers and health clubs, exercise equipment, fitness media and other goods and services (Smith Maguire, 2008). In the experiences of fitness that they shape and the images of fitness that they embody, personal trainers help to educate consumers in a particular view of the body as a vehicle of self-expression and a focal point for consumption.

On the whole, socio-cultural research on fitness, aerobics and the workout has paid greater attention to participants than practitioners. Past research on the discursive construction of fitness readers/consumers/participants has examined various media representations, including those of fitness magazines, manuals and exercise videos (Duncan, 1994; Eskes et al., 1998; Kagan and Morse, 1988; MacNeill, 1994; Markula, 1995, 2001; Smith Maguire, 2002, 2006). This work draws attention to the tensions in fitness culture between ideal representations and actual practice, and notes the deep-seated ambivalences for women between emphases on physical empowerment and traditional, feminine bodily norms (see also Maguire and Mansfield, 1998; Real, 1999). This article is an investigation not of the lived experience of fitness instructors (see, e.g., Greenleaf et al., 2006; Haravon Collins, 2002; Markula and Pringle, 2006; Smith Maguire, 2008) but of the discursive formation of the occupation—the ways in which a series of statements (here, in occupational texts) operate to make certain ways of thinking and talking about, and carrying out personal training seem acceptable and appropriate, while closing off other alternatives (Foucault, 1972; Hall, 1997).

Since its emergence on a mass scale in the United States in the early 1990s, personal training has undergone a process of professionalization: attempts on the part of
individual practitioners and their occupational organizations to standardize the criteria of
the work, legitimate claims for greater social esteem and remuneration, and control the
possibility (and counter the public perception) of malpractice-related problems.
Professionalization thus serves as a mechanism for the cultivation of authority and the
management of risk. Central to this process is an increase in the production of
occupational texts: specialized journals, manuals and newsletters addressing the
professional practitioner (cf. Ferguson, 1998: 630). IDEA, a leading US exercise and
fitness organization, began publishing a monthly newsletter, *IDEA Personal Trainer
(IPT)*, in 1990; it became a 40 page full-colour magazine in 1994. Another key US fitness
organization, the American Council on Exercise (ACE), first published its *Personal
Trainer Manual* (Sudy, 1991) in 1991, as the official companion text to the ACE personal
trainer certification exam. This article draws from a thematic text analysis (Fereday and
Muir-Cochrane, 2006) of the first ACE Manual and *IPT* issues from 1990 to 2000, which
revealed the repeated themes of concern for the occupation—notably, dealing with what
counts (skills, certifications) as personal training; how to best sell personal training
services; how to motivate clients; and technical knowledge on program design and
special populations. Such occupational texts—written by and for personal trainers and
trainers-in-training—are central in the standardization and dissemination of an
occupational identity, code of conduct, and set of work practices and strategies; they are
mechanisms of socialization into a (quasi) professional identity, contributing to the
acquisition of particular dispositions, competencies and values.
While the article’s focus is on the US, it is important to highlight both that
commercial fitness and its accoutrements (such as personal training) are global in scope,
and that they are not globally homogeneous (e.g. Ginsberg 2000; Spielvogel 2003).
Commercial health clubs around the world—from Australia to Brazil, China to
Denmark—may offer personal training, but the particular character of that service will
differ relative to the local context, including established leisure and physical culture
traditions, patterns in the demand for and provision of personal services, and degree of
occupational development for personal training. A US case study thus offers to hig
hlight aspects of a phenomenon that may resonate with, but not directly translate to, other
national contexts.
The findings of the text analysis are considered here from a ‘cultural economy’
perspective (du Gay, 2004; du Gay and Pryke, 2002), revealing parallels with other
cultural intermediary occupations in fields such as advertising and fashion. Reading
personal training texts in this way casts light on the importance of: normative codes—e.g.
an appeal to traditional notions of professionalism and a service-oriented ethic; ‘aesthetic
labour’ (Witz et al., 2003)—e.g. the encouragement to invest personal resources such as
attitude, appearance and belief in one’s work identity; and the tension between cultural
and economic categories in shaping representations of the work—e.g. the location of
personal training at the ambivalent intersection of cultural factors (a professional ethic)
and economic parameters (the need to sell services). This tension is resolved in the texts
through an endorsed vocational attitude, shedding light on how cultural intermediary
work more generally involves particular occupational dispositions, which are the
outcomes of negotiating between cultural and economic agendas, codes and constraints.
The article proceeds with an overview of the term ‘cultural intermediaries’ before turning
to personal training and its problematic professionalization; the reliance on personal
resources for occupational success; and the ways in which a vocational attitude is deployed in the occupational texts to reconcile tensions created when the personal intersects with the professional.

Cultural Intermediaries

In *Distinction*, his analysis of the social dynamics of taste, Bourdieu characterizes cultural intermediaries as those in:

- occupations involving presentation and representation (sales, marketing, advertising, public relations, fashion, decoration and so forth) and in all the institutions providing symbolic goods and services. These include the various jobs in medical and social assistance…and in cultural production and organization (1984: 359).

Of particular note in Bourdieu’s portrayal of this group are the ways in which the ‘new petite bourgeoisie’ are involved not only in the production of styles, services and cultural forms, but also in the legitimation of those cultural forms—for it is through such legitimation that they hope to consolidate their own social position, relative to (and against) the established dominant, middle and working classes. Legitimacy, however, takes a different form than that wielded by the established dominant class and their occupations; rather than the binding authority of the state or the rational authority of traditional professions such as medicine and law, cultural intermediaries employ appearances, attitudes and images to legitimate their advice and exercise influence over others. This may be instrumental, but it is also personal: cultural intermediaries don’t just sell lifestyles, they sell their lifestyles, making them ideal ‘need merchants’ (Bourdieu, 1984: 365).

Three provisos to Bourdieu’s depiction of cultural intermediaries are necessary, and provide useful points of introduction to the occupation of personal training in the US. The first concerns the label of ‘new.’ Cultural intermediary work is not new; it is a manifestation and extension of middle class work more generally—work that intervenes between production and consumption. While there has been an increase in Western societies since the 1960s in the scales of occupations involving information, images and knowledge, these occupations are not necessarily new, nor are they uniformly expanding in number (Nixon and du Gay, 2002: 497). Personal training would appear to be an ideal example of new kinds of work associated with the expansion of the market in services (and personal services more specifically) in the early 1990s. Indeed, the occupation considered itself ‘a new breed of fitness instructor’ in 1991 (Sudy, 1991: xix). However, personal training is actually a new version of an old job: physical educators, sport and athletic coaches, drill instructors and military trainers are all examples of long-standing occupations focused on exercise instruction. One-on-one trainers have also existed in the past, if typically reserved for elite athletes or the wealthy.

The second proviso regarding Bourdieu’s portrayal concerns the use of a single label—‘cultural intermediaries’—while simultaneously privileging occupations that entail traditional, narrow notions of culture as elite, intellectual, and aesthetic (contrary to insights made by, amongst others, Raymond Williams regarding culture as a ‘whole way of life’; see Negus, 2002: 504). Cultural intermediaries are not a monolithic occupational class; they are internally stratified along a number of lines, including income levels (and
associated levels of social prestige). For example, reflecting the internal occupational split between full- and part-time work, personal trainers’ annual income ranged from $14,540 to $55,020 in 2005. In comparison with other personal care and service occupations, 2005 labour statistics place personal trainers (mean annual income of approximately $31,000) somewhere between manicurists and pedicurists ($20,000) and flight attendants ($54,000). Cultural intermediaries are also stratified by the differing forms and degrees of aesthetic labour and cultural capital required to work as, for example, an advertising creative, journalist, or accountant (Negus, 2002: 504-05; see also Nixon and du Gay, 2002: 498-99). Personal trainers employ a range of cultural and symbolic forms of capital that have less to do with elite cultural production and more to do with the typical resources of personal service workers and aesthetic labourers (Hochschild, 1983; Witz et al., 2003): appearance, physique, personality, demeanour and so forth.

The final qualification has to do with the sweeping claims made by Bourdieu and others about cultural intermediaries’ role as the ‘transmission belt’ of a new consumer morality that regards the ‘morality of pleasure as a duty’ (1984: 365, 367; see also Featherstone, 1991), and their status as the epitome of a post-Fordist epoch and a new, ‘creative’ service class (Florida, 2002; see also Lash and Urry, 1987, 1994). Tempering such grand claims is an emerging body of empirical research addressing how such occupations are implicated in the mutual constitution of production and consumption, economy and culture in fields such as advertising (McFall, 2004; Nixon, 2003; Soar, 2000); magazine publishing (Crewe, 2003); fashion design (Gronow, 1997: 105-11; Skov, 2002); music (Negus, 1999); and retailing (Pettinger, 2004). Broadly falling under the banner of ‘cultural economy’ (du Gay and Pryke, 2002), this work understands economy and culture as dynamic and mutually iterative, with the interface between them being situational and accomplished through specific, material practices. Economy and culture are not separated by a fixed, a priori boundary: the market is always a cultural practice (Slater, 1993; McFall, 2004; Miller, D., 2001). Indeed, it is difficult to insist on a static separation of production and consumption in the face of cultural intermediary work (and service work more generally), in which exchange and use overlap in time and space. Cultural intermediaries are of particular interest because their work exemplifies the negotiation between production and consumption, and between economic and cultural agendas, knowledges and constraints.

As the following sections demonstrate, personal training, for all of its associations with ‘new’ work, is, in fact, rather conservative, preserving a traditional professional, vocational mentality (Weber, 1946) and reproducing the conventional (if increasingly inapt) opposition between professionalism and entrepreneurialism. At the same time, this research affirms Bourdieu’s understanding of why cultural intermediaries make such effective needs merchants. The strategies endorsed for occupational success require that personal trainers invest their private lives in their work roles—by making the personal the precondition of their professional life, personal trainers are encouraged to sell their own lifestyles.
Professionalization and its Problems

Despite claims of a radically ‘new’ mode of work, there are deeply-entrenched normative practices and ‘occupational formulae’ (Negus, 2002: 510) shaping cultural intermediaries’ work. For example, Moeran (1996: 60 in McFall, 2004: 72) refers to the ‘system of conventions’ through which advertising creatives makes sense of and coordinate with other advertising sub-groups, such as account managers (the ‘suits’). Processes of professionalization are of interest in this regard: how and to what effect does such work become increasingly codified, formalized, and regulated as a (quasi) profession?

Three main factors differentiate occupations from professions (cf. Abbott, 1988; Caplow, 1954; Larson, 1977; Pavalko, 1971; Wilensky, 1964). First, a profession is typically defined by mastery and monopoly of a distinct body of abstract knowledge, the techniques for application of that knowledge, and the courses of training through which mastery is produced and tested. The emergence of various certifying bodies and training programs for personal trainers is significant for the establishment of a distinct body of knowledge and expertise, and purportedly objective measures of skill and professional credibility. ACE first offered a certification exam for personal trainers in 1990, combining knowledge from academic fields such as exercise physiology, kinesiology, anatomy and biomechanics. In the US, there is no standardized certification required in order to work as a personal trainer; regulation is primarily internal to the occupation. The development of IDEA and ACE referral services is one example of internal regulation and monitoring of the quality of service and qualifications. Certifications are a way to judge quality, and, as the editor of IPT writes, ‘quality is a market issue as well as a service issue’ (IPT, 1995 (July August) v.6: 34). That is, in addition to supporting claims to professional status, certification creates a logic of career advancement and a justification for fee structures (cf. Lloyd, 1996).

Second, as a result of their monopoly of a distinct body of knowledge and skills (and in comparison with other occupations), professions are characterized by autonomy, in that they tend to have a high degree of control over their work, as well as control over the production of fellow professionals (Caplow, 1954; Wilensky, 1964). The degree of autonomy, however, is dependent on the conditions of labour. For example, some trainers are self-employed, making autonomy a relatively unproblematic matter in terms of the external management of one’s labour. The majority of trainers, however, are employees of fitness facilities; in such cases, a trainer’s autonomy is constrained by the need to comply with the employer’s dress code, fee scale, and demand for income generation. Moreover, occupational research finds that 63 percent of all personal trainers work part-time, highlighting the flexibility of the work, as well as its tenuousness: 30 percent of full-time trainers and 57 percent of part-time trainers receive no employment benefits at all. The casual and precarious aspects of personal training sit awkwardly with notions of professionalism. Nevertheless, even as employees of health clubs, personal trainers retain a significant degree of autonomy relative to other personal service workers because their role as personal motivators (which requires adaptability and flexibility) shields their emotional labour from being subjected to employer-set scripts (Smith Maguire, 2001; see also Leidner, 1999; Wharton, 1993).
Third, and most importantly for trainers, professions are characterized by normative codes that place service before self-interest and justify the prestige of the profession by reference to a greater social cause. Such professional ideology is written into codes of ethics, such as the one devised by IDEA in 1988 and updated in 1997 (IPT, 1997 (January) v. 8: 2), and is invoked in articles addressing personal trainers as members of a community with the mission to ‘save’ those who have yet to realize the benefits of regular physical activity—a mission painted as all the more pressing given escalating rates of population inactivity and obesity (World Health Organization, 2004). The indoctrination into a service-oriented professional mentality is further reinforced through the occupational texts, which refer to personal training as a caring profession, like counselling or social work (Study, 1991: 375).

Personal trainers are encouraged to construct an aura of professionalism through such means as certifications, annual meetings, monthly newsletters, stipulated recertifications, codes of ethics, and so forth. This aura, however, is problematic, because occupational success does not rest on professionalism and certifications alone. Like health clubs that have become indistinguishable on the basis of equipment, certified personal trainers are largely interchangeable in terms of their technical knowledge. The difference—between health clubs, personal trainers and consumer businesses more broadly—lies in service, as a 1992 IPT article suggests:

[C]onsider that in this business, selling knowledge is a given. The difference between trainers is service. ...Outstanding service means that you: remember a client’s particular health concern, and bring an article addressing that issue...; provide wake-up calls...; meet with a client and physician or physical therapist...; develop a strong resource support system for your clients...; take clients to look at and test exercise equipment that you recommend. (IPT, 1992 (September) v.3: 2)

In addition, other IPT authors suggest such service strategies as sending clients birthday and thank-you cards, leaving motivational messages on clients’ answering machines, or faxing clients workout instructions when they are away on business trips (e.g. IPT, 1993 (January) v.4: 1-3; IPT, 1992 (July/August) v. 3: 6; IPT, 2001 (February) 12:28-37). These are not presented to IPT readers as expressions of an organic, professional care for others, but as instrumental means to making a living. Thus, in addition to those work roles and duties that affirm their professional identity, the entrepreneurial components of personal trainers’ labour—soliciting clients, setting fee rates, negotiating contracts, maintaining client loyalty—undermine or contradict an ethic of service.

Thus, personal trainers straddle two worlds, typically considered mutually exclusive: the service-oriented world of the professional and the self-interested, instrumental realm of the entrepreneur. The normative codes of professionalism direct personal trainers to acquire intellectual capital, espouse a service-oriented ethic, and regard themselves as one of a family of ‘caring’ professions. Occupational success, however, rests with a trainer’s capacity for recruiting, motivating, and maintaining clients. These entrepreneurial aspects of the work are generally linked in the occupational texts to the deployment of ‘personal’ resources—personality, attitude and appearance—as the following section explores.
Putting the ‘Personal’ in Personal Training

Recalling Bourdieu’s notion that need merchants ‘sell so well because they believe in what they sell’ (1984: 365), cultural intermediaries appear to use their personal lives, bodies and tastes as crucial occupational resources. As such, Nixon and Crewe (2004: 131) note that cultural intermediaries tend to disrupt ‘established divisions between “work” and “leisure”’, thereby raising particular tensions for negotiation. This is not to posit a rigid separation of work from leisure; work and leisure do not exist as mutually exclusive, dichotomous terms (Elias and Dunning, 1986). Rather, the boundary between work and leisure is one that is accomplished in the context of an individual’s particular roles, obligations, desires and aspirations. For example, a fashion designer’s own lifestyle, house décor and wardrobe are featured in fashion magazines, in turn investing their clothes (the actual product) with symbolic value (Rocamora, 2002: 350). The cultural intermediary’s personal taste, cultural capital and lifestyle are necessary for their production of cultural goods, bestowing legitimacy on both the specific products they endorse, and their general authority as arbiters of taste and style. A cultural intermediary may experience the occupational necessity of living an appropriate lifestyle during non-paid hours as a negative encroachment of work into their leisure time, but they may also experience it as an advantage of their chosen occupation, and an opportunity to ‘expense’ leisure pursuits; or they may draw the line between work and leisure in a different manner altogether.

For personal trainers, there is a persistent exhortation to bring non-work life into line with one’s work role. Personal trainers are encouraged to regard themselves as role models, their personal lifestyle and physical form serving as recommended templates for clients. This is reflected in the lived experience of trainers and other exercise instructors, who regard their body shape and attitude as key elements in helping others to live fitter lives, and even, possibly, in challenging the dominant consumer body culture with a more empowered, mindful approach to the body (Greenleaf et al., 2006; Haravon Collins, 2002; Markula and Pringle, 2006). The work of being a role model is reflected in the occupational texts as well; articles promote identifying wholly with the occupation, so that personal lifestyle and professional image are inseparable. For example:

You communicate your energy and intentions through your demeanor, through your honest enthusiasm for helping others improve their lifestyles and reach their fitness goals, and through the activities your pursuit to develop yourself personally and professionally. When people meet you, they should feel your competence, enthusiasm and values. (IPT, 1994 (November/December) v.5: 33)

Further reflecting the degree to which professional authority is seen to reside in personal conduct, the final clause of the IDEA code of ethics states:

Uphold a professional image through conduct and appearance. Smoking, substance abuse and unhealthy eating habits should be avoided. Speech and attire should be appropriate to the client’s comfort. (IPT, 1997 (January) v. 8: 3)

Personal trainers are thus encouraged to regard their professional identity as dependent on and guaranteed by their personal lifestyle choices and experiences. This highlights the gap between established and quasi professions, and the precariousness of the personal trainer’s influence over clients: a heart surgeon’s credibility is not seen to hinge on whether or not he or she has had bypass surgery.
One might suggest that the more appropriate comparison is not with heart surgeons but with teachers; personal trainers have more in common with the pedagogical professions, who have traditionally been held to a higher code of personal conduct than other professions. Because of their position as role models, teachers are expected to embody the values they are charged with imparting. However, Foucault’s work (1986, 1991) on the historical shifts in the modes and exercise of power would suggest that the authority of all professionals—heart surgeons, teachers, personal trainers—must be understood within the contemporary, ‘governmental’ context, in which the social order increasingly rests on individuals’ self-management. Against such a backdrop, authority ‘softens’: rather than directly intervening in an individual’s life, the governmental mode of power is concerned with indirectly managing the conduct of others (Burchell, 1996). Contemporary exercise culture is not about enforced, collective callisthenics at set times during the day, but about enticing people to work out through promises of improved health and appearance (and the chance to look like one’s personal trainer!). This is an indirect mode of authority, which involves the expectation that authority figures must be able to lead themselves in order to lead others (Foucault, 1986); hence, the interest in the personal lives of authority figures. In a sense, the roles of all professionals are becoming more like that of the pedagogical professions: to influence, instruct and motivate, rather than intervene, dictate and punish. That said, the disciplinary mode of power does not disappear (Foucault, 1991: 102); it is reconfigured and held in abeyance until warranted, then exerted against those who fail to comply with the obligation of appropriate self-government. It also remains an ambivalent source of nostalgia for those burdened with the obligation of self-management, as when clients look to personal trainers to act like drill sergeants, thereby passing the responsibility for accomplishing the exercise on to the disciplinarian (Smith Maguire, 2008: 173).

Communication, performance and self-presentation skills, and the ability to exert interpersonal influence are central in accomplishing the management of others (Goffman, 1959; Hochschild, 1983), and thus key to governmental, therapeutic experts. A trainer must cultivate a client’s trust by looking, sounding and acting like a fitness authority, thereby convincing the client to delegate part of their self-managing rationality to one who is more skilled. Similar to using a brand name as a rational means of choosing a product, the trainer becomes a way to manage risk and reduce complexity (cf. Miller and Rose, 1997: 23-25). Consider the following IPT article, which lays out the skills required for success:

As a personal trainer, your ability to establish rapport with others is essential if you’re to facilitate a working relationship that maximizes your effectiveness and your client’s productivity. Lack of this ability will eventually hinder your business, regardless of your knowledge and teaching skills. (IPT, 1993 (October) v. 4: 1)

Technical knowledge, like the equipment at the health club, is a necessary but not sufficient resource in fitness market competition; like the clubs that have increasingly focused on décor and company image to attract and keep members, a personal trainer’s personality adds value, differentiating them from other trainers. As part of their professional mission as educators and role models, personal trainers are encouraged to counter the ‘unrealistic expectations…fueled by the media and
at times a somewhat overzealous health community’ (Sudy, 1991: 364). In an IPT article that includes the advice to be upbeat and positive at all times, the author writes:

To be a top-notch personal trainer, you must have the perfect body. Right?
Wrong! Most clients want to view their trainers as human—above par fitness-wise but with some typical human foibles. Demonstrate to your clients that you are not obsessed with exercise and nutrition but instead practice moderation and balance for a healthy lifestyle. Make sure they understand that gaining a great physique takes time, effort and adherence. (IPT, 2001 (February) v.12: 31)

Physical capital and body management are essential for attracting clients; consequently there is an unquestioned assumption that the trainer (the reader) already has and values a ‘fit’ physique. But trainers are placed in a double bind: an overt emphasis on their body shape will undermine their professional identity by perpetuating unhealthy body attitudes and contradicting traditional professional criteria such as certifications; at the same time, their (quasi) professional authority is literally embodied. Just as the clothing choices of sales assistants are central to the display of ‘fashion competency’ (Pettinger, 2004: 179), a trainer’s physique displays their expertise and authenticity.

As has been found with advertising creatives both on and off the job (McFall, 2004: 74), cultural intermediaries’ expressions of aesthetic preferences and self-care routines through styles of dress, physical appearance, brand choices, and so forth are instrumental in the production and reproduction of identity, achievement of status, and accomplishment of work. Occupational texts encourage adoption of a particular lifestyle (signified—for creatives—by informal attire at work, metropolitan living, juvenile codes of behaviour and—for trainers—by a fit physique, ‘clean’ living, and an upbeat attitude) in order to maintain and legitimate one’s occupational identity. This mandatory lifestyle helps trainers to distinguish themselves from other fitness instruction services (e.g. group classes, videos), from other trainers who are competing for the same clients, and from the clients themselves who supposedly look to trainers’ general lifestyle as an indicator of their reliability and authority.

However, the mandatory lifestyle implied in the occupational texts raises specific difficulties and constraints for the actual practice of personal training. For example, the emphasis on an ideal fit physique creates an implicit age limit to such occupations; family responsibilities or an aging body constrain an individual’s ability to live up to such a lifestyle. In addition, the practice of personal training is shaped by gender—especially given that nearly 75 percent of personal trainers and their clients are female. The ideal fit physique narrows the corporeal parameters for participation (not everyone can ‘look’ the part), and implicates female exercise instructors in the reproduction of dominant feminine ideals (cf. Maguire and Mansfield, 1998; Markula, 1995; Real, 1999), even if they take a critical or oppositional view of consumer body culture (Haravon Collins, 2002; Markula and Pringle, 2006). Nevertheless, the commodification of the personal trainer’s physique opens up the possibility of a problematization, if not pluralization, of hegemonic gender codes (cf. Miller, T., 2001): less-than-perfect personal trainers can market their poor physique as emblematic of an inclusive or enlightened approach to fitness (while still embodying their professional credibility).

Making the personal professional introduces particular challenges: one’s ‘honest enthusiasm’ (IPT, 1994 (November/December) v.5: 33) is colonized as an instrumental means to recruit, motivate and retain clients. This most intimate of occupational
resources—personal belief—is at the heart of the vocational disposition for personal training. The vocational attitude—of living ‘for’ rather than ‘off’ of fitness—brings us to the final aspect of cultural intermediaries: the ‘relational work’ (Cochoy, 2003 in du Gay, 2004: 100) that takes place between economy and culture, production and consumption.

**Fitness as a Vocation**

Cultural intermediaries, as viewed from the cultural economy perspective, are important because their material practices make manifest the ongoing dialogue between culture and economy. It is not that cultural intermediaries have a monopoly on the interweaving of these two realms or logics, but that their work provides an ideal lens on such dynamics because such dynamics are their work. The material practices of personal trainers make the categories of culture and economy manifest, as for example when: cultural knowledge is used as a tool to achieve economic ends (e.g. personal trainers use their ‘people’ skills to recruit and retain clients); economic logic is used to achieve cultural agendas (e.g. trainers use their fees and package deals to motivate clients to take up a ‘fit’ way of life); economic ends are embedded in cultural activities (e.g. trainers gain increased exposure and client recruitment by hanging out and working out at a health club during their non-work hours); and cultural knowledge is embedded in economic calculations (e.g. trainers use their experience with people’s obstacles to exercise to assess how much time and effort to devote to reclaiming a client who’s become an ‘exercise drop-out’). It is not that there are two mutually exclusive economic and cultural logics or agendas intersecting in the work of personal trainers, but that the everyday understanding of the difference between culture and economy is produced through such dynamics. Unlike previously studied cultural intermediary occupations in, for example, advertising, retail and publishing, personal training makes explicit how the dynamic interrelationship between culture and economy can not only be fraught with ambivalence (thanks in part to the pursuit of professional status), but that such ambivalence is itself productive of an occupational mentality or disposition.

The tension between economy and culture is particularly evident in the occupational texts around the issue of selling. Selling goes against much of what is taken for granted about professions as it places the economic rationality of the entrepreneur in direct conflict with the service-oriented ethic of the professional. For example:

The word ‘sales’ has a bad reputation in the fitness industry. However, selling personal training is something that many of you are doing daily without even knowing it! Most of you truly love your work. You represent a healthy lifestyle, a fit mind and body, and a positive self-image. Selling often becomes second nature when you present the concept of personal training to someone else. Your own personal commitment generates enthusiasm and sparks an interest. (*IPT*, 1993 (June) v.4: 1)

Similarly, in an article on ‘the ethics of selling products,’ the reader is reminded of the code of ethics and the pledge to put the client’s interest ahead of personal financial gain. Nevertheless:

In addition to being fitness professionals dedicated to helping individuals lead healthier lives, many of us are also small-business owners. We’re always looking for better ways to serve our clients, but we want to grow our businesses
Most trainers would agree that there is a distinct difference between selling yourself and selling products. (IPT, 2000 (October) v.11: 26)

Reflecting their not-yet-established professional status, selling evokes mixed emotions for personal trainers. Yet, the same applies to established professions such as those in academia, medicine and law, for whom norms are changing as the expectation to be income-generators (with the emphasis on research grant income and billable hours) becomes commonplace (Leicht and Fennell, 1997). Selling—demanding a price for—one’s professional service places the student, patient or client in the position of a consumer, a figure more likely to demand choice, personal service and guaranteed results (and be more litigious should these expectations not be met).

Selling is a contentious issue, bringing to the fore a conflict between a professional culture or ethic, and the economic parameters of the occupation—the need to recruit clients, set fee rates, and so forth. The occupational texts resolve this conflict through appeals to belief, personality and the moral ideology that fitness lifestyles are socially ‘good.’ While neither a personal belief in fitness nor highly developed relational skills form the objective basis of wages or certification, a personal trainer’s authority status and occupational success ultimately rest with his or her personal qualities. As the ACE manual (Sudy, 1991: 375) makes clear, trainers must be able to mobilize empathy, warmth and genuineness:

*Genuineness* can be defined as authenticity or being honest and open without putting up a front or facade. It is a state in which the helper’s words and actions are congruent. …Genuineness is the ability to relate to people without hiding behind a clipboard or a white coat. It is not necessarily being self-revealing, but rather being committed to a responsible honesty with others.

The primary resource for personal trainers—as depicted in these occupational texts—is a personal belief in a ‘fit’ way of life. By virtue of a ‘genuine’ commitment to fitness, selling is converted into preaching: in order to do the work, the trainer is encouraged to believe. This, ultimately, is what makes cultural intermediaries ideal ‘need merchants’ (Bourdieu, 1984: 365): both their social status and personal belief reside—and are thus at stake—in their work.

The endorsed vocational disposition does not seamlessly translate from an ideal, discursive construction to actual practice. A variety of factors enable and constrain an individual’s reflexivity concerning the different parameters and tensions framing personal training work. It is noteworthy that discussion of such factors—such as age, physical ability, gender—is restricted largely to questions of tailoring personal training to specific populations—such as the elderly, the physically disabled, or pregnant women. The occupational texts position the personal trainer as a mediator of the constraints faced by participants in the consumption of personal training, while remaining mute on the role of such factors in the production of such services. For example, the texts’ promotion of certification is gender-blind, despite the added incentive for women trainers to gain certification: specialized, technical knowledge serves as an objective measure of competence and expertise, assisting women’s entry into the ‘male preserve’ (Dunning, 1986) of strength training.
Concluding Remarks

Personal trainers mediate between spheres typically considered mutually exclusive: production and consumption; culture and economy; professional and entrepreneurial. Like cultural intermediaries more generally, personal trainers are simultaneously involved in the production of consumption and the consumption of production, helping to create for others the experience of particular goods and activities, while internalizing their productive role and thereby legitimating those goods and activities through an investment of personal belief.

The discursive construction of personal training endorses a vocational disposition, which is constructed in the occupational texts through and in response to the tension between culture (the culture of fitness, and its associations with health, well-being and traditional caring professions) and economy (the entrepreneurial aspects of the work that require personal trainers to market themselves and/or their health clubs). The disposition of living ‘for’ fitness is an attempt to resolve—if only at the level of representation—the contradictions inherent in living ‘off’ of fitness while simultaneously pursuing an aura of professionalism. As a vocation, the problematic blurring of work and non-work time is resolved as consistency in lifestyle and behaviour, giving evidence of one’s professional credibility; the instrumental deployment of one’s physique and attitude in the recruitment and retention of clients is recast as a sincere expression of one’s professional belief and authentic desire to help others; and the conflict between professionalism and selling one’s services is reframed as a service-oriented espousal of physical fitness, transforming the entrepreneurial into the evangelical. The vocational ‘formula’ (cf. Negus, 2002) provides trainers with a mechanism for reconciling and separating disparate aspects of their work: ‘yes, I must be strategic in setting rate fees, recruiting clients, and sending birthday cards; but I do this in order to better convert my clients to a fit and healthy way of life, like my own.’

The occupational texts propose a solution to the conflict between personal trainers’ professionalism and entrepreneurialism that simultaneously produces (and, indeed, reproduces entrenched notions of) the boundary between culture and economy: it is acceptable that selling exercise instruction is a for-profit business, but because it has to do with health, and with personal interaction, economic rationalities must be ruled by a professional ethos, which is considered exempt from self-interested calculation. This helps to cast light on the broader dialogue between culture and economy in a consumer culture and service economy: economic rationalities are still considered suspect when in the context of ‘personal’ interactions and ‘caring’ services. We do not like to contemplate—either as service workers or clients, teachers or students, doctors or patients—that the foundation on which our interactions rest is an economic ground, raising as it does questions of authenticity, trust and exploitation.

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References


Notes

