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# Justifying Physical Activity (Dis-)Engagements: Fitness Centers and the Latent Expectations of (Former) Members

Anne Vatter & Walter Bartl\*

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**Abstract:** »(De-)Engagements körperlicher Betätigung rechtfertigen: Fitnesscenter und die latenten Erwartungen ihrer (ehemaligen) Mitglieder«. Discourse surrounding healthcare constructs physical activity to be the moral obligation of individuals for preventing illness. Commercial fitness centers are the principle places for doing physical exercise and represent a commercial and relatively standardized socio-material setting aimed at helping to create a fit and healthy body. Despite their success, fitness centers in Germany have a customer turnover rate of 25 % and often appear unable to retain their members over the long term. Why do people who were once motivated to become a member of a fitness center turn their back on it? We argue that these disengagements can be explained to a considerable extent by the non-fulfillment of latent personal expectations. The discourse on health creates manifest normative expectations which actors on the fitness market respond to by providing functional environments (supply) and by developing individual physical exercise projects (demand). Yet, the establishment of personal routines, which is an integral element of the marketized good in question, could fail in the functional setting of a fitness center – a critical moment that brings to light personal latent expectations that are usually difficult to verbalize. This paper focuses on the justification of engagement in, and disengagement from, physical activity by analyzing qualitative interviews with (former) members of fitness centers. Regimes of engagement and orders of worth are two concepts from the sociology of conventions which enable us to disentangle typical tensions in this specific socio-material setting. Our analysis provides access to user experiences that are only rarely explicitly verbalized as a critique of commercial market providers. It also allows us to reflect upon preventive health policies aimed at the promotion of physical activities.

**Keywords:** Sociology of conventions, regimes of engagement, justification, preventive healthcare, physical activity, fitness center, self-care, body.

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## 1. Introduction

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Various actors construe public health as being at risk and individual forms of physical activity as a possible remedy (Paul and Schmidt-Semisch 2010). In such discourse, seemingly heterogeneous activities appear to converge to create a rather general moral obligation for individuals to engage in body work and self-care (Smith Maguire 2008; Tulle 2015; Brown 2018). The aim of this paper is to investigate how individuals justify their own engagement in, or disengagement from, physical activity in fitness studios. Which vocabularies of motive do they employ? Analyzing these will bring to light typical tensions surrounding individual physical exercise in the commercial setting of a fitness center. Gaining access to the critique of former fitness studio members is valuable because it allows us to reflect upon ways in which these tensions can be ameliorated or even avoided in similar or alternative settings of physical activity.

We focus on fitness centers as commodified providers of facilities and services for physical exercise because they are becoming increasingly relevant to society and because, in a marketized environment, they specifically embody the contemporary expectation that individuals are to take responsibility for their own health (Doğan 2015, 453). According to 2018 figures, fitness centers are the most frequently chosen physical exercise setting in Germany, with 11.09 million members; this is followed by soccer clubs with 7.09 million members (DSSV 2019, 14). They are also one of the two settings that grew most dynamically from 2017 to 2018 (DSSV 2019). At the same time, customer turnover in the fitness market is fairly high, which could be indicative of tensions between the commodified approach to providing the services and infrastructure and the quality expected by customers. More specifically, we assume that commodified providers of facilities and services for physical exercise, such as fitness centers, which promise to deliver healthy and attractive bodies as consumer goods, often disappoint their customers because the production of this good requires the continuous cooperation of the customers themselves. Customer cooperation is more likely if they manage to familiarize themselves not only with the primary function of the socio-material environment of the fitness center but also with its rather secondary and often diffuse characteristics, such as “atmosphere.” Placing attention on prices, as implied by market logic and the highly standardized market strategy of fitness chains, might be at odds with the increasing individualization of the population (cf. Ritzer 2000; Andreasson and Johansson 2014). In other words, the socio-material setting of fitness studios as a standard, cost-efficient way to do physical activity is probably well-suited to meeting the manifest expectations of individuals planning to engage in it in a utilitarian way. However, customers may be disappointed by the non-fulfillment of their latent expectations, which are

still implicit at the outset of a membership but become manifest situationally when the body of the customer is (repeatedly) exposed to the socio-material setting of the fitness center. We claim that maintaining one particular supplier of facilities and services for one's physical exercise typically depends on both the supplier's primary function as well as its secondary characteristics, which help to singularize the customer's individual experience there. Indeed, market suppliers increasingly work hard to add a singularizing value to their products and services, very often in the form of a distinctive image, narrative, or feeling (Boltanski and Chiapello 2007, 99; Beckert 2016; Reckwitz 2020; Boltanski and Esquerre 2019). Failure of providers to develop such distinctive features increases the probability of customer disappointment. Yet, in a market setting, customers do not always verbalize the reasons for their disappointment; instead they leave without provoking an altercation with the provider (Hirschman 1970). We attempt to describe the expression of customer disappointment in a systematic way in order to contribute to the discourse of preventive healthcare and its subjectivation in a commodified socio-material setting. While previous studies have shown seemingly *en passant* that some members of up-market gyms are critical towards certain expectations that these settings embody (Doğan 2015), we would like to put these criticisms front and center in order to gain a better understanding of an individual's stance towards contemporary discourse about the body.

While participation in (particular forms of) physical activity are known to be class specific (cf. Bourdieu 1978; Klostermann and Nagel 2014), we are interested in the justifications of individuals who interact with particular socio-material settings. Diverging from Bourdieusian theory, which assumes there is a correlation between class and the desire for physical activity (*habitus*), sociology of conventions leads us to assume that actors might justify their engagement in, or disengagement from, physical activity by a plurality of evaluative repertoires (Boltanski and Thévenot 2006). To our knowledge, this perspective has yet to be applied to research on physical activity.

We investigate the assumption that commodified fitness centers provoke typical disappointment in their customers. We do so by analyzing qualitative interviews with current and former members of commercial gyms. While justifications for disengaging from a gym membership may vary among subjects, many of them converge in the way they contrast their experience of the commercial gym with an (imagined) experience of a non-commercial sports club. Furthermore, motives for joining a gym and the justifications for disengagement do not overlap. This points to expectations that were implicit or latent at the outset of membership and become explicit or manifest only through the repeated exposure of the body's sensual perception to the socio-material setting of the commercial gym. Unveiling the failure by commercial fitness centers to meet latent expectations may prompt alternative socio-

material designs – both commodified and de-commodified – in order to broaden access to physical activity as a form of sustained personal routine of self-care.

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## 2. Regimes of Engagement and Vocabularies of Evaluation

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### 2.1 Regimes of Engagement

In order to investigate how individuals reflect upon the assumed moral obligation to engage in physical activity, we draw upon the concept of regimes of engagement from the sociology of conventions (Diaz-Bone 2018). The basic assumption in the concept of regimes of engagement is that people engage with socio-material reality on different levels of reflexivity, each regime being related to a particular good, ranging from personal convenience to conventional utility and collective common goods (Thévenot 2000). The assumption of different levels of reflexivity during the course of action is crucial for pragmatic sociology (Joas 1996). Unlike teleological theories of action, which assume that action is guided by a preconceived telos, pragmatic sociology assumes an interaction between aims (“ends-in-view”) and means, both influencing each other as the process of action unfolds. It highlights that the course of action unfolds to a large extent in a habituated and pre-reflexive manner. Only when routinized engagements with the world become problematic do reflections about realistic ends and means or their legitimacy set in. The advantage of a pragmatic theory of action is that it allows for an analysis of the interactive creation of aims as well as their moral justification or critique. Situations differ in the vocabularies that are drawn upon by participants (Mills 1940).

A specificity of French pragmatism is that it does not assume an autonomous individual but one whose interaction with the world depends on an environment that facilitates his or her actions. This assumption is also present in Laurent Thévenot’s concept of regimes of engagement (Thévenot 2000, 2007). The regime of familiarity establishes a relatively limited form of order of persons and things which meet personal expectations in the first place. Persons adjust to this environment in a very routinized way and mostly based on sensual perception; very idiosyncratic semantic clues are relevant and the need for planning or deliberation with others is minimized. Engagements in this regime are assessed against the good of personal well-being.

The regime of regular, planned action facilitates conventional action by drawing upon functional instruments and using commonsense language geared primarily towards “needs” and “utilities.” It implies autonomous

individuals who project their plans into the future and search their environment for ways to achieve these plans. In this regime, engagement with the environment is evaluated based on the expected utility of the plan.

The regime of justification can mobilize a plurality of evaluative repertoires that have a seemingly general validity, each oriented towards the common good. The plurality of orders of worth enable people to make a judgement rooted in the situation when a dispute arises by providing pragmatic and legitimate criteria for attributing worth (Boltanski and Thévenot 1999). The plural evaluative repertoires of the regime of justification have evolved historically and individuals can draw upon them as they switch between particular situations, often in the same social space, during their daily lives. The conventions, which attribute persons with certain qualities according to more or less codified criteria, use things, objects, and devices as stable referents for making a judgement. Hence, the qualified relationship between persons and things that is constituted in the situation is crucial for settling the dispute. Therefore, especially in economic sociology, these repertoires are also referred to as quality conventions (Diaz-Bone 2018). In other publications, repertoires of evaluation are referred to as orders of worth, polities, or worlds; we will use these terms interchangeably. Depending on the pragmatic interaction of participants, public disputes might be resolved through the dominance of one convention, by a compromise between different conventions, or by silencing the conflict. Up to now, eight orders of worth and their corresponding repertoires of evaluation have been identified (world of inspiration, domestic world, world of opinion, civic world, world of the market, industrial world, ecological world, and network world; Boltanski and Thévenot 1999, 368; Diaz-Bone 2018, 161).

We use the concept of orders of worth to describe the evaluation of physical activities in the socio-material setting of a commodified gym. In an interview situation, respondents use generally understandable and legitimate vocabulary in order to justify their engagement in, and disengagement from, the gym. In the following subsection we will describe seven of the eight orders of worth that have been identified so far. We refrain from describing the ecological repertoire of evaluation since we surmise that it is not relevant to our field of inquiry (cf. Lafaye and Thévenot 2017).

## 2.2 Orders of Worth

In the world of inspiration, in individual's relationship to an external world is what constitutes worth. Due to this relationship, the person does not depend on the opinion of others but is able to form opinions and act in a very original way, indicating that worldly constraints do not seem to matter. Inspiration arises "in the personal body when prepared by asceticism, and especially through emotions" (Boltanski and Thévenot 1999, 370). In contrast, tradition,

continuity, and trust are the overarching principles of attributing worth in the domestic world. The demonstration of worth in this world is considerably restricted by space and time because presentation of the self typically must take place in face-to-face interactions. The body and its presentation are of eminent importance (Boltanski and Thévenot 2006, 165). While in the domestic world and in the world of inspiration, recognition by others is not important; in the world of opinion, a person's worth is determined by the amount of recognition he or she receives. In this world, self-love and the striving for personal recognition are typical ways of acting and feeling (Boltanski and Thévenot 2006, 178-85). In the civic world, collectivities are the most valuable objects. Human beings are judged by their membership to one of these collectivities and solidarity determines how they relate to one another. The collectivities themselves are part of larger collectivities, humankind being the most encompassing (Boltanski and Thévenot 2006, 185-93).

The sphere of economic relations is based on two different forms of coordination: market order and industrial order. While market order is geared towards the sphere of consumption and value is determined by price, industrial order is more applicable to the sphere of production (Boltanski and Thévenot 2006, 193-212). Justifications in the market world only become necessary when a price does not seem justified (Boltanski and Esquerre 2015). Value in the industrial world is determined by effectiveness and efficiency. In this world, the body is an instrument that executes physical work. This physical capacity is further enhanced by machines and other devices. The functional elements of the industrial world stabilize each other and allow for the projection of substantial programs or time schedules into the future. Finally, we regard network convention as potentially significant for our investigations (Boltanski and Chiapello 2007). In this dimension, value is based on the successful completion of projects; the harmonious figure in this world is the network. Ideally, protagonists (managers, coaches, innovators) are capable of moving from one project to another and boundaries between work and private life becoming increasingly blurred.

All these orders of worth have legitimate tests at their disposal that have been established through a relatively formal procedure of categorization. Because of the public nature of their criteria, these tests also become the object of (moderate to radical) critique. However, there are also tests of mere strength that are of a more local and contingent nature; their criteria are less defined and the tested subjects draw on an unclassified range of resources (Boltanski and Chiapello 2007, 314-8). In fact, there is a continuum between highly visible formal tests and relatively informal ones that receive little recognition. Tests use material and/or symbolic objects that are present in the situation and have been qualified for this purpose according to the equivalence principle of the respective order of worth. In economic transactions, for example, price formation is the legitimate test (Boltanski and Esquerre

2015). However, socio-material settings vary in the degree to which they enact particular orders of worth. This is also the case for economic arrangements (Thévenot 2001). In fact, while some situations are relatively simple embodiments of a certain convention, others that contain objects from different worlds are more ambiguous and hence more likely to provoke criticism (Boltanski and Thévenot 1999, 374). In economic transactions, criticism typically centers around unjustified prices (Boltanski and Esquerre 2015).

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### 3. Discourse on Preventive Healthcare and Possible Tensions of Engagement in Fitness Centers

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#### 3.1 The Development of Preventive Healthcare Discourse

Since the period of enlightenment, states have developed an interest in keeping the health of their citizens in check through both curative and preventive measures (Bröckling 2008; Lengwiler and Madarász 2010; Leanza 2017). Indeed, through a salutogenetic approach (cf. Mittelmark et al. 2017), the traditional curative direction of the health system has been substantially influenced by the epidemiological transition (Omran 1998), internal and external critics of the medical system (Zola 1977), and the increasing importance of health promotion research (Kickbusch and Nutbeam 2017). In practice, the salutogenetic approach includes measures for preventing illness as well as measures for promoting health. The difference between the two is not always clear-cut, but preventive measures can be defined as those aiming to avoid potential future harm, while health promotion focuses on strengthening existing resources in order to maintain or achieve health in the future (Krajic, Dietscher, and Pelikan 2017). While prevention, as a future-oriented time scheme, might be in competition with other (future-oriented) time schemes (Leanza 2017, 11), it seems to complement health promotion activities substantially. Physical activity, for example, which is currently a salient form of health intervention, can be justified by the desire to *prevent future illness* as well as by the desire to *promote existing health resources*.

Since World War II, a distinctive feature of preventive dispositives has been to increasingly ascribe responsibility for preventive healthcare to individuals and their lifestyle choices while paying less attention to occupational and environmental determinants of health (Raphael 2011; cf. Leanza 2017).<sup>1</sup> This “behavioral turn” in public health was first observed in the U.S. in the 1970s

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<sup>1</sup> While the observation that there is a tendency towards increasing individual responsibility for preventive healthcare is certainly correct, one must not overlook how public actors are still trying to enhance public health through protective legislation and health promotion measures (Leanza 2017, 242).

and later in Germany (Crawford 1977; Kühn 1993). More recently, the focus on individual behavior has been further enhanced by the influential work of economists, who claim that policymakers should pay more attention to the “choice architecture” of consumptive situations in the sense that these should “nudge” the consumer towards prudent choices (Thaler and Sunstein 2008). The private health insurance market contributes to preventive healthcare by rewarding clients for living a healthy lifestyle (Brömmelmeyer 2017). However, these programs focus exclusively on individual preferences without taking into account the socio-material environment of individuals. Furthermore, health governance increasingly relies on numbers and sociotechnical devices. The development of indicators for governing public health on a global scale is intended to create transparency for policymakers when they set priorities for public policy. This is to ensure that scarce resources can be used as efficiently as possible (Maldonado and Moreira 2019). These indicators objectify for policymakers the health needs of the population. At the same time, they envisage life as composed of units of time and the individual as a *homo oeconomicus* who invests resources for the sake of maximizing his or her lifespan (Batifoulier, Latsis, and Merchiers 2009; Kenny 2015). Critics argue that placing health promotion efforts on the shoulders of the individual will result in a moralization of lifestyle choices (Brown 2018). In these cases, non-conforming individuals might feel stigmatized and view public health discourse as curtailing their individual autonomy rather than assuring their civic rights (cf. Tulle 2015).

Individuals that feel responsible for engaging in preventive healthcare can choose from a range of activities, including psychological coaching, relaxation, time management, ergonomic work-place design, nutrition courses, and physical activity and sport (Cachay and Thiel 2000, 163). An important implication for the diversification of compatible activities is that they are mostly not catered for by the health system but instead rely on other organizations and informal forms of social coordination (cf. NPK 2019). Within the set of compatible measures, physical activity is seen as crucial for preventing illness, especially with regard to non-communicable diseases that are most prevalent in industrialized and newly industrialized countries (WHO 2013). As a consequence, experts recommend adults do 150 minutes of physical activity of moderate to high intensity per week plus a form of muscle strengthening exercise twice a week (e.g., Rütten and Pfeifer 2018, 28).

Critics of the scientific discourse on insufficient physical activity and sedentary behavior argue that it is part of a bio-politic “characterized by a distancing from, and thus objectification of, our bodies so that we can judge them and enhance them, making ourselves better than we are. This process is mediated, that is to say facilitated and produced, by a complex but ultimately market-led apparatus” (Tulle 2015, 12). We are somewhat skeptical towards criticism that equates every form of knowing and objectifying the self

with market logic. Foucault reconstructed from ancient texts a form of self-care that involves accepting one's own limits and focusing less on continuous improvements (Foucault 1986, 66). Indeed, developing a sense of the needs of one's own body seems to be a crucial precondition for self-care that is increasingly valued as a possible contribution to "the good life" (Wetzel 2014). For this reason, we are interested in subjective reflections on physical activity. We believe that sociology of conventions allows for a nuanced account of individual agency with regard to the subjectivation of health discourse by shedding light on the moral engagements of individuals with those bio-politics. It might well be that individuals regard physical activity as a form of self-care and not as a form of self-optimization for competitive reasons. Importantly, time spent doing physical activity means there is less time for other activities, like work or the consumption of culture.

In the terminology of sociology of conventions (Boltanski and Thévenot 2006), the discourse on preventive healthcare seems to relate largely to the industrial world by defining an explicit standard relating physical activity to an individual future state of health. At the same time, it relates to the civic and to the market world. Individuals – as members of a political collective – are held responsible for engaging in physical activity not only for scientific reasons but also for the budgetary reasons of public policy (cf. Tulle 2015). The inclusive standard defined in terms of a minimum amount of activity per week seems to support a civic justification of equal opportunities to comply with this standard. A reference is made to market logic when new business opportunities resulting from increasing individual attention to preventive healthcare are pointed out. This is the case with the discourse on the cost of public health insurance and how privatization might be a remedy, supposedly providing win-win outcomes for different stakeholders, but also by pointing out business cases for commercial providers of urban facilities and services for physical activities, such as fitness centers (cf. WHO 2018). While the realization of these market opportunities can be seen as enhancing public interest in economic growth, the price to be paid for the private provision of facilities creates a tension with the norm of equal access, which is important to civic order.

### 3.2 Fitness Centers as a Commodified Setting for Physical Activities

Fitness studios are among the most important commercial providers of (urban) sport facilities (Sassatelli 2015). They provide a highly calculable space with a range of equipment and weights to work out individually or as part of a scheduled class in a very time-efficient way (Andreasson and Johansson 2014). Gyms are a commodified form of doing sport. In contrast to sports clubs, fitness companies are not supported by governmental funding and

their economic viability depends solely on membership fees. Their members are, in fact, customers and, unlike in sports clubs, they are not expected to volunteer to provide services (Kläber 2013). Gym membership can be characterized as a type of subscription. Based on a fixed-term contract, members are typically obliged to pay fees that do not correspond to their actual usage of the facilities. In contrast to trade in material goods (Boltanski and Esquerre 2019), they provide services that require the continuous cooperation of their customers.

Gyms emerged from the bodybuilding scene and began targeting a wider audience when they started to offer cardio training, aerobics, and, later, health workouts (Andreasson and Johansson 2014; Sassatelli 2010). Today's fitness studio sector exhibits a diverse segmentation. "Individual studios," "chains," and "microstudios" are the categories defined by the German Employer Association for Fitness and Health Facilities (DSSV [Arbeitsverband deutscher Fitness- und Gesundheitsanlagen]). The DSSV (2019) defines independent studios by their size ( $> 200 \text{ m}^2$ ) and the number of branches (1 - 4). Chains and franchises are of a comparable size ( $> 200 \text{ m}^2$ ) but have more branches (5+). Microstudios are exclusively defined by their size of less than  $200 \text{ m}^2$ . The fitness studio sector has grown considerably. In Germany, more than 11 million people were members of a gym in 2018. This amounts to around 13 % of the total population and is a higher number than membership to soccer clubs, which is the most popular sport in the country with around 7 million members. Within the fitness studio market, fitness studio chains and franchises saw the largest growth in membership in 2018 (8 %). However, an above-average fluctuation rate of around 25 % for chains and franchises raises the question of why customers terminate their membership in these socio-material settings more often than in others (DSSV 2019).

The fitness market has undergone continuous changes throughout the last decade. Fitness studio chains and franchises have become increasingly more prevalent (DSSV 2019; Andreasson and Johansson 2014). These corporations are characterized by low prices and long opening hours. In 2018, the average monthly fee for chains and franchises was considerably lower (32.78 euros) than for independent studios (52.45 euros) and microstudios (68.85 euros) (DSSV 2019, 2). Falling prices in this market segment indicate that competition between providers is not about the quality of the product but rather centered on the cost of the membership.

How do individuals who exercise in a fitness center describe their experience in this commodified environment?

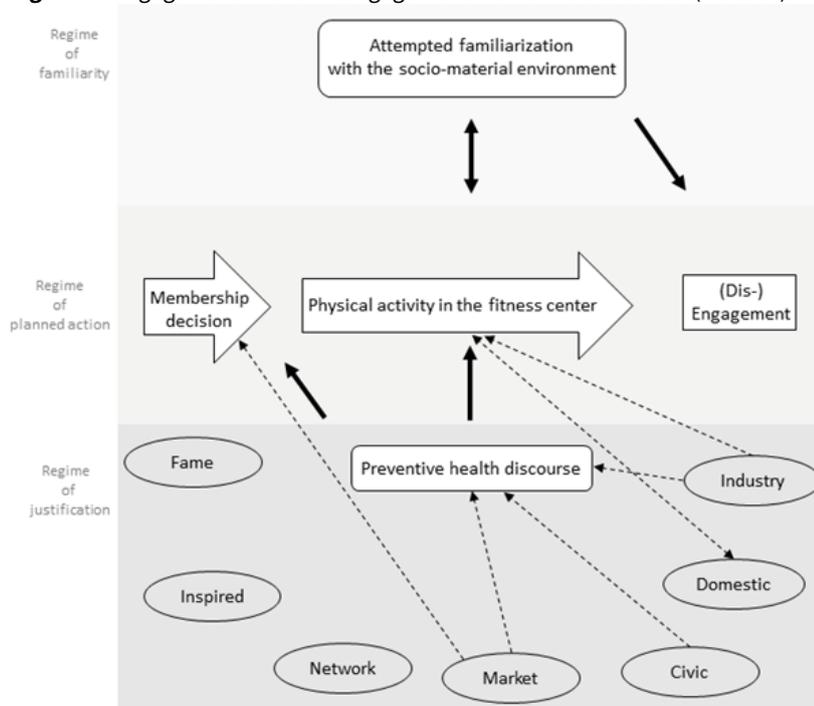
### 3.3 Assumptions about Possible Tensions of Engagement in a Fitness Center

Against the theoretical backdrop of the sociology of conventions, we conclude that, for preventive healthcare discourse to be effective in the socio-material setting of the fitness center, the latter would have to embody crucial expectations of this discourse as part of its organizational design (Kranz 2016), such as providing a space for physical activities that is functional and “legible” to users. Furthermore, since the fitness center might embody normative expectations from other forms of discourse as well, such as the sport of bodybuilding, those might be at odds with expectations derived from preventive healthcare discourse. In addition to these potential “horizontal” tensions between different orders of worth, “vertical” tensions between different regimes of engagement might arise. These possible “vertical” tensions can be further specified by taking into account that regular physical activity requires not only engagement with a functional environment which has been designed for this purpose but also the establishment of personal routines. The latter form of engagement is not automatically in harmony with the effective execution of a plan; instead, the opposite seems to be likely. Figure 1 provides an overview of the expected “horizontal” and “vertical” tensions during the process of engaging in physical activities in a fitness center.

Functional environments are very often designed by experts who imply a certain target group or a plurality of target groups by imagining their needs and desires. Adele Clarke coined the notion of “implicated actors” for these projections of actors who are not present or not consulted during the process of decision making, but who will nevertheless be impacted by these decisions (Clarke and Montini 1993, 45). In a similar vein, Jan Tangen (2004) noted that while “sport for all” has been an official policy goal, the sporting infrastructure is often not used as much as expected. He attributes this fact to a mismatch between the expectations implicated in the socio-material design of particular settings for physical activities and the self-concepts of targeted individuals. On the part of targeted individuals, we distinguish between manifest and latent expectations. Following Thévenot, we assume that planned action requires the explication of expectations or motives before the course of action. These expectations can be justified to third parties using legitimate vocabularies of motives as they have been described in an ideal-typical way as orders of worth. Becoming a member of a fitness center can be considered a planned action in this sense. Engagement in the regime of familiarity is usually based on a continuity of personal routines. New members of a fitness studio still need to build up such routines in order to become stable members; they will try to “domesticate” the new functional environment. However, this attempt at familiarization might fail, uncovering expectations that had remained latent until then. The clash of latent expectations with the socio-

material setting makes them vulnerable to critique directed towards this setting. Why do people think that their membership to a fitness center is not worth the price they pay?

**Figure 1** Engagement in and Disengagement from a Fitness Center (Model 1)



Source: Authors' own model. The figure represents our conceptualization of the process of becoming a member of a fitness center and possible disengagement. The process model is based on the concepts of regimes of engagement (vertical axis) and orders of worth (horizontal axis) as well as our analysis of preventive health discourse. Solid lines represent expected relationships between regimes of engagement (directional arrows: influence, double arrows: tensions). Dotted lines represent the discursive reference to different orders of worth.

Our process model in a nutshell: Preventive healthcare discourse refers to particular orders of worth (industry, civic, market) generating manifest expectations of market actors. Actual engagement of people in functional socio-material settings uncovers latent expectations of customers belonging to the domestic order which might lead to a disengagement from fitness centers.

#### 4. Research Design and Methods of Analysis

This empirical field of investigation was chosen based on theoretical criteria (Glaser and Strauss 2006). From a theoretical standpoint, it is crucial to draw on cases that are, firstly, empirically relevant and, secondly, where tensions

with the preventive healthcare discourse are expected. Our research focuses on the franchise fitness studio as a socio-material setting of physical activity because of the popularity of fitness and because its industrial and commodified set-up is likely to lead to tensions when the increasing heterogeneity of (potential) customer expectations is taken into account.

We conducted interviews with a total of seven former commercial gym members and two current gym members. The current members did not visit the fitness studio regularly, hence, they had essentially distanced themselves from this setting. The sample reflects the importance of fitness studio chains and franchises on the market (DSSV 2019), as six out of the nine interviewees are, or have been, members of a fitness chain or franchise. An overview of the sample is presented in the table below:

**Table 1** Demographics and the Characteristics of the Fitness Studio Memberships of our Interviewees

	Age	Gender	Membership to more than one studio over time	Last type of fitness studio	Length of membership (in years)	Membership status
Ben	26	m	X	franchise	2.5	terminated
Emma	29	w	X	independent studio	1.5	terminated
Paul	26	m	X	university gym (independent studio)	1	(active) member
Mia	70	w		chain	3.5	terminated
Leon	27	m	X	franchise	2	terminated
Finn	29	m	X	chain	ca. 5	terminated
Elias	27	w		independent studio	4	terminated
Hannah	28	m	X	chain	0.5	terminated
Sofia	65	w	X	chain	5	(active) member

Semi-structured interviews were conducted based on the theoretical considerations of problem-centered interviews (Witzel 2000). We used four narrative-generating questions.<sup>2</sup>

In order to find out why people signed up for a gym membership and then decided to cancel it, we applied an adapted version of Fritz Schütze's narrative analysis to reconstruct the processes of disengagement. He distinguishes between three different communication schemes: description, narration, and argumentation (Schütze 2016). Descriptions depict a constellation of circumstances that seem to be relevant in a particular situation. In narratives,

<sup>2</sup> 1. What does the term "fitness" mean to you? 2. How did your membership to a gym come about? 3. Why did you quit the gym? 4. What role does sport play in your life?

interviewees apply a temporal order illustrating the processual unfolding of conflicts or turning points to the researcher. In argumentation, interviewees justify their decisions using a conventional grammar in order to ensure general comprehensibility, very much like in the sociology of conventions (Boltanski and Thévenot 1999). Following Schütze, we classified different text genres in our interviews, identified relevant text segments, and coded them using MaxQDA. On the basis of a cross-case comparison, we reconstructed typical conflicts that occurred during gym membership and contributed to the disconnection from physical activity in the gym (cf. Nohl 2010).

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## 5. Empirical Analysis

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The results of our analysis are presented in the following section. Examples from the interviews are used to illustrate our results. We will begin by describing the justifications for choosing this specific socio-material setting as a place to be physically active before addressing different situations in which tensions developed. Finally, the form of physical activity in the fitness studio will be contrasted with other physical activities that were introduced by the interviewees in order to point to a possible amelioration of perceived tensions.

### 5.1 Tensions between Different Vocabularies of Motives for Joining a Fitness Center

As described above, public health discourse stresses the individual and societal benefits of being physically active. In this context, individuals are increasingly responsabilized to take care of their own health. The history of the fitness center shows that it has developed into a place that enables a range of individuals to become physically active on their own by focusing explicitly on a fit and healthy body (Sassatelli 2015). The image of the fitness center as a place for health-oriented self-care is supported, for example, by insurance companies that provide financial aid or bonus points for a gym membership and, as one interviewee pointed out, by doctors who recommend that their patients exercise at the gym. Membership has thus become a commodity that appeals directly to an individual's preoccupation with their health and achieves the expectations of public discourse on an individual level as long as members actively remain going to the gym.

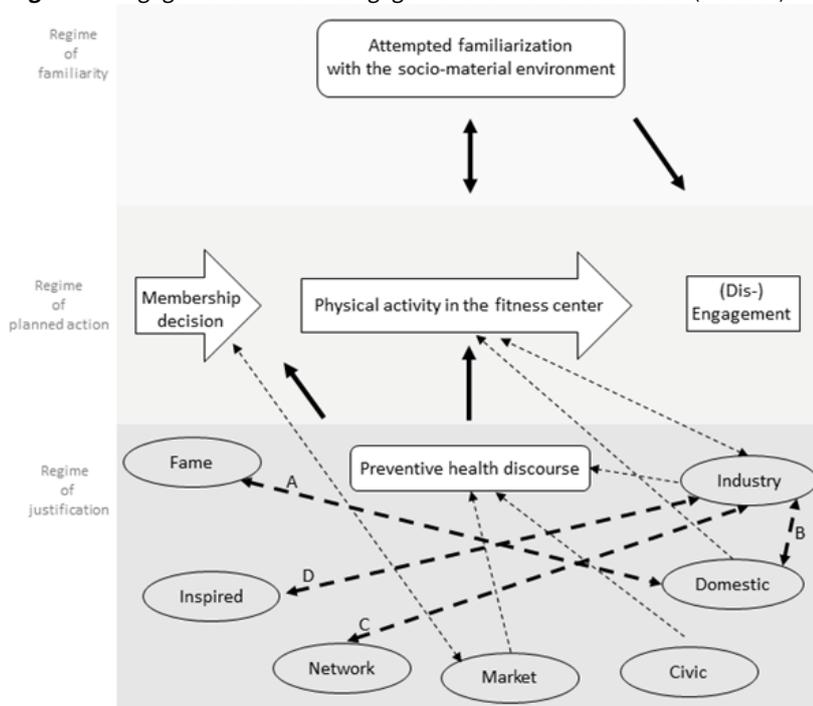
The gym's special features and the type of physical activities it provides are not important to our interviewees when they sign up for membership. They regard membership as a commodity to which they assign the ability to take care of their bodies. Individuals feel assured that the gym will provide them with an adequate place to conduct their physical activities.

The most unifying motive for gym membership, as cited by six of the nine interviewees, is to improve one's own fitness for a specific activity or for everyday life. The future-oriented concern for one's physical health is at the forefront. As advocated by scientists in preventive health discourse, individuals take responsibility for their own bodies. This is in contrast to the aim of increasing performance, which is typical for competitive sports (Werron 2010). The perception of losing or decreasing one's physical abilities makes the need to work out and join a fitness center more urgent and personal, as the interviews with previously ill or injured people show. Physical impairment thus becomes a more tangible risk that can limit one's own life. Physical activity thereby appears to be an intrinsically valued form of self-care because individuals have directly experienced the consequence of health problems. We argue that this type of self-care through physical activity follows a domestic logic in which a person cannot be detached from his or her body. Just like worthy people care for their subordinates, according to domestic logic, when it comes to health, taking responsibility to care for one's own body becomes a legitimate act. According to the interviewees, a gym membership is an investment in being fit and healthy for as long as possible. In contrast to this argument put forward by our interviewees, it seems to be less appropriate to justify membership on the basis of promoting one's own beauty. They describe a tension between a practice that is oriented towards beauty and attributed to others, and a practice of self-care, which they claim for themselves. This tension particularly manifests itself in the rejection of losing weight as a motive for physical activity and the devaluation of bodybuilding, which they associate with superficiality. In contrast to the claimed idea of preventive health care, which makes assumptions about the inner workings of the body, our interviewees associate these allegedly illegitimate aims with a directly visible change in one's own body. One interviewee describes this tension very clearly: "[...] because I think, um, I would never go to the gym only to, somehow, um, to achieve a socially attractive look, you know, for me it's not about status, um, for me, um, it's about being fit and about being in shape for football [...]" (Leon).

In the vocabulary of the sociology of conventions, the legitimate motives for entering a gym are dominated by industrial and domestic logic. Our interviewees strike a compromise between these two logics by choosing an efficient training location and by expressing concern for their own body. They lend our interpretation further support by distancing themselves from aesthetic ideals, using a distinction between a "superficial" and a "meaningful" practice of being physically active. This indicates tensions between a physical practice, which follows the logic of opinion, and the domestic logic of self-care (Figure 2: A). Experiencing one's own physical activity at the gym as meaningful according to explicit motives may contradict the motives attributed to observed physical practices of others at the gym and cast doubt

about the usefulness of a fitness center membership. Below we describe the process of how disappointment with the setting of the commercial gym situationally arises.

**Figure 2** Engagement in and Disengagement from a Fitness Center (Model 2)



Source: Authors' own model. The figure represents the process of becoming a member of a fitness center and actual disengagement as reconstructed from our interviews. The process model is based on the concepts of regimes of engagement (vertical axis) and orders of worth (horizontal axis). Solid lines represent actual relationships between regimes of engagement (directional arrows: influence; double arrows: tensions). Dotted lines represent references to different orders of worth by interviewees. We highlighted the tensions (A, B, C, D) associated with disengagement (bold lines).

## 5.2 Disappointment of Manifest and Latent Expectations

### 5.2.1 Manifestation of Latent Expectations

At the outset of a fitness center membership, a training plan is drawn up together with a trainer. Based on the individual training goals, the training in the gym is organized using a template. However, this plan often fails, as the high fluctuation rate of members indicates. Among our interviewees, going to the gym and being sensually aware of the environment there lead to a

disappointment about the (latent) expectations in the course of a membership. These latent expectations concern both the material and the social environment. Dissatisfaction and disappointment become connected to the individual characteristics of a particular fitness center, not to fitness centers in general. The general attribution of a fitness center as an adequate space to pursue functional, fitness, and health-promoting activities seems to remain relatively unaffected, as rejoining another gym is a possibility contemplated by five of our interviewees. However, the costs and long-term contracts of fitness centers have so far prevented these respondents from joining another fitness center.

Very much resembling the principles of the industrial world, the gym offers an efficient, cost reducing, and functional space for independent exercise (cf. Andreasson and Johansson 2014; Ritzer 2000). Franchises and chains especially emphasize the cost-efficient aspect of this commodified urban sports infrastructure by advertising low-priced products as part of a fierce competition over customers. Our interviews indicate that the combination of standardized and highly commodified characteristics of the gym become more important throughout the course of the membership and lead to tensions between manifest and latent expectations towards the gym and what one experiences while doing regular activities there. Typically, interviewees experienced their training and the atmosphere in which it took place as monotonous, void of surprises, and not up to their undefined standard. One characteristic of familiar engagements with the world appears to be that critique is hard to explain.

Seemingly unimportant details described in the interviews, such as repetitive background music that is regularly interrupted by commercials, which can become disturbing after a while, indicate latent expectations. Furthermore, a disillusionment about more conventional expectations can arise if machines do not work properly, the interaction with the personnel or their availability is disappointing, or the training location does not correspond to the individual's standard of cleanliness. When a gym does not fulfill conventional and latent expectations, membership no longer seems worth the expense. It is no coincidence that the perceived contradiction between expectations and reality is reflected in the situation surrounding training advice. In such a situation, conventional wisdom of consumers on the fitness market anticipates personalized customer service by trained personnel. Instead, the customers in this sample were typically not treated as individuals but rather as an anonymous mass (Figure 2: B). In four interviews, this led to tensions. Interestingly, these interviewees implicitly expected individualized service despite their decision for a low-cost supplier.

In addition, while working out, members whose training practices are associated with bodybuilding can be perceived as disruptive and lead to questions about the ability of the gym to provide an adequate space for preventive

healthcare. As we have shown in the previous section, there seems to be a divide between “superficial” and “meaningful” physical activity, something that other authors have observed as well (Kläber 2013). In our interviews, this is typically accompanied by devaluing aesthetic modeling of the body to create a particular image. While bodybuilders regard themselves as athletes, customers using the gym to improve their fitness reject the concept of bodybuilding as a sport. Instead, for these interviewees, working out in the gym is just a way to improve one’s physical ability through a range of “real” sports. The gym offers space for both forms of physical exercise. It is designed to appeal to a heterogeneous mass and the different types of self-image among user groups typically leads to perceived tensions and sometimes even conflicts in the fitness center. The repeated perception of a heterogeneity in the make-up of the members inferred from their forms of physical exercises might lead an individual questioning whether it was possible to achieve one’s goals there.

The regime of familiarity as a distinct level of reflexivity is most evident in interactions with other people. Perceptual clues like “I didn’t feel comfortable there” (Mia) or that the fitness center and the interviewee “drifted apart” (Ben) point towards a personal sentiment rather than a description of being engaged in a conventional plan. However, these perceptual clues from the situation in the gym are being drawn upon in the interview in order to justify disengagement.

In contrast to these accounts, other parts of our interviews show that employees and other members of the gym are able to mitigate the industrial characteristics of the gym. In line with previous research, in our interviews, recognition of physical activity in a small and trusted community seems to affirm the value of the physical activity (Koppetsch 2000) and acts as a motivation to continue. Again, the relevance of trusting others brings the arguments of our interviewees in line with the domestic logic and maybe as well with the network logic (Figure 2: B, C) emphasizing that the joint achievement of shared goals is important (cf. Boltanski and Chiapello 2007, 104-5, 378-9). A routine can be established more easily and transform an impersonal training environment into a familiar space with regular social interactions, which might even reach beyond the context of physical activities. “Running on a treadmill still allows you to speak to somebody else” – except if no adequate conversation partner is present (Hannah). In this situation, the importance of individual appropriation of the socio-material setting becomes evident. Running on a machine that increases running efficiency becomes a practice in friendly exchange by having a friend as a running mate. This interviewee relies on her friend joining her at the gym since she refuses to interact with other members. The gym in and of itself is not a sufficient incentive to engage in physical activity. Friends have a special function here. They are part of life

outside the gym and their presence during training automatically adds a personal component.

Tensions arise if the expectation to meet other people is not fulfilled or if the social interactions are not satisfying. Our interviewees seem to seek a compromise between industrial and domestic logic. One example is the desire for a “training group.” At the start of her membership, Mia aspired to find others to exercise with and who could motivate her. This did not happen during her membership. She did not feel able to connect with other members – especially other women – because the ones she mentions did not seem very interested in working out or interacting with her. Hence, she felt excluded from the social space. Based on her descriptions, they sat around on the fitness machines chatting within an established circle instead of engaging in the scheduled circuit training and including her. In this case it is the domestic logic which dominates the situation and impedes the industrial logic of the clock, which is crucial for handling the situation with regard to this type of training.

Hence, it was both the feeling of exclusion – of not being part of a community – as well as not being able to stick to the individual training plan which led to her frustration. Frustration becomes even more manifest when other members train in groups. The structure of fitness centers supports efficient training. Social interactions become subordinate to the efficiency of the workout. This can lead to disappointment with gym membership from the outset, but it can also lead to irritation for an already existing routine if one feels excluded by friends or if familiar people leave the fitness center. The latent expectation of social interaction in the gym, in contrast to an efficient training space, thus fails to be met. Gradually, the fitness center loses its value as a training venue.

### 5.2.2 Contrasting Socio-Material Settings of Physical Activities

Descriptions of other forms of physical activity and socio-material environments during our interviews hint at varying experiences with the body and emotions when doing an activity. As much as an efficient workout and a defined goal can motivate a person to exercise, other sentiments also seem to be a factor in continuing one’s involvement. The physical activity itself is crucial for continued participation. The experience of flow while running, the feeling of muscle flexibility and strength, and the feeling of exhaustion after exercise contradict a purely functional practice as perceived in the gym. Just as physical activity is associated with expectations, so is the socio-material environment. Mountaineering, playing tennis outdoors, or cycling speak of the desire to experience nature while training. Not surprisingly, expectations influenced by the experience of other sports and environments can conflict with the industrial logic of the gym and the training done there. This can be

observed in situations where the constant sound of music is perceived as disturbing, when the same commercials keep popping up on the screens, or when the body is not perceived during training. The logic of inspiration is dominant in such narratives and industrial logic prevents innovation and emotionality during training (Figure 2: D). In contrast to the long-term, goal-oriented form of training in the fitness center, the immediate experiences are salient here. The sense of community when training in a sports club also seems to be different from what is experienced in a fitness center. Conflicts between domestic and network logic and the industrial world seem to be less expected there.

We have found more tensions than expected. Physical activity in a commercial fitness center appears to be an ambiguous situation which embodies multiple conventions and hence is more likely to provoke criticism than a highly purified setting. In particular, market logic, in which the price of a product determines its value, as well as the industrial production methods applied in price competition, such as in chain and franchise fitness studios, target a heterogeneous clientele of consumers. Standard services are delivered at a low price to the masses, which make individualized attention to the customer difficult. Our analysis shows that the disengagements in our sample depended on the specific characteristics of a particular gym rather than a general rejection of this type of setting.

It has been shown that the industrial and market logics of the fitness studio repeatedly conflict with other orders of worth and lead to tensions in the membership. Finally, motivation for physical activity influences the affective experiences made during it. The domestic dimension of self-care is linked to the results of working on one's own body and not to the physical activity itself. The interviewees compare their perception of physical activity in the fitness center to their experience of doing other sports activities which can thus be devalued in comparison to them.

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## 6. Discussion and Conclusions

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Due to the importance of physical activity in the preventative healthcare discourse, this paper focused on engaging in and disengaging from physical activity in the fitness studio as a specific socio-material setting. The market-oriented decision to join a specific gym leads to the disappointment of manifest and latent expectations throughout the membership.

We started by describing the public health discourse and its reference to the industrial, civic, market, and domestic world. From our point of view, the appeal of individual preventive healthcare comes close to the domestic world, which is not easily compatible with the other logic referred to in the

discourse. Furthermore, with the commodified setting of the fitness center, we expected tensions between different forms of engagement.

Our analysis has shown that an examination of aesthetic physical ideals is important and is used to justify one's own motives. This distinction can be illustrated by the differentiation between meaningful and superficial practice of physical activity. The motives initially described guide the planned actions in the gym and are translated as part of individual training plans at the beginning of a membership. However, their implementation requires continuous training in the gym, which often falls short and leads to disengagement. The fitness studio often appears as an alienated space. Former members cannot identify with it and have no personal connection to the social-material setting. Continuous use of a fitness center is linked to an individual appropriation of the socio-material setting.

Justifications are sought to express conflicts throughout the membership in generally understandable semantics. In our analysis, they refer mostly to conflicts between the commercial fitness studio's inherent industrial logic and other world logics, such as domestic, network, or the logic of inspiration. In this way, the non-qualification of the fitness center as an adequate training location is expressed. This is how members check the suitability of fitness centers. Conflicts include the way staff interact with members, other members who do not correspond to their own idea of meaningful training, the absence of social interaction in the gym, and the material structure in the gym that can get in the way of social interaction or prevent effective training if machines are broken. Other physical activities influence the perception of training in the gym. The same applies to experiences in other material settings, e.g., there is a notable contrast to outdoor activities. In this way, the inspirational world logic conflicts with the industrial world logic.

In conclusion, preventive healthcare discourse, with its focus on physical activity, depends on adequate socio-material settings to be effective. The comparatively low price of fitness centers makes them particularly compatible with the civic element contained in the discourse on preventive healthcare, which emphasizes accessibility for all. Yet, if accessibility for all is regarded as a crucial aspect of policies that promote physical activity, there are various forms of public infrastructure that could be made available at no cost to the private individual – quite in contrast to commodified fitness centers. Public access to natural environments and outdoor urban infrastructure is one example of this. These alternative settings seem to speak more clearly to the civic and in part to the environmental quality convention. Descriptions of sensual experiences during cycling, running, or mountaineering (e.g., Poulson 2016) indicate that aesthetic qualities of the activity, specifically the surrounding environment, can be an important factor in the enjoyment of physical activities and can foster their continuous practice, thus hinting at the relevance of the environmental quality convention.

While our sampling strategy was explicitly tailored to revealing the disappointment of an individual's latent expectations towards fitness gyms as socio-material settings for physical activity, our results show a fairly high overall commitment of the interviewees to physical activity as such. Many of them continue to be physically active in other settings or plan to be so. Hence, self-determined physical activity seems to be able to contribute to these individual's versions of the "good life" and evoke experiences that resonate positively (cf. Wetzel 2014; Rosa 2019). Looking at resonance theory, which emphasizes the importance of resonant practices for individuals, one may ask whether this is a regime of engagement in its own right, where the evaluation of situations depends on the feelings that people experience during them.

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