

THE ROLE OF HEALTH CLUBS IN SURVIVING LIFE TRANSITIONS

BY

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The Role of Health Clubs in Surviving Life Transitions

Abstract

This paper reports a qualitative study of persons undergoing life transitions and their use of fitness clubs. Eight fitness club members (four male, four female) were interviewed to determine their use of fitness clubs and to investigate how the fitness service addressed their individual needs. Findings suggest that extrinsic motivations (losing weight, getting stronger, etc) draw individuals in transition to fitness clubs and that intrinsic motives (increased self-esteem, a feeling of belongingness, etc) keep them active members. Five themes emerged which reflected two characteristics related to a progression or developmental process, namely: the development of a level of comfort with the equipment and chosen exercise activity, and interaction with club members and staff and the development of relationships with same.

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The Role of Health Clubs in Surviving Life Transitions

Chapter 1

Introduction

Nearly ten years of observation as a health club owner has made it obvious that people who purchase health club memberships join for very specific individual reasons. Additionally, a significant number of these health club members can be classified as "in transition". Schouten (1991) suggests: "A transition of identity begins with separation from some role, relationship or other key component of the extended self. Separation may occur literally in time and space, triggered by some external force or event or it may be experienced subjectively, triggered by an internal force such as a psychological need for intimacy, security or control".

What does the health club environment provide for these individuals in transition? How does an individual's motivation to exercise relate to their use of the facility, and how are their needs being met by fitness services at a club? Is exercise the product, or is something else offered by the club meeting the member's needs? What type of support do fitness centres provide to keep these people in transition coming back again and again?

It is the purpose of this study to determine these questions and to formally investigate:

- 1) What are the unique needs of fitness centre participants undergoing life transitions?
- 2) How do fitness service firms address those needs? How could they be more effective in doing so?

I. Why people exercise

The acquisition of habits of increased physical activity has been described as a three stage process: a) the decision to initiate, b) early habit acquisition, and c) maintenance of the new behaviour. (Knapp 1988) This process, which is dependent for the most part upon the individual, requires some degree of personal motivation. Since it is difficult to measure motivation, it can be inferred through observations of behaviours and actions.

This often results in inaccurate perceptions about presumed levels of motivation since motivation lacks a uniformly acceptable definition. I have adopted Deci and Ryan's (1985) definition of motivation: "...the internal

mechanism(s) and external stimuli that arouse and direct behaviour".

According to their definition, motivation is affected by both internal and external forces. External forces, or extrinsic rewards are often necessary stimulus for people to develop early habit acquisition and maintenance of a behaviour as suggested by Knapp. An event of considerable importance in exercise motivation occurs when the individual transcends dependence on external rewards and begins to internalize feelings of well-being as the prime motivators of exercise. (Rosato, 1990) Franklin (1978) states,

"the benefits derived from extrinsic rewards, while initially important, are also short lived. Ultimately, the motivation to continue an exercise program must be intrinsic rather than extrinsic in nature. The individual must develop an attitude toward exercise which reinforces adherence."

The concern for health club operators is to create and provide services that attract members and ultimately keep them coming to the club. Becoming a member must satisfy needs associated with the initial motivation to join (most likely extrinsic - to get in shape, lose weight, etc) and at the same time support the development of intrinsic motivations for the member (the development of a relationship with the club and/or other members, a feeling of well-being when working out, etc).

To further examine the extrinsic/intrinsic factors affecting motivation, and their relationship to individuals maintaining membership in a club, Kenyon (1968) developed a conceptual model that illustrates six dimensions regarding why people participate in certain kinds of activities. (Rosato 1990, Willis and Campbell 1992) According to Kenyon, it is a reasonable assumption that there are movement experiences that have the potential to provide some degree of satisfaction for everyone. Kenyon's scale (Kenyon Attitude Toward Physical Activity Scale) consists of the following dimensions:

- (1) *Physical activity as a social experience* - it is believed that involvement in some forms of physical activity can meet some of the social needs of certain participants. Some physical activities provide a medium for meeting new people or perpetuating existing relationships.
- (2) *Physical activity for health and fitness* - This dimension relates to involvement in physical activity primarily for the development or enhancement of physical fitness.
- (3) *Physical activity for the pursuit of vertigo* - Kenyon modified the more traditional definition of vertigo to mean activities involving risk, danger or a thrill derived from speed or danger.

- (4) *Physical activity as an aesthetic experience* - This dimension pertains to physical activities that appeal to participants for their characteristics of beauty, grace, symmetry or other artistic qualities.
- (5) *Physical activity as catharsis* - This dimension refers to participation in physical activity to release tension and pent-up emotions.
- (6) *Physical activity as an ascetic experience* - The willingness or desire to endure long, strenuous, and often painful training in pursuit of a particular goal.

People usually exercise for more than one reason, and time and situational influences tend to change motives. In addition to Kenyon's work on exercise motivation, Willis and Campbell go on to suggest there are five major themes to exercise participation:

increased health and fitness

improved appearance

fun and enjoyment

social experience

psychological benefits

There is a great deal of interaction among themes and it is unlikely that any one theme is solely responsible for providing motivation to exercise. For example, an individual may exercise for the health and fitness benefits associated with an activity by choosing one that is fun and provides enjoyment. With continued participation they will find the activity may improve their appearance. Likewise, research indicates people rarely participate in a physical activity for an extended period of time without enjoying it.

Christine Brooks, Director of the Sport and Fitness Market Research Lab at the University of Michigan has investigated how adults feel about health and exercise clubs. Brooks postulates that consumers form judgements about exercise facilities based on dimensions related to facility characteristics. Consumers evaluate the potential of a partnership with a club in six ways: *tangibles* (which include the building, equipments and programs), *reliability*, *compassion*, *competence*, *responsiveness* and *atmosphere*. (Brooks, 1991)

Once a consumer has been attracted and becomes a member of a facility, Brooks suggests they are not necessarily as concerned about the total number of tangible attributes available as they are with the ability to customize what the facility has to offer so that it meets their needs. Since surveys indicate both men and women lack confidence when it comes to exercise, personalized guidance is needed - at least initially, until the member becomes comfortable in the

environment. In addition, facilities should provide consumers with a friendly, inviting atmosphere so that the transition from newcomer to regular occurs quickly and without incident.

a) Social Support - Why a private fitness centre appeals to those in transition

Wankel (1985) suggests that instead of the usual focus on the health outcomes of a fitness program, the emphasis might better be placed on the enjoyment or quality of the experience. He also maintains that the health and enjoyment need not be contradictory objectives. A person may reap the health benefits of exercise while experiencing the pleasurable aspects of belonging to a health club.

A high proportion of members in transition purchase health club memberships to socialize, or to use Brooks' definition, are *Social exercisers*. Evidence is rapidly accumulating that social support is indeed a significant force in assisting individuals to initiate activity, to adhere to activity once started and to increase enjoyment of the activity experience. (O'Brien and Cousins 1992) Social support is abundantly available in a health club - all one needs to do is get into the environment.

Social reasons for physical activity range from meeting new people to fighting loneliness and isolation (Willis and Campbell 1992). Health clubs generally provide an environment where people with similar beliefs and values congregate. Once a connection with a facility is developed, members feel welcome regardless of when they enter, whether they enter alone or with someone or whether they exercise with anyone at all.

A comparison between eating in a restaurant and going for a workout further develops this theme. A single person can enter a fitness centre and appear "not alone" immediately. People mix and mingle while exercising, and it is easy to become "one of the crowd" simply by being among them. There is no need to work out with anyone, yet the opportunity to strike up a conversation or partner exercise with someone is abundantly available. There are many instances where complete strangers "spot" for each other and end up working out together. The commonality of working out is the link between the two, whether they previously knew each other or not.

To contrast this example, eating is a more common activity than exercising, yet dining alone publicly is not generally considered a popular activity. A single person eating in a restaurant is obviously alone. In North American society it is quite rare for an individual to join a stranger(s) for a meal.

Even if alone by choice, the stigma of social isolation is present. It is quite obvious to other patrons in the restaurant that you are alone.

Entering a fitness centre allows a person in transition to engage others and actively seek social support. Social support, which can be incorporated into a general stress and coping framework is easily available and accessible. A conversation can begin while waiting for a class to start, a discussion initiated by asking for a spot while lifting a heavy weight. The locations of various pieces of exercise equipment may actually promote socialization. A brief conversation with the person on the next treadmill or bike seems more likely than not to occur during the course of a workout. Social support seeking is all possible and most likely in the context of "going for a workout".

b) How Fitness affects Self-concept and Self-esteem

Although findings are far from conclusive, regular exercise and improved physical fitness have been associated with emotional stability, self-assurance, extroversion, and low levels of neuroticism (Willis and Campbell 1992, Franklin 1985, Wankel 1985). Regular involvement in physical activity can be an uplifting physical and emotional experience (Crocker, 1994). Studies show that body attractiveness is so highly valued that it has the single most important

impact on many individuals' physical self-worth. Physical self-worth affects self-esteem (CFLRI 1994).

Body image, which represents the physical self is an important constituent of self-concept. Long term participation in exercise leads to a significant increase in self-esteem and significantly enhances one's estimation of the physical self. Body image improves as fitness level improves. (Rosato, 1990)

Physical activity also seems comparable to psychotherapy for treating milder cases of anxiety and depression. Both anxiety and depression are common symptoms of a failure to cope with mental stress - leading to a low self-image. According to the Canadian Psychiatric Association, as many as 47% of Canadians report being severely stressed several times a week (CFLRIa 1994).

Physical activity is a tool for coping with mental stress, and the relaxed atmosphere of many fitness facilities makes social interaction easier for some people. Interaction with others and the ability to improve one's body image are significant attributes for fitness clubs to promote to potential new members.

It is important to consider enhancement of body image and self-concept and self-esteem as motivators for exercise. Self-concept refers to our

perceptions about ourselves. It is molded from how we see ourselves and how we think others see us. The creation of an identity emerges through interactions with others. Others affirm and re-affirm who one is and what one does.

The social support available in a fitness club can assist in molding this vision of self-concept, as does the lack of same accelerate its deterioration. Since both men and women lack confidence when it comes to exercise and want personalized guidance, (Brooks, 1991) it is important that support is available within the fitness club environment. Whether this support comes formally from staff or informally from other members is not the issue - the provision or lack of same is important to membership retention.

Sharing the group exercise experience often leads to camaraderie and friendship among regular participants. The socializing associated with some activities has become institutionalized. Expressions such as the "19th Hole" and "apres-ski" indicate the enjoyment of the congenial companionship of like minded participants (Willis, Campbell, 1992).

c) Social Support and the "Third Place"

Personal experiences with new clients in transition indicate that for many of them, the fitness club becomes their retreat away from home or work. Ray Oldenburg, in his book The Great Good Place (Paragon House, 1989 pg.32) states:

Third places that render the best and finest service are those to which one may go alone at almost any time of the day or evening with assurance that acquaintances will be there. To have such a place available whenever the demons of loneliness or boredom strike or when the pressures and frustrations of the day call for relaxation amid good company is a powerful resource. Where they exist, such places attest to the bond between people.

There is a process involved in transition that results in a person taking on new roles and entering into new relationships, which in turn lead to a new self-concept. This may occur through a single event or experience or gradually over time. The environment in which this occurs is directly related to the outcome. If the new environment is so different that culture shock occurs, the feeling of disorganization is more acute. The newcomer must learn how to act and respond to cues within the new environment in order to adapt. However, in

taking on new roles and incorporating the new life, individual development is ongoing (Mercer et al 1989).

An individual's adherence to exercise and a facility may also be supported and improved through external sources of reinforcement (Kravitz 1992), specifically, a familiar third place environment. Reinforcements, in conjunction with a commitment to exercise, can contribute to a successful transition and the incorporation of a positive self-concept.

II. Thesis Overview

The connection between the pleasurable aspects of belonging to a health club and the needs of persons in transition is the central theme of this paper. Transitions represent a period of disequilibrium or flux in a person's life. The person experiencing transition is usually faced with adapting to a new situation, role, or responsibility. This creates feelings of inadequacy and lack of self-confidence (Mercer et al 1989).

Those in transition feel inadequate and stressed, and as a result may seek out social support to deal with these feelings. Persons in transition are more accessible to help from others, and are in need of interactions with others

experiencing similar situations or having the capacity and capability of helping deal with the experience (Mercer 1989). The fitness centre provides an environment for this support function to occur.

Chapter 2

Literature Review

I. Transition - definition

Transitions tend to be conceptualized implicitly as one of three processes; a loss that draws on coping resources, the need to learn role-based knowledge, skills and behaviour, or identity change that influences consumption symbolism (Goodwin 1992). People seek feedback from others confirming their identities, and people constantly work to establish and maintain the parts of the self-concept that are important to them.

A transition may be internally motivated (intrapersonal) or externally motivated (interpersonal or situational) and begins with separation from some role or relationship.

Separation may occur literally in time and space, triggered by some external force or event or it may be experienced subjectively, triggered by an internal force such as a psychological need for intimacy, security or control. (Schouten 1991)

II. Self-Concept

Symbolic and experiential consumer behaviours are important to successful transitions in that they aid the exploration, establishment and ongoing support of new roles and identities. There is a process involved in transitions that result in a person taking on a new role and entering into new relationships, which in turn lead to a new self-concept.

Self-concept, as the term is understood and applied in this research, is the cognitive and affective understanding of who and what we are. Self-concept is thought to encompass such things as role identities, personal attributes, relationships, fantasies, possessions and other symbols that individuals use for the purpose of self-creation and self-understanding.

a) Self-efficacy

The less secure people feel in roles to which they are committed, the more likely they are to use stereotypical or standardized norms to reinforce perceptions of adequate performance (Lazarus 1984). Fitness centres provides a unique opportunity to reinforce perceptions of adequate performance by allowing members to perform exercises, use equipment or follow a leader

through a class and be perceived as "looking like they know what they are doing". Selectorized weight training equipment (cable and pulley machines, ie. Nautilus type equipment) can be used for a variety of applications, but for each machine there is generally a recognized correct or right way of doing the movement. It does not take long to master this movement, and a sense of fulfilment and satisfaction may be associated with the action.

Additionally, regular exercise has a number of measureable effects, namely a progressive increase in the amount of resistance tolerable during exercise. This in itself has been found to be stimulating and motivating, compounding and enhancing the effects of equipment mastery. This combination of factors - mastery of equipment and movements, confidence in doing exercises correctly and an improvement in strength and/or endurance can have an affect on enhancing the self-concept. Combine these attributes with the potential body composition changes that are a physiological result of exercise (loss of body fat, increase in muscle, etc) and significant positive changes in self-concept are a likely result. Schouten (1991) found changes of appearance to be symbolically important in coping with certain role transitions:

"An attractive body is a valuable personal attribute, found by researchers to facilitate success in social, romantic and economic endeavours".

(Schouten 1991)

The Canadian Fitness and Lifestyle Research Institute indicates in its research handout *Self-Esteem and Body Image* " . . . that body attractiveness is so highly valued that it has the single most important impact on many individuals' physical self-worth." Physical self-worth affects self-esteem. The article goes on to indicate that "it is easier to develop self-efficacy related to a particular athletic skill than to attempt to change general feelings of self-worth, let alone overall self-esteem."

b) Identity

Identity also emerges through interactions with others in a social context. That is, others reaffirm who one is and what one does. Individual coping activities will be enhanced by social support, "the resources provided by other persons that reduce uncertainty. . . and function to enhance a perception of personal control in one's life experience." (Albrecht and Adelman 1987)

The newcomer must learn how to act and respond to cues within the new environment in order to adapt. People in transition experience stress related to their new role identity. Individuals are vulnerable to stress when they appraise their coping resources as inadequate, "unfamiliar environments diminish self-mastery" (Lazarus 1984). It is likely that consumption behaviour associated with

activities that reinforce existing skills and knowledge will facilitate the coping process (Goodwin 1992). Hence, for some familiar with exercise, a new fitness club may not be so new at all.

Differences among transitions can also be detected. For instance, response to identity change seems to vary from one transition to another. Some authors have suggested that people may view transition as an opportunity to experiment with possible selves.

"Taking control of one's body and its appearance, whether through surgery, dieting or exercise, or other means of body sculpting, is intrinsically rewarding for some and can also be used as a means of increasing control over the emotional responses of other people."

(Schouten 1991)

People gain self-efficacy and learn new identities by interaction with staff and fellow customers.

III. Social Support

a) "The Third Place"

What attracts members to a fitness centre is supplied not solely by management but by the fellow customers. The theme song of the famous NBC sitcom *Cheers* sums up the social support network available in a fitness centre... "Where everybody knows your name." Oldenburg (1989) states, "The third place (fitness centre) is just so much space unless the right people are there to make it come alive." The right people can be staff, but more likely are other regular members. Third places are popular for the individual even though his or her day may not have gone well, because the expectation that a feeling of comfort and belongingness goes with the third place.

It is the regulars who give the place its character and who assure that on any given visit some of the gang will be there. "It is the regulars whose mood and manner provide the infectious and contagious style of interaction and whose acceptance of new faces is crucial" (Oldenburg 1989). Third places remain upbeat because those who enjoy them ration the time they spend there.

One of the reasons why home and work are not as fondly anticipated is because people must often remain in them when they would rather be

elsewhere. This is rarely the case with third places. People congregate in third places because they choose to be there, and often times social engagements are scheduled so as not to conflict with a workout. Many married people have no third place because their spouses want them home or because they themselves consider it appropriate to forego third place association for the responsibilities of marriage (Oldenburg 1989).

Fitness clubs represent a distinct form of third place. Certain members will regularly be seen at the same time each and every day. Building close relationships with other members with similar workout patterns adds a support component to the daily ritual of working out. Members usually find workout buddies or partners who become each other's supporter, and in some well established situations, their conscience. The companionship that often comes of shared participation many times leads to long-term friendships and mutual esteem.

Golf partners who play at a regular time for many years suggest social attachment becomes the primary factor in their continued participation. In such groups, the absence of a member is keenly felt and the permanent loss of a group member has a lasting effect on those remaining. (Willis and Campbell 1992)

Likewise, aerobic class participants commonly ask front desk staff if (name) has arrived yet. When a regular weight training member is away on business or vacation they are commonly greeted with questions like "were you sick", or "where did you go?" upon their return. Affiliation, or the desire to be part of a group, to be with friends, or to make new friends, is a leading motive for participation in exercise. It is also an important factor in development of the self-concept and acceptance of a new role.

In other instances, members do not acquire a partner but interact in certain ways at certain times because they recognize people in the facility.

Third places that render the best and finest service are those to which one may go alone at almost any time of the day or evening with assurance that acquaintances will be there. A community life exists, when one can go daily to a given location and see many of the people he knows.

(Oldenburg 1989)

b) Development of Community

McDonald's (1991) Community Model describes "exercise participation that leads to a sense of community and broader appreciation for existence."

This model describes a move from a sense of awareness to conscious choice to engage in constructive leisure time activities. McDonald goes on to suggest this leads to embracing the challenge of the activity, which enhances self-awareness to the extent that this self-awareness leads to new insights and development. The individual will develop a more positive attitude, which will encourage an increasing sense of commitment. Ultimately, this commitment will lead to a greater sense of connectedness with other persons and a greater sense of community. In this case, the community - the third place - is the fitness centre.

Regular exercise participants often observe how much more enjoyable the experience is when others share it.

In a study by Heinelmann and Bagley in 1970, almost 90% of 195 program participants preferred to exercise with someone else or with a group rather than work out alone. When people exercise together they enjoy the experience more, derive social support, feel a sense of personal commitment to continue, and welcome the opportunity to compare their progress and level of fitness with other participants (Willis and Campbell 1992).

Exercise has also been shown to strengthen social support ties that appear to negate some negative aspects of stress.

Other studies have shown that temporary escape benefits are of high importance to people who exercise. Exercise has a variety of stress-medicating functions, although different activities vary with respect to stress-reducing benefits (Ulrich et al. 1991).

Relaxation, rest and revitalization through the opportunity of exercise is essential to stress management in today's busy and demanding world. The catharsis achieved through exercise activity is an ideal antidote to the build-up of otherwise negative tensions, anger and adrenalin. (McAuley and Edwards 1992)

Exercise has been shown to have a positive relationship with self-perceptions (ie. self-esteem, mastery, efficacy and mood), and levels of anxiety are reduced after acute and chronic exercise. It has been found that the greater the level of participation in exercise by people, the lower the level of depression experienced.

Observation indicates it is common practice among many club members to frequent the facility at or about the same time every day. This practice results in members getting to know others who are on a similar workout schedule - in effect, creating a group of "regulars". Friendships develop as people get used to seeing others at certain times, and in many cases miss them when they are not

present. Frequent interactions with others also promotes a learning environment, where members watch the behaviour and actions of others and develop their own self-image based on what they observe and perceive.

The consumer who uses a service frequently will be motivated to invest energy in learning skills that can enhance service productivity, and will have time to develop an appropriate self-image. The consumer who sees and possibly interacts with other consumers during the service encounter can view more experienced consumers as role models for acquiring skills and values. (Goodwin 1988)

c) The Role of the Fitness Club

The fitness club is a special kind of third place because it helps develop self-efficacy. Role adjustment is nurtured by being in the environment. Viewing behaviour and becoming accustomed and comfortable with the situations and roles resulting from that behaviour are the result.

The basic institutions, home, school, and work make prior claims that cannot be ignored. Third places (fitness clubs) must stand ready to serve people's needs for sociability and realization in the intervals before, between

and after their mandatory appearances elsewhere. In this regard, a fitness centre keep long hours. It must, for it accommodates people only when they are released from their responsibilities elsewhere (Oldenburg 1989). The change in atmosphere from life outside to that of the fitness centre was mentioned by many interview participants.

Third places exist on neutral ground and serve to level their guests to a condition of social equality (Oldenburg 1989). Within these places, conversation is the primary activity and the major vehicle for the display and appreciation of human personality and individuality. Members are accepted for who they are, as social status or rank mean little.

Third places are generally taken for granted and most have a low profile. The character of the third place is determined most of all by its regular clientele and is marked by a non-serious mood, which contrasts with people's more serious involvement in their life away from the gym.

Precious and unique benefits accrue to those who regularly attend third places and who value those forms of social intercourse found there. The levelling, primacy of conversation, certainty of meeting friends, looseness of structure, and eternal reign of the importance of fun all combine to set

the stage for experiences unlikely to be found elsewhere. (Oldenburg 1989)

Attending regularly involves developing a new image, as Goodwin (1988) states:

Just as physiology students come to see themselves as scientists, and military recruits give up their civilian identities, consumers of services may develop new ways of thinking about themselves.

Fitness centre members are no different. For the most part, fitness centres play a role in molding the identity of its individual members. The degree of identity change is totally in the control of the individual, as membership is voluntary.

IV. Exercise Component of Fitness Clubs

Exercise is thought to either act as a coping strategy or as an inoculator to stress, although research has not been conclusive in determining if fitness gains brought about by exercise training programs are implicated in anxiety reduction or stress reactivity. Since aerobic fitness may be independent of emotional state, it can be said that something associated with exercise or the exercise training program produces self-report, behavioural, and physiological

changes that have been interpreted as reduced anxiety or stress reactivity. Although the casual nature of this relationship is still unanswered, the fact remains that a solid relationship does exist, as concluded in the report Recreation: A Major Vehicle for the Promotion of Health (1985).

Exercise may also provide an opportunity to experience a sense of "spirituality". The perceived sense of spiritual experience may affect the individual in ways that involve the capacity for introspection, humility and feelings of belonging. The role of exercise is that it may allow an opportunity to engage in this experience when the mind is not otherwise preoccupied or the individual is "busy". (McDonald Schreyer 1991). A significant benefit from spiritual experience may be the potential for personal development, which again relates to the development or enhancement of the self-concept.

Other research on exercise which focused on the issue of enjoyment or optimal experience has found:

" . . .that whenever people enjoy what they are doing, they report very similar experiential states. The same dimensions are reported in the context of enjoying chess, climbing mountains, playing with babies, reading a book or writing a poem. These dimensions are the same for

young and old, male and female, American or Japanese, rich or poor."

(Csikszentmihalyi et al. 1991)

When all the characteristics are present, the result is called a flow experience.

Characteristics include a matching of challenges and skills with clear goals and immediate feedback; a depth of concentration that prevents worry and the intrusion of unwanted thoughts into consciousness and results in a transcendence of the self. "The activity becomes autotelic or rewarding in itself"

(Csikszentmihalyi et al. 1991).

According to Csikszentmihalyi's work, the common characteristics of optimal experience are: a sense that one's skills are adequate for the challenge at hand; concentration so intense that people do not worry about problems; self-consciousness vanishes; and sense of time becomes distorted. In effect, the exercise experience evolves from an initial extrinsic need for physical benefit to an intrinsic need based on personal enjoyment.

Although the psychological benefits of exercise are widely recognized among participants, the many ways in which the benefits are described make them difficult to characterize. The psychological benefits that people cite range from "feeling good" to claims of a "cathartic effect" or a "runner's high".

Somewhere in between lie the beliefs that exercise and working out reduces

tension and anxiety, elevates mood, improves one's coping ability, increases self-worth, and promotes feelings of happiness (Willis and Campbell 1992).

Despite this diversity, it is obvious that people generally believe regular exercise brings about beneficial psychological changes. Meaningful exercise activity is an essential source of self-esteem and positive self-image. The critical issue in this paper is to determine whether these previously recorded results - the positive feelings, the increased ability to cope, the enhancement of self-worth, etc... are related to the physiological effects of exercise, or to the effects of "connectedness" and feelings of "belongingness" to the third place.

Chapter 3

Research Question

I. Specific Research Question

This study attempts to answer the question "How are fitness centres experienced by those who join a club while undergoing life transitions, such as moving to a new community, getting a new job, changes in a relationship, etc."

The study will investigate:

- 1) What the are unique needs of fitness centre participants undergoing life transitions?
- 2) How do fitness service firms address those needs?
- 3) How could they be more effective in doing so?

The author believes that clients identified as "in transition" enter fitness centres with unique needs. Direct observations accumulated during 10 years as a health club owner and fitness participant suggest that those in transition

exhibit needs for companionship, attention and/or socialization opportunities. These needs can be classified as being psychological in nature and differ from the usual physiological needs associated with people joining a private fitness club, namely; losing weight, gaining muscle, and shaping up - reasons listed in the majority of research on exercise motivation and adherence.

Fitness providers have become very adept at providing for the physiological needs of clients. A review of the literature as it relates to exercise adherence reveals an abundance of articles outlining the physiological benefits of regular exercise. The physical benefits related to exercise has gained significant prominence, as both the Canadian and American Heart Associations have modified their determination of risk factors to include inactivity as a major risk associated with heart disease (American Heart Association 1991, Canadian Heart Association 1992).

Research attention usually focusses on physiological benefits of exercise rather than benefits of the club as a third place. The provider needs to understand what motivates people to join a health club amidst a life transition and what motivates the individual to remain with the club afterwards.

This research paper attempts to determine the way people undergoing transition experience a fitness club. A person's level of self-concept is related to

their life classification. The reviewed literature suggests people experiencing transition tend to have a low level of self-concept. What are these people needing to increase their self-concept? How is membership in a fitness club involved?

How does the fitness service provider identify members with these particular sets of needs? How are they able to react to the different expectations of these individuals? How does the provider offer programs and/or services that, once attracted, keeps these individuals as members? And, as the member's needs change, modify or adapt services to continually meet the changing demand of this client group.

Participants were observed for a period of one year post-interview. Observations were carried out by the author and involved frequent interactions with the participants during their workouts in the fitness club environment. The author indicated to the individuals that his research was continuing, but did not suggest that the discussions related to any type of ongoing research. After one year had elapsed the author contacted each participant by phone or had a discussion with them at the fitness club. During each conversation the original interview was discussed, and the individuals were asked to provide comments regarding any changes that occurred during the year. The author's reflections regarding these comments are included in the discussion section.

II. The Interview Method

a) Qualitative Interview Technique

The qualitative interview technique was chosen as the method of information gathering. Qualitative inquiry typically focuses in depth on relatively small samples selected purposefully. "The logic and power of purposeful sampling lies in selecting information rich cases for study in depth" (McCracken 1988). The fundamental principle of qualitative interviewing is to provide a framework within which respondents can express their own understandings in their own terms.

In this study, the samples fell into a homogeneous category of "in transition", as per the definition previously presented. Fitness clubs have many types of individuals as members, and the experiences and beliefs of those individuals is important in determining whether the research question can be adequately investigated.

The purpose of interviewing people is to find out those things that we can not directly observe. Although members in a fitness club can be regularly observed and notes recorded on their actions, we can not observe everything. Feelings, thoughts, beliefs and behaviours that take place at previous points in

time that relate to the individual can only be discovered through an interview process. The intention of the interview is to gain the interviewee's perspective on the issues of interest related to this study.

The environment and situation surrounding the study presented an opportunity to use an informal conversational approach style of interview. This type of interview process allowed the author to be highly responsive to individual differences and situational changes. As well, an interview guide provided a framework within which the author developed questions, sequenced those questions, and made decisions about which information to pursue in greater depth. It provided topics or subject areas within which the author was free to ask questions that expanded discussion in and related to the subject area.

III. Scope of the Study

a) Setting

All respondents were members of Jim's Gym. Jim's is located in a mid-size rural Manitoba community a few hours drive from Winnipeg. The privately operated co-ed facility has 236 members of various ages at the present time.

The exercise facility includes resistance and weight training equipment, an aerobic exercise area and a small retail outlet selling fitness related clothing and supplies. Jim's program offerings include individual fitness program design, group aerobic exercise classes, fitness assessments and one-on-one lifestyle counselling.

Fitness club membership packages are available in two different formats, time plan memberships and sessional passes. Time plan memberships are available in four different lengths, 1 month, 3 month, 6 month and 12 month options. Sessional packages may be purchased for 5, 10, 15 and 20 workouts.

Memberships are divided into three categories and include: aerobics only, weight-training only, or combination (aerobic and weight training) packages. Prices vary from \$53/month for a 1 month membership to \$350 for a 12 month membership. (Cost of a membership on a per month basis significantly decreases as the length of the membership increases.) A payment plan (time payments) is available for 6 month and 12 month memberships and discounts are available for groups, students and seniors.

The fitness club studied was a private, members only facility. The fact that memberships needed to be purchased to "work out" could affect the type of person attracted.

b) Method

An interview guide was developed and used to identify attitudinal and behavioral characteristics of members and former members defined as being in transition. Questions on the guide were:

1. What brought you to this fitness centre in the first place? Have these needs changed over time?
2. How did you feel at the beginning? What was the environment like? Could you describe it?
3. How did you experience staff support?
4. If you identified yourself as having changing needs over time, what were the factors relating to those changes? What were the stimuli for change? What was the result?
5. How did your involvement in the club change over time?
6. Explain whether you noticed any change in needs over time and explain whether that realization was gradual or "all of a sudden".

7. How important was it to have a background in fitness? Did you work out somewhere before or is this your first membership in a private fitness club? Do you feel this makes any difference?

c) Subjects

A sample of members was developed from a list of persons who met the author's definition of being "in transition". Present members were selected from the current membership directory and no specific differentiation was used. Although differentiation between type or length of membership package was not taken into consideration, all persons interviewed worked out at one time or another on the weight training equipment. There were no members interviewed who were aerobic class members only. Likewise, all members had been exercising at Jim's for at least one year, and with the exception of one, continued with their memberships from the time data was gathered to the present. The one exception decided to leave the gym when a new job became available, but returned to the facility when the job had ended.

Members were called individually and an interview time convenient to them was scheduled. The interviews took place in various locations; the author's office in the fitness club, the author's second office off-site, the author's

home, at a restaurant and at the office of one of the subjects. The subjects were preliminarily informed of the basic premise of the study, that it was Master's Thesis research on behaviours of fitness members classified as "in transition".

Eight subjects, four males and four females were interviewed in the study. Seven subjects at the time of the interview were current members. In all cases the author tape recorded the meetings and transcribed notes from the recordings. The author made notes from the follow up meetings and telephone conversations.

All subjects were made aware prior to the interview that their participation in it and subsequent discussions involved them in Master's thesis study research. Each provided their consent to be interviewed and to use whatever information was acquired through observations and follow-up conversations in the thesis document.

d) Analysis of data collected

Data (responses of participants and written observations by author) was compared across subjects to determine whether commonalities or similarities

existed. Recorded data was compared to existing research literature to determine whether similarities or differences existed.

Chapter 4

Results

I. "In transition" - defined

Study participants were all experiencing a form of life transition(s) or a transition of identity as defined by Schouten (1991):

A transition of identity begins with separation from some role, relationship or other key component of the extended self. Separation may occur literally in time and space, triggered by some external force or event or it may be experienced subjectively, triggered by an internal force such as a psychological need for intimacy, security or control.

The transitions outlined in this paper incorporate all three psychological processes described by Schouten. The majority of participants indicated the need for control was more profound than either a need for intimacy or security, and that the control they sought was one of control of their personal situations, predominantly because each was new to the community.

The chart on the following page lists individual participants, their age and occupation and the transition(s) they were experiencing (self-disclosed at the time of interview).

Name (pseudonym)	Transition experienced	Age	Occupation
Mervin	Marital problem, business failure	47	Building Consultant
Carol	Family change, job relocation	26	Health Professional
Darwin	Residence change, identity change	36	Manager
Jack	Job change	36	Education Professional
Sheila	Job change, residence relocation	28	Education Professional
Mary	Job relocation	37	Health Care Consultant
Louise	Personal crisis, disability	35	Office Worker
Ted	Family change	45	Railway Worker

Chart 1: Interview Participant/Life transition

Each participant experienced a different transition(s) and explained their situation in their own terms. Mervin noted his marriage had failed, his business went bankrupt and he moved to a new community and completely different way of life. Carol noted a death in her family had preceded her move to the new community. She knew very few people in her new place of employment and felt

disassociated. Darwin's wife had just started a new job in their new community, he was without employment and they had just moved into a new house. He was, for the first time "not the breadwinner in the family". Jack had recently moved to the community from a much larger centre, was in a new job and had moved his family into a new neighbourhood. Sheila was a young professional in a new job in a new community. She lived in an apartment alone and did not know anyone in town except for a few people at work. Mary had recently changed jobs within her organization and found that the new position required her to move to another community. Since her family was established in this town she took up residence in the new community during the week and commuted "home" on weekends. She also purchased a membership in a club in the new community. Louise has recently experienced a stroke which left her partially paralyzed and emotionally demoralized. She was unable to work and felt "less useful" since the stroke. Ted noted his family was in a crisis as two of his sons were not doing well in school and were in the process of transferring from the public school system into a private school. The change had created quite a turmoil in his household.

Participants who joined the club to "get in shape" or rehabilitate an injury reported their reasons for maintaining memberships were related to "feeling like part of the group", "being connected to the facility" and "enjoying the experience of working out with others". Initial feelings of uncomfortableness and unfamiliarity with the surroundings were reported, which diminished as workouts

and attendance progressed. There was a reported increase of self-confidence and self-esteem as each spent more time in the facility.

Five themes emerged through the interview process. The themes generally reflected two characteristics which were related to a progression or developmental process, namely: the development of a level of comfort with equipment and the chosen exercise activity and, interaction with club members and staff and the development of relationships with same.

The themes that emerged were titled:

- 1) Starting Out (Extrinsic to Intrinsic Motives)
- 2) Getting Used to the Place (Intimidation)
- 3) Climbing a Mountain (Gaining Control)
- 4) The Turning Point (Making Connections - A Sense of Community)
- 5) Entering the Comfort Zone (Feeling Comfortable)

Each title was created from statements made by participants during the interview process. Sub-titles (in parenthesis) were added by the author to associate related subjects as the themes were developing.

II. Discussion of Themes

Theme One: "Starting Out" (Extrinsic to Intrinsic motives)

a) Motivation for joining

Participant responses varied when asked to explain their reason for joining a private fitness club, however all respondents did initially indicate a need to become more physically active (extrinsic motivation). Motives for joining seemed related to a need for self-enhancement, defined by Banaji and Prentice (1994) as "the desire for positive feedback about the self, and self-improvement, or the desire to bring oneself closer to what one should or would ideally like to be".

Some participants had previously exercised in fitness clubs, and these individuals tended to take the least amount of time to acclimatize themselves to the new surroundings. The similarity of workout procedures and fitness equipment from gym to gym made the transition to the new environment easier for the experienced user.

"I'm from Thunder Bay. . . used facilities there which are different, but it's a fitness centre just the same" (Jack)

Since substantial changes in the self-concept have been documented during periods of life transition, the members in this study suggested they were attempting to construct new identities for themselves during this period of personal life transition.

" . . . I think it takes time, and from my experience, it's an effort on everyone's part to make the place fit or you fit the place." (Mary)

b) Extrinsic Motivation

"You want an activity that is physical, that makes your body feel better. . ."
(Jack)

Exercise adherence research indicated that becoming physically active is directly related to physiological or extrinsic motives (losing weight, gaining muscle, etc). Research also indicated that attrition rates are over 50% with these same individuals (Dishman 1990). No matter how important the need to become active, over half of new exercise participants drop out within 6 months of initiating the activity.

Individuals who stick with exercise programs for the long run either enter the fitness arena with strongly internalized needs or have their extrinsic needs evolve to include intrinsic motivation:

"Physical benefits are secondary. . . don't get me wrong, If it wasn't for the exercise I wouldn't be here because without exercise nothing would be the same . . . but I come in here lots of times and spend two hours because I spent 45 minutes talking, and that's really important to me." (Ted)

"I always felt a need for fitness. . . although when I was travelling extensively I didn't seem to have the time to exercise. I felt I was getting out of shape and I had some marital problems. . . I had to go somewhere to relieve my stress and I thought, serious participation in a fitness program would help me." (Mervin)

c) The progression to intrinsic motives

"I am still motivated to work out by what exercise can do for me physically, but I have now found someone who thinks the same way I do about exercise and it just makes it easier to come and work out when I know he

will be there. The time working out just seems to go by more quickly now". (Jack)

Successful long-term exercisers made the initial commitment to join on their own terms - regardless of the type or degree of extrinsic motivation to do so. However, this commitment to physical improvement is tied directly to a psychological need as well:

"I gained weight in graduate school, so I was motivated to fitness. . .but I also joined to meet people and get involved". (Carol)

"I was in Winnipeg before I moved to (town) and at my apartment block I had a gym facility which I used a lot and I just wanted to continue when I got here. . . plus other people from work were going to Jim's." (Sheila)

"I'm an avid golfer and I feel better when I ride my bike, and my boy was lifting weights and my wife insisted I help him out. I was working out initially solely to help him, although I was having trouble with one leg and the weight lifting helped . . . it felt good. It was an accident to actually begin working out - a good accident to tell the truth." (Ted)

"We had just moved to town and my wife was very busy with her new job - I didn't have one when we first moved and thought, what better chance to get re-involved in physical activity than join Jim's. I was competitively active during my university years and was recovering from a serious ankle operation, so the training was good for me both physically as rehabilitation and mentally to have something to do". (Darwin)

As noted by these responses, each individual developed an approach towards exercise which reinforced adherence to the activity. Each experience was a transition from dependence on extrinsic motivation(s) to internalized feelings of well-being. This internalized feeling became a prime motivator to continue at the club. Whether directly or indirectly, the participants also suggested that contact and communication with others was an important factor in their decision to start and continue exercising.

Parallel to their personal transition experiences, participants encountered exercise transitions as well. Each expressed feelings of unfamiliarity with and in the new fitness environment. Although the degree of initial discomfort varied across individuals, it was reported by all. As familiarity with the setting increased the degree of discomfort diminished and eventually disappeared for most participants.

"I felt like an idiot at first. I had a preconceived notion, stereotypes of those who strut their stuff" (Carol)

"At first I felt less comfortable if the owner wasn't there." (Sheila)

"I had feelings like, what am I doing here? There must be something else I can do, anything, at home.. ."(Louise)

"I didn't know what to expect. It's amazing to find out that everybody puts their socks on one foot at a time." (Ted)

"I thought I fitted in right away in the weight room, but not in aerobics. Because there were hardly any men, and a lot of times I was the only male. . . it bothered me at first. I did feel a little uncomfortable, but not any more." (Mervin)

However different these initial experiences, the reasons for joining shared two common characteristics -

- (1) an extrinsic physiological need that over time evolved into an intrinsic psychological need.

- (2) members' needs were related to their state of transition: a need to re-attach their separation from some role, relationship or other component of their extended self.

Theme Two: "Intimidation" (Getting used to the place)

a) "Being different"

Existing data suggest that self-concept changes occur primarily, and perhaps only, in response to major changes in role or situational demands. This conclusion coincided with a view of the self as consistent in its motives and conservative in its strategies, yet ultimately responsive to environmental contingencies (Schouten 1991). How one thinks about oneself at any particular time is strongly influenced by the immediate social context.

The atmosphere of the facility makes a difference. Identifying and becoming comfortable in a new role takes time. Self-esteem enhancement appeared to rest on the reduction of cognitive dissonance occurring when one's ideal self-concept is inconsistent with current perceptions of self. It is important that connection and caring are perceived in the new environment.

"I thought I would feel comfortable. . . but it's awkward. . . getting to know a few people so you can have some buddies." (Mary)

"I appreciated the feeling associated with being acknowledged." (Jack)

Life transitions present a clear threat to the maintenance of self-esteem, and socialization tends to focus on learning specific roles. These roles can be incorporated more easily when input from peer groups is provided while new skills are developing. Becker (in Stone 1970) stated:

"Situational adjustment is very frequently not an individual process, but a collective one. That is, we are not confronted with one person undergoing change, but with an entire cohort, who enter the institution and go through the socialization program together - (although sometime at different times). The individual enters the institution alone or in a small group, but joins a larger group there already, who stand ready to tell him how it is and what he should do, and will be followed by others for whom he will perform the same good turn."

Most facilities have certain similarities: there was usually a front entrance/desk area where members and staff congregate; there were change/shower rooms where members mingle before and after workouts; and,

there is the workout area, which due to the duration of an average workout, provided ample opportunity for member interaction.

"At my apartment block in Winnipeg we had a gym facility which I used a lot, and I just wanted to continue when I got here. . . . in Brandon I'd gone to a fitness centre and so I knew a little bit about what kind of things, how many reps. . . I moved to town in August 1991 and started in the fall".

(Sheila)

Members who used a facility frequently were motivated to invest energy in learning skills that enhanced service productivity and the exercise experience. Staff assistance and support were important factors in making the transition to regular member status smooth. The member who interacted with other members and saw appropriate member behaviour will be incorporated into the environment easier and more quickly than others who don't. For some, the initial fear was exacerbated when familiar faces were not present:

"They (staff) knew I was new, but they weren't sure of my name; Wendy (Manager) knew who I was. On days she wasn't there it was just in and out". (Carol)

Many members noted the friendly and pleasant manner in which they were greeted when they entered and left the premises. Two respondents went so far as to assume this technique was business motivated.

"Staff responded to customers. . . hard to fake after you know a person".

(Jack)

"I figured you must have rules about staff saying hello" (Carol)

Whatever the motive for the acknowledgement, all members indicated a feeling of satisfaction with the gesture. This satisfaction was reflected through the following statements:

"Any time I needed help she was there (staff). If I needed any help I was to come and ask her, she told me that a million times. If you don't have good staff then there is no point in coming here." (Louise)

"People (staff) were wondering why I'm not there. People call on me when I get back - 'Oh you've been away'. It is maybe a bit of a motivator. When somebody says something to you, you do think, I guess I am a regular here". (Sheila)

"It's nice to walk in the door and somebody says Hi, big smile. . . bye, see you next time". (Ted)

The factor mentioned most often by participants was the personal attention they received. This attention made them feel welcome and at ease and diminished the amount of fear and apprehension they initially felt. However, there was still a period of trepidation and nervousness during the early stages of membership.

b) Feeling threatened

In addition to being unfamiliar with the new environment, several participants noted an initial response of feeling threatened in the new club. They stated a type of psychological uneasiness accompanied them when they first joined the facility - that they "didn't know what they were getting themselves in to". This uneasiness was related to being perceived as someone uncomfortable with the equipment or the exercise routines as much as it was being an "unknown". Getting "used to the place" took some time:

"In December I started to feel like, like I got used to the place. It became a routine -- yeah, it did become a routine. If I stayed home for some reason I felt like something was missing". (Louise)

"It took awhile to know what I was doing with my workout, but as I gained confidence in what I wanted and how to get it I felt better about being there. Like, I even started to help other new members with their technique. I think they (new members) looked for people who seemed to know what they are doing for help". (Darwin)

"In weight training I was fortunate because a good friend of mine was working out here. He helped set me up with a program. I also picked up a few ideas from people who were working out so now I have a set routine and I'm comfortable." (Mervin)

In addition to feelings of uneasiness and nervousness mentioned by both men and women, extra pressure was experienced by two female members.

"I think women are self-conscious. They don't want other people watching them." (Sheila)

"I was nervous. . . had apprehensions about women with perfect bodies. . . big muscleheads. . . (I had) no knowledge about what I was getting into. It was only in the last month that I felt comfortable - not threatened."

(Carol)

Becoming comfortable in the weight room was only one part of the acclimatization process, and some participants stated they still felt awkward in certain situations even after belonging to a club. The following excerpt outlined how someone very familiar with exercise can become unnerved by ancillary components of club membership:

"In some ways I still feel awkward. . .for example, the locker system (in Winnipeg) wasn't explained to me when I joined. You hand in your membership card, go to a locker, it had a key and a number on it; it ends up being a coin locker. None of this was really explained, and I was ten minutes late for the first class because I didn't get my locker locked. I felt stupid, really stupid. Actually, there was also a fellow who worked with me who had an awkward experience. He joined the same place and was telling me how embarrassed he was because in the men's changeroom, instead of skin creams (like in the ladies locker area) they had dispensers of things for guys. There were about five other guys in the change room when he grabs a dispenser and starts spraying it through his hair. He

thought because it was next to the hair dryers it was hair spray. It wasn't labelled, and turned out to be underarm deodorant. He just bolted and didn't want to go back at the same time of day in case he met up with the same guys". (Mary)

There appeared to be a relationship between the level of confidence (self-concept) an individual developed and the length of time spent in the facility. As members became more comfortable with their place in the exercise environment their feelings of self-doubt decreased and self-confidence increased.

"I felt a lot better. Emotionally, physically getting better, and I started to develop better self-esteem." (Mervin)

For some, the relationship had a significant affect on how they and others viewed themselves:

"I started to look better. . . I started to feel better about my situation"
(Darwin).

"At work I got comments about my model's body". (Carol)

Whatever the situation, each participant expressed a feeling of gaining more control of their situation. This feeling of control transcended the workout environment and affected certain people in their daily life:

"I know when I first started we had a Dance for Heart, I think it was probably February of 1987, and I have a video and I looked at my shape a couple of months ago. . . and that was after I was exercising for a couple of months, and today there is a big difference-- not only my upper body but my legs are slimmer and straighter and I've probably gained a quarter inch in height. But I'm very satisfied that it's made me, not only from the standpoint of physical appearance, but a lot better in my self esteem and how I feel about myself and maybe the image I convey to people. But the physical side, I always get comments about the physical shape I am in."
(Mervin)

Theme Three: "Climbing a Mountain" (Gaining Control)

"It felt like climbing a mountain. Crossing over the line from meeting people to fitness". (Carol)

Members experienced a gradually shifting in their locus of control - moving from an initial physical type of control (controlling their bodies during work outs) to an enhancement of their social contact network both in and away from the gym (having an increased feeling of confidence around other people). Some explained how their regular workout routine motivated them to continue exercising and to get involved in other activities. Workouts provided them greater command of their personal situations.

"You've seen me in more often now. Right now my goal is to work on muscle definition and reduce bodyfat, so timing becomes really important. So every day I have an objective. I have measures I use. . . weight as well as waist and chest measurements". (Jack)

"When I first came the progress was slow, very slow. I had good days and not so good days. Right now I am only doing the things I can do myself. I'm only staying with what's good enough for me." (Louise)

"At Jim's I'm just on my own. I'm just really independent. I wanted to be sure I'm doing everything right and I just feel better knowing I'm using the machines right." (Sheila)

"I got set up with a split routine — it was great because it was designed especially for me. I had certain needs, the ankle rehabilitation for example and I was motivated to work out because everything I did was for me."

(Darwin)

Being in control of their own workout program was paramount in achieving feelings of self-confidence and self-control. This control transcended the fitness club boundary and positively affected their every day lives:

"You learn your way around generally. I never expected anybody to change anything for me. Like I said, the way you feel dictates from one day to the other what you are going to do, exercise or you're tired. Lots of times I come in frustrated and get on the stairmaster or bike for 30 minutes and its gone". (Ted)

"In the beginning I was gung ho. I thought you had to give 100% all of the time. If you didn't come out all covered in sweat you didn't have a good workout. My thoughts have changed now. I'm more interested in consistency. I believe that fitness is a full time commitment, not seasonal or monthly, it's year round. I'm now responsible, the one in control."

(Mervin)

Theme Four: "The Turning Point" (Making Connections - A Sense of Community)

Getting to know others made the difference for most participants, as their workout experiences were enhanced as the number of people they interacted with increased. Recognition by staff and other members was an important factor in confirming their transition from new member to the "regular" membership fraternity.

"New face, new person, you're perceived as a new member. Just over time, the last few years I've become a regular". (Sheila)

"(The) turning point. . . (the incident that) broke the ice occurred when we went to Bingo Bowling (an off-site event organized by Jim's). I felt all by myself, and was actually ready to walk out, but I bit my tongue and pushed through it. The next time I was in the gym Rick (a member who I had known to see and was briefly introduced to at the Bowling event) said 'I thought you were a snob, but you're a nice person.' Once he said that to me it was OK. I became Carol, instead of the girl who always worked out with Susan (another well known member)." (Carol)

"When I first moved to the community, people have their own little groups, once you get involved in something, then it falls into place (going to the gym). Those are the kind of people I would associate with, people who are interested in keeping fit". (Sheila)

"From a social point of view, the people here are very friendly.

Management, the staff, the interaction for the clients are there, a good place to go, to feel welcome. Other places I've been a stranger and I don't intermingle that easily – Oklahoma, Phoenix, Regina, where people don't know you, big city atmosphere where nobody really talks to you – it doesn't bother me because I'm there to exercise not to socialize when I go to these places. But in town, I know people and I socialize." (Mervin)

The development of an identity, first by getting comfortable with the exercises and equipment, then by getting to know other members - the "fitness community", was the significant breakthrough point for the interviewees.

"At first I didn't know anyone except Wendy (Manager) and I spent a lot of time hanging around the front desk chatting. They (staff) didn't seem to mind, but I felt I had to start talking with other members. I developed a pretty close friendship with three other guys over a period of time, we jokingly called ourselves Four Neat Guys. The friendships created in the

gym have lasted, as I still get together with the other guys even though two of them have moved away from town." (Darwin)

"As a clinician I had no ties. Over the summer I had a family crisis so I didn't go – a big break from Jim's. I felt like I was on an island, I needed to feel connected again. At Jim's I had ties, Jim's is the only connection I have to people my own age." (Carol)

Theme Five: "Entering the Comfort Zone" (Feeling Comfortable)

"It's like having my own gym, I feel comfortable here." (Jack)

was a statement that best summed up participant comments regarding workout maintenance.

"In Winnipeg there wasn't a lot of interaction between people in classes. It seemed like an attitude of 'I don't know these other people, I don't want to know these other people – I've come here for a workout, do my stuff and get out'. There was almost a tension, not a relaxed environment. It's much more comfortable here, or at least you feel more comfortable and make comments to other people. A psychological comfort. A cocktail

party metaphor might be appropriate, where you can either prop yourself in a corner and be alone or be out there mingling, making contact with people, small talk, interacting. I look for feeling comfortable, feeling relaxed. There is no reason I couldn't hang out in the club in Winnipeg after work – the facility is very convenient, it's attached to my building at work. I just didn't make the effort." (Mary)

"You don't have to prove anything to anybody. . . There's always somebody to talk to, conversation, I look forward to that. I think it's very important. You kind of expect to see the same people here. If I'm depressed, there usually is something wrong. I get mad. I can just forget all about that when I come to the gym. It's like I've stepped over to where I want to be. I feel refreshed – lost all my anxiety and anger. You leave everything behind when you go here. It's nice to come into the gym, you've got someone to talk to, to communicate with, make fun of, have them make fun of you. . . The place seems to grow on you." (Ted)

Though the comments reflected the opinion of facility members, one participant held a dual role as a fitness leader. Her expressions, as they related to being comfortable in a facility, added credence to the comments of the others and indicated that even someone who would seem to be totally at ease in a gym

need to define their own comfort zone. Mary had a dual membership in another city because of her work and travel schedule and commented:

"As a leader, my role was to interact with people and to balance out the chatter so new people could be brought into the group. People don't seem to comment to each other here (Winnipeg). Even when I go during the mid-afternoon to avoid the rush at noon, people still read papers and don't make any eye contact. If you need socializing, this wouldn't be the place. The belongingness comes from what happens in the interactions that happen when I'm there. And so far I haven't connected to this place (Winnipeg club). It's different when I'm at Jim's" (Mary)

Being comfortable when working out was an expected experience for the participants in this study. Comfort became an expectation, a given, a part of daily routine like brushing teeth or combing hair.

"I'd rather be at Jim's than coming home and watching TV." (Carol)

"You kind of miss the place if you don't get here regularly. I had knee surgery -- two days later I was back. Herman (other member) just had bladder surgery -- he was in the following day -- got to be something to it. If Jim's closed, it would be like a vacuum was created. I don't know if you

could ever replace it. Like you walk over a fine line -- you leave everything behind when you get here. . . you become a family here. The environment, people around me are almost as important as the exercise itself." (Ted)

III. Summary of Themes

A gradual acclimatization process was experienced by each member upon first joining the gym. Feelings of uneasiness and/or apprehension preceded feelings of comfort. Those with previous backgrounds in fitness or past experiences with fitness clubs stated they became comfortable in the environment sooner and to a greater degree than those with less experience. However, one subject who had no previous experience felt comfortable almost immediately and another with extensive experiences never got comfortable in a new gym in another city.

The process of achieving a "comfort level" in the new fitness environment was related to an evolution of the role experience -- from newcomer to regular. This accompanied a feeling of increased personal self-confidence which was related to:

- a) increasingly being recognized by staff
- b) being more familiar with equipment and facility attributes, and
- c) being referred to as a "regular" by other members.

This "evolutionary" process from newcomer to regular involved a time factor which was contingent upon inputs from others. Those members who initiated interactions achieved "regular" status or were recognized as a "regular" sooner than those who didn't -- however all expressed feelings of being recognized as a regular at some point in their exercise experience. This process affected even experienced body builders and aerobic participants who move to a new facility. They must experience the daily routines and observe facility protocols prior to becoming being part of them.

According to Stone (1970):

. . .there is something about spaces, particularly enclosed spaces, that requires further investigation. The enclosure itself. . .affects the character of the interaction carried inside. Variations in any or all of certain elements can noticeably affect the mood of interactions between individuals. The conduct of two social situations, each with the same

people meeting in the same place can be noticeably different.

The "favourite spot" mentality that pervades aerobic classes (where regular members have their own exercise location in a class setting) illustrated how this acclimatization process developed. New members attended classes and quickly found out whether they have invaded someone's favourite space. Over time they became part of the routine and designated and marked their own space. Likewise, a new participant in the weight room quickly learned the "rules of the room" as they related to equipment use and space utilization simply by spending time in the environment and/or talking to the recognized regulars. These developments do not occur in isolation and are dictated by the actions of other members and staff.

The development of relationships between members was critical in the establishment of the "recognition factor" -- of being recognized and acknowledged as a regular. Time spent in the environment enhanced the awareness of what was acceptable behaviour, as members learned from the actions and reactions of others. Over time members felt more welcome, and the acclimatization process was enhanced.

A non-threatening environment, with supportive staff was perceived as critical in fostering a positive workout climate and developing a connection to the

facility. In one instance, that climate was never set and a connection was never made with the new facility. The feeling of being connected to the facility was enhanced when members knew someone else in the gym. This other person could be a friend who was already a member, a work associate or a staff person. It apparently made no difference who the person was, it was simply a matter of being with someone that made the difference. As Willis and Campbell state (1992) "Affiliation, or the desire to be part of a group, to be with friends, or to make new friends, is a leading motive for participation in exercise.

New members were very concerned about meeting or being in contact with people during their early workouts. However, as they perceived an increase in self-confidence their reliance on this person(s) decreased. This led to them getting more comfortable with others in the facility. They were recognized as (name), not "that new person" and in essence gained a personal identity that fit with their own definition of who and what they were.

Relationships developed between participants and others they met in the gym. The connection between them and the gym evolved into a bond that kept them together and interested in working out. One participant began working out with another member and have become inseparable workout partners. Another convinced a family member to join the facility. A third participant developed a

serious romantic relationship with another club member. Personal friendships developed among others that have served numerous purposes.

The development of these friendships assisted in the process of making the members feel a part of the community - the club community. Being connected to the facility and the kinds of people who shared beliefs that exercise is important was a common variable among subject's comments.

"Back and forth chatting. It's one of the extras when you're in the gym.

Where else can you find them? You don't get to meet the same type of people that you do in the gym. Everybody's here for one goal, to improve themselves." (Ted)

Being recognized as a member, and being with other members supported feelings of improved self-worth.

Achieving the "Comfort Zone" was the most important theme expressed throughout this study. As much as becoming active was the initiating factor in purchasing a membership, the level of personal comfort, both physical and psychological was crucial in maintaining regular attendance. Enhanced self-esteem and increased self-value accompanied feelings of increased comfort.

Interestingly, fitness gains were given a low priority among the members and the need for feeling comfortable pervaded all discussions:

"Three times a week—you feel like something's missing if you don't come at least two or three times a week. On vacation I wanted to go to a gym, and I did. I hit a gym four or five times while I was gone. To a point, it was like walking into unfamiliar territory; you don't communicate with the people the same way as you do here. You're a stranger. People are helpful, but it's not the same. You feel like you belong here." (Ted)

A majority of research related to fitness and exercise has focussed on the positive physical effects associated with activity, and the effects that physical activity have on psychological well-being. Discussions with members indicated that the physical was important, but that feeling comfortable, being recognized, and most importantly, being connected to the facility require equally important stature.

Measurement of progress was usually associated with changes in body size or dimension, and program providers provided little emphasis on the personal well-being of the individual. In many cases, fitness providers tended to focus too much on the physical developments and actually "turn off" individuals

when progress is measured by typical physiological parameters and not psychological ones.

Being comfortable was a theme consistent across all interviewee responses. It was something that was personally determined, and for the most part was a reflection of how each person "fit into" the workout environment. Those interested with developing relationships commented on the ease at which relationships could be created and fostered. Those who were more physically motivated were secure in the knowledge that they would not be categorized or pre-judged.

"Here you have a range of individuals working out for different purposes, different levels. Consequently it's a place where people can fit in, you don't have to be of one type or another. The atmosphere is non-judgemental, accepting. Accepting everyone as sort of a family. Doesn't mean the customer needs to be in the family, it's the customer's choice. But I would think it's a positive thing, an acknowledgement of a lifestyle."

(Jack)

Comfort and Connection were the major intertwining variables that serve to make participation in fitness clubs an ongoing activity. It might best be summed up by these comments:

"Being involved in the gym here (Winnipeg) gives me a new perspective on what people might be experiencing when they go to a fitness facility. I've been instructing classes and doing personal training for over 15 years and I thought it's almost become a part of who I am and what I do. It would have to take something incredible to make that not be a part of who I am and it just seemed like who doesn't. And if I'm feeling awkward or uncomfortable in a facility after I've managed facilities and worked in facilities and been in this field for so long, exposed to different equipment, I was thinking one day, what does that do to somebody who, all this stuff looks so strange." (Mary)

IV. Post Interview Observations

All the members (participants) interviewed for the study remained active until the publication of this thesis. The participants were observed by the author for a period of one year after being interviewed, and the observations noted significant changes in some of the member's personal lives. Yet, their activity patterns did not change significantly.

The list of changes included:

Participant	"Lifestyle" Related Change
Mary	had her first child
Mervin	got married (to a non-exercising member)
Carol	got involved in a serious relationship (with a member)
Ted	son moved to a different School (resident school)
Darwin	job change - no longer employed
Sheila	job change - new employer

Although these changes significantly affected their personal lives away from the club, it did little to affect their exercise habits. When questioned on whether their needs changed over the past year, the overwhelming response was that the fitness environment provided them a situation with which they had control.

Some changed the complexity or components of their exercise routine,

"I ended up doing more aerobics again instead of weights, but I got to choose what and when." (Sheila).

"When Kathryn left (previous Manager) I was a little on my own, so I took it upon myself to find someone else to work out with. There was a period of uncertainty, but I felt comfortable enough with the situation that I could find a solution." (Carol)

"When Mark (son) had his problems at school it affected me at home quite a bit, but like always, whenever I stepped in the door the problems of the real world slipped away." (Ted)

"Getting married has certainly changed my use of free time, but I still make sure I get by the gym at least 3-5 times per week after work. I've tried to get Debbie (wife) involved, but she isn't too interested right now. But that's OK, since I work out for me and not anyone else." (Mervin)

The participant's actions during the course of observation paralleled their comments regarding connection to the facility (and/or people in the facility) and feelings of comfort when in the club. Jack, for example developed a workout partnership with another member who had a similar work related schedule. They faithfully got together at least three times a week for workouts and motivated each other to continue coming. Jack suggested he would still work out if he hadn't gotten involved in the partnership, but stated the motivation to come was now enhanced:

"Now when I go to the gym I know Kelvin will be there. We don't really do anything different that when we worked out separately, it's just comfortable knowing someone else is there to help you get through those sets and workouts that seem uncomfortable. It's easy to quit and go

home on days when you just don't feel like it if you're by yourself. I'd still be around if we weren't working out together, I just don't know if it would quite as consistent."

Another participant noted he began exercising with another member (who was going through a marriage break-up) because working out had helped him cope with his transition situation:

"I know how working out helped me. Terry and I worked out before now and then, and we were friends away from the gym, but when his marital problems started I took it upon myself to help wherever I could. Since we both worked out I knew that if I could get him to come in with me he would keep the commitment. At least during workouts he could keep his mind on things other than his personal situation. It seemed to work a little, he was more upbeat and positive during our workout time."

Likewise, another participant suggested her workouts had been enhanced by knowing her boyfriend would be at the club most times, and by the fact she had become somewhat of a mentor to another new member:

"It seems that I need someone to help motivate me. When Kathryn was around we worked out together and I really liked it. When she left things

were different, my motivation lagged. Then I got more serious with William and that helped - and now I go quite often with another women from work. She joined a few months ago, but felt like I did when I first started. Coming with me has helped her, and its also helped me -It's neat to see how I have become a part of her workout like Kathryn was a part of mine."

All participants moved through a three stage process of: 1) recognizing and responding to extrinsic motives to initially join the facility (eg. Darwin joined to rehabilitate his ankle, Mary joined to stay in shape while working at her new job, Louise joined to strengthen her body after having a stroke); 2) experiencing social rewards during their workout sessions (Darwin forming a close relationship with three other members, Ted stating how he spends over two hours working out yet only exercising for 45 minutes and Jack entering into a workout partner relationship with another member); and 3) developing intrinsic motivation to continue working out related to feeling good about themselves (Mervin stating how working out has positively affected his self-esteem and his performance at work, Sheila suggesting how she moves from working out on weights to participating in aerobics classes based on how she feels about herself - whether she needs more socialization (aerobics) or individual concentration (weights) and Ted suggesting a vacuum would be created in his life if he couldn't come to Jim's and be greeted by a friendly smiling face each

and every time he enters - "It's like stepping over the line from where I am to where I want to be").

Chapter 5

Conclusion

I. Implications of findings for:

a) Health Club Owners/Managers

The participant responses, both initial and post-observation indicated an early acclimatization process was required by each of them. The length of this time period varied among them, but occurred immediately following the initial membership registration process. This period was marked by a interval of uncomfortableness, which was related to a feeling of unfamiliarity with the environment. Most participants indicated their focus during this time was on extrinsic "rewards" and motivations, which included exercising for health benefits. However, some stated that personal attention from staff was critical in keeping them in the environment regardless of the motivation to start the program. There was a level of personal comfort knowing

"... that someone who new something would be there if I needed help."

(Sheila)

Exercise professionals typically promoted the extrinsic values of exercise, sometimes to the exclusion of other outcomes. These values included reduction in body fat, increase in lean body tissue, physical appearance changes in ones body, etc. From this research I would suggest this approach is appropriate during the early stages of the membership -- but the development of a relationship between the client and the club must be facilitated. The assumption that one only has to explain the health benefits of exercise is erroneous - as additional attributes keep members in the club.

Issue A - Affirmation

An explanation of the health benefits of exercise rationalized the client's initial motive for joining. Affirming how exercise will positively influence their extrinsically motivated goals assisted in creating a need for regular activity. Members generally were appreciative knowing that what they were doing during their first few visits in the facility was in fact the appropriate exercises to assist them reach their goals.

The drive to produce long-term adherence in any endeavour, exercise included, must include intrinsic motivation. Some recent research indicated that external rewards do not necessarily subvert internal motivation. In fact, prudently selected external rewards that are contingent upon quality of

performance do not impair (and may even augment) intrinsic motivation (Rosato 1990).

To foster the develop the intrinsic motivation necessary for continuance, personalized attention must be provided during the critical early stages of membership. Participants commented that they required and appreciated personalized attention, which led them to feel more connected to the facility. The assurance that they could approach any member of staff for additional guidance was key in fostering this connection.

It is important to note that most new members felt better connected to the program/facility if they first developed a relationship with a particular staff person or member during this early process. In contrast, a reliance for help or assistance from different people generally lowered the individual's commitment to the program/club. This process assisted the participant with the creation of an identity that was of their own making. One which was initially based upon extrinsic needs that developed into intrinsically based motivations.

Issue B - Becoming a "regular"

The second component of member retention involved recognition as a "regular", both by staff and other members. Members perceived a level of

comfort when they were acknowledged by name when entering and leaving the facility.

In addition to physical extrinsic rewards related to proper exercise program selection and the physiological benefits of regular exercise members required psychologically related rewards of attention, recognition and encouragement. This led to a general feeling of belongingness, which began the process of transcending from extrinsically based need satisfaction to intrinsic internalization, or the feeling of well-being. Rosato (1990) suggests "there is some question regarding the staying power produced solely by external rewards and there is speculation regarding its possible depressant effect upon intrinsic motivation".

Human behaviour is purposeful; that is, it is goal-directed. The objective of motivated behaviour is the achievement of goals, in this case the achievement of personal well-being. Positive reinforcements (intrinsic - the responsibility of the individual, supplemented by extrinsic - the responsibility of the program provider) motivate individuals to persist in the attainment of these goals. A workable plan for achieving goals involves knowing what the individual wants to accomplish in the long run.

In other words, the fitness provider should be able to identify long-range goals and assist in their achievement. Realistic short-term goals for the individual should be set, which act as both a reinforcer and a stimulus motivating them to strive for the next goal. Each accomplishment brings them closer to realizing their long-term goal. The key is realism: setting goals that are difficult enough to provide a challenge but that have a reasonable chance of being achieved.

The fitness provider is faced with the task of knowing when the individual requires some form of external motivation to intensify intrinsic motives. This might involve the organization of special functions or events for members only. It might involve a contest in the facility that members can compete in for prizes. The task might simply involve the owner/manager or fitness director taking a few hours to work out with the individual and provide personalized "one-on-one" attention.

Recognizing and determining what is required, and then supplying it is important. Learning to identify what is needed by an individual can only be determined if facility staff knows its members. This is achievable through the development of relationships with members. Fostering communication, even informal and listening to member's comments is crucial.

Training staff to provide this personalized support to new members is critical to the survival of fitness clubs. Front-line staff are generally the lowest paid and in many instances the least informed of club personnel. This is ironic, in that these people generally have the first contact with a new member, and first impressions are so important in establishment of a relationship between the member and the facility. Emphasis should be placed on training front-line staff to provide new members with the assistance and attention they require when first entering the facility.

b) Fitness advisors, exercise consultants and personal trainers

The results of this study suggested professionals in the field of providing fitness and exercise programming consider the motives people have for getting involved in exercise. The author's experience with these allied professionals suggested they already do this in assessing their client's needs and developing appropriate personalized programs. This conclusion is borne through an investigation of what a personal trainer provides a client through their one-on-one relationship.

The relationship between personal trainers and clients provided personalized attention, similar to what participants experienced by being

recognized as a "regular". The personal trainer/client relationship also provided "connectedness", a partnering of the two individuals. Study participants indicated their need for connectedness to person(s) in the club, either staff or other members. The personal trainer/client relationship also provided comfort in that the client gets the full attention of the trainer during the workout. A similar kind of comfort is provided to the participants in this study through their connection to the "third place".

What the participants found they developed over time in the club atmosphere (comfort, connection) other clients may pay for in a relationship with a fitness advisor, personal trainer or exercise consultant. The difference is the relationship with the club created by the member is everlasting, or will continue as long as the member participates to the same degree. The pay for service relationship with the personal trainer is based upon a business arrangement and will continue only as long as the member pays for the service.

c) Researchers

Clearly, more research is necessary to determine whether the service provider can easily and cost-effectively recognize the level of intervention necessary to ensure member retention. Historically, members are preliminarily

screened by fitness clubs when purchasing memberships. However, the larger the club the more difficult it is to provide personalized service. This study indicated it is the personalized service that help to foster their connection to the club.

II. Epilogue

A situation worth noting occurred during the final stages of thesis preparation. As previously mentioned, one member involved in the study (Darwin) let his membership lapse when he became employed on a full-time basis. Up until he became employed Darwin was a regular member and participated in many club activities. He was recognized as a regular and was well known by other club members.

Darwin remained a non-member for almost three years during the time of his employment. A change in organizational structure resulted in Darwin losing his job. Darwin returned to Jim's and renewed his membership immediately after losing his job.

Does his return signify an attempt to "re-connect" to a former role held as a regular member? Has his change in employment resulted in a transition that

can be eased by returning to Jim's? Interestingly, Darwin has not made use of the club as much as he did previously, but has maintained full member status. Apparently, belonging to Jim's and regaining status as a "regular" is important to Darwin.

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Appendix

An interview guide was developed and used to identify attitudinal and behavioral characteristics of members and former members defined as being in transition.

Questions on the guide were:

- 1. What brought you to this fitness centre in the first place? Have these needs changed over time?**
- 2. How did you feel at the beginning? What was the environment like? Could you describe it?**
- 3. How did you experience staff support?**
- 4. If you identified yourself as having changing needs over time, what were the factors relating to those changes? What were the stimuli for change? What was the result?**
- 5. How did your involvement in the club change over time?**
- 6. Explain whether you noticed any change in needs over time and explain whether that realization was gradual or "all of a sudden".**
- 7. How important was it to have a background in fitness? Did you work out somewhere before or is this your first membership in a private fitness club? Do you feel this makes any difference?**