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Chapter 13
Overcoming Deathworlds of Addiction, Self-Injury, and Stress

Abstract: Pressure and power have two sides; both of them have positive and negative aspects. They can motivate and oppress us. Pressure can be our power and power can be our pressure. This relationship is especially noticeable within the Deathworldly provinces of meaning of addiction, self-injury, and stress. This chapter presents a collaboration of three student researchers who explore the Lifeworldly affirming activities of weightlifting, personal training, and yoga in relation to obtaining power to overcome Deathworlds, as well as reducing Lifeworld pressures. We discuss the somatic connection between pressure and power in order to reveal how it is possible to communicate body knowledge through exercise. Additionally, the pressure of middle-aged women who endanger themselves in exercise to obtain a younger body-image, and consequently a perceived power is explored. We conclude that by obtaining this power and relieving the Lifeworld pressures, an individual will move through a transformation. Along with examining this topic, we also discuss our self-observations of transformation, which occurred through the phenomenological process to deeply understand our phenomena.

Keywords: addiction, stress, exercise, yoga, phenomenology

Introduction

The following chapter is the result of a collaboration between three women who participated as doctoral students in the “From Strangers to Collaborators” international research project. Though many kilometers apart (USA and Poland), we discovered a personal connection through our exploration of the phenomenon of pressure and power in the context of overcoming Deathworlds of addiction, self-injury, and stress. Through our collaboration we found that our Deathworlds

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shared a common denominator – they are associated with the worlds of physical activity.

At the root of each of these activities – weightlifting, personal training, and yoga – each of the researchers found pressure. It turned out that pressure can be a positive motivator to undertake healthy physical activity, which helps overcome the Deathworld of addiction and stress. On the other hand, the pressure of having a young and firm body can also lead to an unhealthy addiction to physical activity and push towards the Deathworld of self-injury.

There is also an element of power in these activities. The power from weightlifting helps in the fight against addiction. The power of exercise found in yoga helps to overcome the stress associated with the realities of work. Women compromising their well-being for the sake of body image have a dangerous sense of perceived power during personal training sessions.

Our descriptions of lived experience (protocols) were written from a Schützian (1970) perspective. We explored the essential elements of power and pressure and described the actors and multiple realities experienced in the Lifeworld and Deathworld. The protocols were written from the vantage of our personal lived experience and, in some instances, we recognized “that we know more than we can tell” (van Manen 2015, p. 113).

Lori’s Vantage Points

After entering recovery, I memorized a prayer that I recite every night. The prayer is known in many circles, but to me, it is known as the addicts’ prayer, “God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference.” Acceptance, courage, and change are vital elements of this prayer and connect closely with the phenomena of power. In order to remain in recovery, I first needed to accept that I am powerless over my addiction, and then, through finding personal power, I find the courage to change my behavior. The question is, how does one find their power? In my case, power was brought to me through the experience of weightlifting.

I propose that strength training may prevent relapse for those in recovery from addiction. The power one gains from strength training may transform itself into personal power for the addicted person, which allows for somatic growth, thus decreasing the desire for the former Deathworld of addiction.
Jennifer’s Vantage Points

As an observer of the phenomenon of middle-aged women who endanger themselves exercising for body image, I have identified three common biographical determinants: their life stage (age), their socio-economic status, and their gender. These three aspects of the phenomenon play a role in how the actors move through past, present, and future, and how time influences the manifestation of endangerment.

In their mid-forties to early sixties, the women experiencing this phenomenon adopt a specific cultural-historic perspective. Attitudes regarding gender and physical activity have evolved over the decades. Some middle-aged women may be new to exercise thereby affecting how they participate in it.

Each of the women I am discussing in this phenomenon are wealthy. Personal training is one of the many commodities available to these women. Their wealth allows them to pursue optimal health and age-concealing measures. Because of their relationship to me, as a personal trainer, I can glean insight into their Lifeworlds.

Women have a unique experience of aging as compared to male counterparts. King (2004) stated that far more than the male body, the female body is subjected to the “gaze” of the other. Aging women may feel increasing pressure to conform to body image standards because their bodies are constantly scrutinized by society (Chonody/Teater 2016). Therefore, gender plays a critical role in how one experiences aging.

Dagmara’s Vantage Points

My experience is that of being under enormous time pressure. This is a very uncomfortable position, which not only causes stress but blocks creativity, killing the joy of work. In this sense, it is a kind of Deathworld. I will describe how pressure impacts the Lifeworld of a doctoral student entering the social scientific community, where the feeling of pressure to make it – to succeed in academia – is present. Yoga became a means to re-enliven this Deathworldly experience. I look at how yoga helped in fighting both external and internal pressure. I understand yoga not as a sport, not as a challenge, not as a competition, but as an opportunity to stop, to look inside yourself, and an opportunity to look closely at ourselves under pressure.
Personal Power through Weightlifting: Fighting the Deathworld of Addiction

Power is everywhere’ and ‘comes from everywhere’ so in this sense is neither an agency nor a structure. – Michel Foucault in The Will to Knowledge, 1998, p. 63.

There is no easy road out of the Deathworld of addiction. The fractured self, seeking the path, must first find the road to recovery, which is often hidden by addiction. When one is ready, the path will appear, and then it is up to the self to remain on it each and every time they come to a fork in the road. For the self to remain in recovery one must admit their powerlessness, as well as embrace their power.

Weightlifting provides both a feeling of powerlessness and powerfulness. Powerlessness when one is unable to achieve the desired lift and powerfulness when one does, especially when the action proves to be a personal best. In my case, the movement known as the barbell deadlift brought power into my life, which continues to transform as well as provide motivation. The deadlift was not universally known until the early 1900s but can be traced back to the early 1700s. The movement is basic, almost primal, and instinctive as one lifts a dead weight from the earth. I correlate the deadlift with addiction in that the power of the drug, once lifted, similar to pressure, yields the feeling of powerfulness. Below is a lived experience description of the power achieved through weightlifting.

The Deadlift

Every weight training session takes me to another level, sometimes it is negative because I did not achieve the goal, but more often it is positive because I did. My mirror image changes daily, but one thing remains: the feeling of power. The power of making healthy choices, the power of feeling power through lifting weight, and the power of knowing that no one or thing can take the achievement from you. It is yours to own, to control, as long as your mind and body will allow you to do it.

“It’s time to learn to go heavier,” he says. I love deadlifting, as it is one of the most powerful lifts. There is something about picking up a heavy weight and holding it, just standing with it in your hands, and looking at yourself in the mirror. I agree with him and we head for the garage. It’s cold, so we turn the heater on, it’s evening, so the single long, fluorescent bulb is flickering to the side of us. The mini lamp is also on, which emits a soft glow, displaying our shadows on the walls. It smells like oil or gas, because of the parked cars behind us, but I quickly forget about the smell once I rub my hands with chalk. The bar is set up on the platform on wooden risers instead of the platform itself. He turns on the music, which is loud (the group Disturbed, Down with the Sickness) and intoxicating,
as I begin to enter the “zone.” I step in front of the bar and try not to look at the weight. “I don’t want to know,” I think to myself, “I just want to pull it.” I breathe in and tighten my weight belt, I bend over and grab the bar, it’s cold, and the knurl digs into my skin. I look up and lock eyes with myself in the cracked mirror. It’s not pretty because I’m split in half, but this is weightlifting, it’s not intended to be pretty. The music gets louder and the shadows dance faster on the walls as I begin to pull the weight from the risers. There are no other thoughts, just to pull, just to rise, just to stand and the bar slides up my legs, and I’m squeezing, I’m tight, I lean back and I’m standing. I pause, my eyes, still on me, I see me and I see power and I see accomplishment. I slowly begin my descent with the bar and release it once the weights touch the wooden risers. My heart is racing, as I pop off my belt and inspect my hands for evidence of the accomplishment. Euphoria races through me, as I begin to think about the next goal. (L. Davidson, self-observation, 2019)

An actor entering recovery needs to know it will be hard, the hardest thing they have ever done in their life because it never ends – you practice it every day. You have to practice effective time management and find ways to manage stress levels. I recommend adopting a physically healthy lifestyle because once you are capable of this the mind and spirit will follow. I cannot say there was someone who saved my life, but I can say there is something, a phenomenon, that keeps me in recovery and that is the power achieved through weightlifting.

Whether or not an actor in recovery chooses to remain anonymous in another reality is their choice. However, finding a healthy balance between the realities is often a struggle, without sharing their history, and tends to be an area of extreme pressure, which then leads to relapse.

The following protocol provides typifications of the actors in recovery based on Schütz (1973):

**Newcomer:** The newcomer is fresh out of rehab or jail and is looking to connect with like-minded folks to maintain sobriety. This person is both excited and scared as they are struggling to find their sober self. They will be searching for a sponsor, preferably an Old Timer, with 10 plus years of sobriety, and of the same gender, because this is what their counselor or probation officer told them they need to do. This person will be a chain smoker and, depending on their drug of choice, will have a hankering for coffee or candy.

**Old Timer:** This person is well known throughout many meeting rooms and has 10 or more years sober. They feel strong in their recovery, and have fully embraced the reality of recovery, though they are wise enough to know that the rooms are part of what helps them maintain their sobriety so they “keep coming back.” They will be the first to reach out to the Newcomer, as well as put the Relapser in her place. When the Old Timer shares stories in the meeting rooms, she will reflect on hope, inspiration, and gratitude. The Old Timer no longer smokes and has adopted a healthier lifestyle. The Old Timer is likely someone’s sponsor and/or is head of the chapter which oversees the meetings.

**Relapser:** This person is stuck between the reality of recovery and Deathworld of addiction. She struggles with maintaining sobriety due to person, places or things and may have not yet fully detoxed from her drug of choice. This person has not yet hit a “rock bottom.” This person may have a sponsor but does not follow the sponsor’s advice. This
person has been unable to break her link to the seductive Deathworld of addiction, despite being told many times there is only sobriety, incarceration or death. She attends meetings in the hope that she will find "something" more powerful than the addiction Deathworld.

**Maintainer:** Like the Old Timer, this person has fully embraced recovery and all the gifts it offers. She only attends meetings as needed but has managed to remain sober by discovering other coping mechanisms to replace prior behaviors. The Maintainer has rules, which she adheres to in order to maintain her sobriety. Fear is what drives her to remain sober as she knows a relapse at this point would mean death. The Maintainer is also driven by a great sense of power and achievement. (L. Davidson, protocol, 2019)

### Movement Between Realities

For the Relapser, the pressure of balancing the realities is a common theme, and they will often lose power. The Newcomer has not yet totally experienced all the realities but is aware of their existence. The Old Timer and the Maintainer have become experts in balancing work, family, recovery, hobbies, goals, etc. The Old Timer is typically satisfied with this balance, however, the Maintainer focuses and pushes towards new goals, as she has a strong sense of personal power and accomplishment.

### Motives

The motives of each actor will change over time and as they maintain sobriety (have power), or not (lose power). In the addiction Deathworld, motives are extremely selfish and this behavior does not necessarily diminish once one has detoxed. Typical motives for entering the world of recovery are legal and health. The prime motive is referred to as one’s “rock bottom.” Fear is a motive worth exploring, fear of jail or death. As with the addiction Deathworld, there is typically a “rock bottom” that one may experience in achieving power through weightlifting. However, this bottom is not as significant or profound as in the addiction Deathworld. There are many motives for remaining in the world of recovery; some mention health, family, self-esteem, achievement, finances and power.

Below is a segment from a writing protocol discussing power and my archetype:

One of the first things an actor entering the recovery world will hear is, “you must surrender to a POWER greater than yourself.” What is this power? It is different for all of us. Could it be this supernatural being that Schütz and Bentz describe or it could be based on
faith? For this actor . . . in case you haven’t figured it out by now . . . wait, I will let you guess which actor I am, but in my case, it is both, a supernatural being who I have faith in to have my back. She looks like the Phoenix and I see her when I lift weights, I see her when life gets hard, but I also see her when life is good. I even try to look like her, perhaps this is another area worthy of further exploration. (L. Davidson, protocol, 2019)

Schütz (1973) references work from William James and Kierkegaard when addressing the sub-universe and transitions from paramount to non-paramount realities. Specifically, Schütz references the *leap*, as Kierkegaard called it. The shock of the leap is experienced when our consciousness is forced to change its attention. I think this shock occurs at several pivotal moments in the realities of addiction, recovery, and weight training. Below is a protocol addressing this paramount reality:

Addicted Reality > Recovery Reality > Weight Training Reality

Addicted Reality (fantasy, powerless):
- difference in time and spatiality
- noema (that to which we orient ourself)
- concept of self and others
- meanings and motives

Recovery Reality (socially acceptable Reality, powerful):
- all of the above, as influenced by what is labeled as socially correct behavior
- world of work, the world of family
- time is short

Weight Training or Reality of Power (all other worlds are incorporated into or influenced by this world):
- behavior based on what feels good or right
- world of work and family satisfied if there is a healthy balance between these and the world of self
- time is long (even when it might be short) and manageable if you are focused

The shock is specifically experienced from the addicted world to the recovery world or one could see it as the powerless world to the powerful world. As the senses begin to live again, this is both good and bad, overwhelmingly powerful in many aspects as the consciousness moves from the goal of intoxication to the pressure of the maintenance of sobriety. (L. Davidson, protocol, 2019)
The Pressure Phenomenon

Thanks to discovering the phenomenon of pressure, reflecting on its examples, and analyzing my life in its context, I noticed that living under pressure is my normal way of functioning. As if this phenomenon was necessary for me for effective living.

Pressure motivates me to act. However, this motivation (in order to motivation [Schütz 2008]) is a negative motivation. I’m doing something in order to not to think about the negative consequences of inaction. This motivation is forced by fear. Motivation forces me to work, but in the short term. Eventually, pressure overwhelms passion, enthusiasm, and joy of performed activities.

Thanks to the pressure, I will sit down and start writing a fragment of the text, but this weight will be with me all the time. The greater the pressure, the greater the compulsion, the greater the resistance. Under pressure, I try to do my job, but the same pressure prevents me from continuing. The constant tension I feel under pressure takes away my natural motivation, so the pressure is a motivation killer in the long run. The very word “pressure” evokes unpleasant associations. Even if it pushes you to act, any coercion ultimately always resists.

Constant exertion of internal pressure keeps individuals in check of a planned, forced, but known and safe life. It allows automatic operation according to a previously developed scheme. Living outside pressure requires the ability to get out of this pattern, requires flexibility and trust in your intuition. Getting out of pressure begins when the motivation “I need” and “I should” turns into “I want” when the in order to theme is a natural motive, not a compulsion.

Looking at my own pressure, it is easy to see that in most cases, my internal pressure has arisen because of external influences. The pressure of the environment is usually the expectations of others as to what we are to be like and how to live. Expectations become pressure and coercion. Social pressure imposing the need for a healthy and slim figure forces me to play sports. Pressure related to the need to maintain social balance can lead to seeking peace through yoga. But isn’t that another kind of pressure? Is yoga not the result of pressure to find harmony? Is finding balance not just another goal, right after the perfect figure, set by a vibrating society?

I think we can even talk about the pressure of being under pressure. Consumer society, the society of excess, promotes a busy lifestyle full of pressure, especially the pressure of time in which individuals constantly strive for something and advance. Any attempts to stop this race and escape from pressure are a sign of weakness and inability to adapt to the rest.
The following fragment of my protocol was written during participation in the project in which I focused on the phenomenon of pressure and its dual nature:

Pressure for me has double face – good and bad. Pressure can be motivating and suffocating. It can give us some adrenalin but also can drive us to be overburdened. I don’t like this feeling, but I think that my life will be worse without it. I know that I am a lazy person and maybe without pressure, I couldn’t achieve anything that makes me happy, maybe without pressure I won’t feel fulfilled. Originally, I view my phenomenon only in a bad way, but now I think that I was unfair or simply I wasn’t aware.

Now I notice more and more good aspects of pressure. I think that without pressure we can’t really feel pleasure, we feel it too facilely. In the world of repletion, and the excessiveness of potential we feel pressure to make a decision. And we have to make it. Pressure eases this task for us. Maybe it is violence but maybe it is “wise” violence. Without pressure maybe I will not take part in this class. I felt some safe pressure in that I want to take part in it because it can be important for me. It can help me to develop myself. A pressure force to focus on, to activate life. But pressure also limits me and invites me to release, to get out from under the pressure, to make a break, feel lightness, feel freedom. And finally, I asked myself – do I want it? I don’t know. If I want to be an aware person maybe I should see pressure off. But I think that without this feeling my life wouldn’t complete. That freedom can’t exist without pressure. Peace, calm, can’t exist without stress, pressure. That lightness also can be unbearable and can make pressure.

For me, pressure is something more. It’s something important, something that provides harmony though it is associated mainly with disorder. It’s like power, which can support people but which can also destroy them. It can provide a chance for growth, collaboration, and advancement. With pressure, I feel that I can live. Maybe without pressure, my life will pass through my fingers unnoticed. But pressure can also lead to the risk of bad rivalry, and inequality. It motivates me, but it can also break me. That’s why I should be aware of my pressure and try to control it.

(D. Tarasiuk, protocol, 2019)

Pressure in the Reality of Higher Education

The higher education system in Poland promotes individuality and competitiveness. The functioning of students and employees in the points system generates a continuous race in terms of publication and number of appearances at conferences. The so-called “pointosis” translates into the quality of the resulting texts and papers, which are produced en masse. Therefore, the scientific life of a doctoral student is accompanied by constant frustration and pressure related to the need to gather research data and develop subsequent articles at an ever-faster rate.

On the other hand, although I feel the pressure of individual development, the opposite is also expected – interdisciplinarity and scientific cooperation. Because “the relativity and selectivity of our experiences force us to constant dialogue” (Waldenfels 1989, p.254), researchers who are serious about their scientific
careers are even obliged to cooperate, especially internationally. To participate in it, they face the problem of understanding, sometimes interculturally. Coming from different realities, they must not only jump out of the world in which they live in their free time into the world of research but also jump into the open model of learning, suspending the individual work style. Therefore, scientific cooperation seems to be a particularly difficult kind of cooperation, due to the researchers themselves, who participate in a project at the same time as they are developing their scientific careers. So, with the inevitable more or less important differences in individual motivation, the common goal, or the in order to motive, is very important. While the divergence of the “because” motive may hinder or even prevent the cooperation process, but not waste the potential, the lack of a common goal means a lack of cooperation.

In scientific cooperation, the pressure of hierarchy may also be a problem. When a professor by virtue of his title gives himself the role of an expert in a research group, he may underestimate knowledge outside his narrative and not create conditions for dialogue and full cooperation. In an extreme case, cooperation may be limited to gathering the material together and taking further steps in the research process by the expert alone, without taking into account the voice of others, which cancels the cooperation. Its guarantee is an open dialogue and exchange of thoughts, and the assumption that a truly great teacher always learns from his students (Schütz 2008, p. 129).

However, redefining relationships from hierarchical to partner, in which each expert discusses even-handedly with others, can be difficult due to the general fear of conducting constructive disputes in scientific circles (Zielińska 2013, p. 177). Disputes should be understood as a creative exchange of views, which consists of adding and including data that were not previously considered in their argumentation. In scientific cooperation, it is not enough to reach peaceful compromises or averages, which are accepted by the general public but are not represented by the majority of participants.

A phenomenological attitude, especially the practice of epoché, seems to be inspirational and helpful in conducting a good and effective dialogue, which is the basis of all scientific cooperation. By analyzing Schütz’s recommendations regarding the understanding of the Other, we receive general advice on efficient and fruitful dialogue. So how can we cooperate in practice? First of all, Schütz notes that direct contact is the most effective form of communication: “It [range of the expression field] may reach the maximum level when there is not only a unity of time but also space between the partners, i.e. in a situation which by sociologists is called a face-to-face relationship” (Schütz 2008, p. 29). Since at the beginning it was established that scientific cooperation is based on dialogue, and the dialogue is best carried out live, it can be assumed that scientific
discussion during a direct meeting will be more effective than calling via Skype or exchanging emails.

But not only distance can be an obstacle to mutual understanding. Clinging to one’s assumptions, lack of readiness to accept the unknown, can cause an inability to leave the circle of established habits and close oneself to the suggestions of co-researchers. Moreover, “the most common attitude is to impose on others our perception of things, and even to stubbornly direct conversation to our own experience. This is a testimony to the exuberant narcissism that encloses us” (Depraz 2010, p. 14). Participating in the process of agreement, it is worth adopting the opposite attitude, the phenomenological epoché, which requires constant questioning of one’s own assumptions and asking oneself and others questions, which will allow seeing the problem from many perspectives. Epoché consists of:

Radical “refraining” (Enthaltung) from what is observed . . . . In this way a space is created without any judgment or, at least, a space where the passing of hasty judgments is delayed or stopped. The typical of observer lack of prejudices further strengthens the withdrawal by introducing a kind of blockade to our natural tendency to judge, i.e. to take objects in the mode of “it goes without saying,” to a mode of acting without asking yourself.

(Depraz 2010, p. 32)

Epoché allows to be more open to the comments of others, not make initial assumptions, and thus improve communication. It enables, at least partially, the suspension of emotions, suspension of one’s reasons (or even ego), and one’s assumptions in order to be more open to the Other and his perspectives. Practical application of epoché is an exercise of active listening and interchangeability of points of view, it is not putting yourself at the center of the social world: “Everyone who becomes a social researcher must make a mental operation in order to put in the center of the world not oneself, but someone else, namely the observed person” (Schütz 2008, p. 125).

By participating in the From Strangers to Collaborators project, which was to be based on openness, cooperation, and mutual inspiration, I understood that I was not ready for this mode of work yet. Because I needed pressure to produce individual achievements and I always worked under constant time pressure, it turned out that I cannot work (or cooperate) in an atmosphere deprived of “motivation” which, until now, was pressure for me. This was probably because I didn’t know how to motivate myself otherwise. The pressure was the only known motivation for me. I was afraid that if I gave up my life under pressure, I would stop caring about anything. I would lose my motivation to act. In fact, I clung to my pressure not realizing (for a long time) how serious the consequences could be. Being under pressure in both academic and private
life, I was afraid to change something, but at the same time, I was asking myself how others can function in their worlds and move forward without the weight of pressure. Where should I look for another motivation tool (although pressure is a force tool)? How can I find a willingness to not act under pressure? Finally, where should I look for an environment without pressure?

Yoga Practice

The answer may be yoga practice. Initially, I expected progress in yoga. My everyday habits transformed through the experience of yoga. I imagine how I stand on my hands, how my body becomes athletic. But coming regularly to classes, I began to understand that a mat is a place where I do not think about what is ahead of me, I do not think about progress and instead allow myself to be in the present. The reality of yoga is about being in the here and now, there is no specific goal in it, there is no expectation so there is no pressure. This short time in which I leave the world of pressure is salutary for me.

I cut myself off, tangibly, physically. I cut myself off from the rush of many thoughts at once, from everyday challenges and tasks. Everyday life involves a compulsion to constantly think, analyze, plan and set strategies. The pressure of multitasking, the pressure of many thoughts from many worlds at the same time.

Yoga is time off. A moment just for myself. I am among the people whom I only say hello to, but I who I have no relationship with. They are neutral, so they do not have dependencies, challenges, tasks or responsibilities. There are only a mat and a teacher who gives further “orders.” Yes, during practice I want to receive orders. I follow her voice and my body carries out her instructions. For an hour and a half, it is not me who manages myself.

But I do not feel like I am under the pressure of the teacher’s orders. Conversely, my teacher, my master, releases the pressure of making decisions from me. When I started my adventure with yoga, I was completely unaware of my body. I felt that the teacher knew my body better than me! She knew my options better. I willingly submitted to her corrections. Thanks to the teacher, I learn to listen to my body, understand the work of muscles, their arrangement. My teacher also teaches me that yoga is an activity that is not about rapid progress and that you should patiently and systematically teach how to listen to yourself and your body. In yoga, you are not under anybody’s pressure and you cannot put pressure on your own body, otherwise, you will get injured.

Living without pressure requires self-confidence and intuition. It requires trust that you are the person who knows best what is good for you. In order to
be able to start such cooperation with yourself, it is good to start by understanding your body. Yoga helps in this. Yoga releases you from pressure, which makes you feel that you have to be better and the best. Yoga is not a competition. It’s not a race against others or a race against yourself. Yoga is development, self-improvement, but not at all costs, and at its own pace, not imposed from the outside. The yoga teacher does not behave like a motivational trainer. Instead of a kind of pressure like: “do it, you can do it,” the yoga master will say “do it if you can.”

In contrast to somatic practices which are oriented toward the performer (such as diet, bodybuilding, personal training) and which are often motivated by the desire to satisfy others (Shusterman 2016, p. 46) by submitting to social pressure associated with an attractive appearance and a healthy lifestyle, yoga turns us to ourselves. It is not oriented at improving the external appearance, but at improving the internal experience, at sharpening self-awareness.

When performing asanas, I focus on the pleasure arising from the activity itself. It is easier to allow yourself to follow this approach during the practice of yoga than, for example, watching the series unproductively, because we are constantly accompanied by the thought that I am doing something for my body and soul. I do not think that I am wasting valuable time, on the contrary, it is for me a kind of investment in internal peace and harmony. And most importantly, I do it for myself and not for others. I do not want to satisfy others, I do not want to adapt or give in to social, external pressure; I want to focus on myself during practice and derive satisfaction from this.

The Pressure to Conform: Women who Risk Injury and Death to Maintain Body Image Standards

There are elements of both perceived power (changing one’s body through exercise) and pressure (patriarchal body-image ideals) present in the phenomenon of middle-aged American women who endanger themselves exercising. It is possible to view this phenomenon through multiple lenses in my Lifeworld. I define exercise endangerment as when an individual places themselves in risky exercise situations in pursuit of an ideal body image. With this definition in mind, the phenomenon is not exclusive to middle-aged women. However, the phenomenon of middle-aged women who take exercise risks is nuanced in two main ways: 1) women are vulnerable to ageist attitudes coupled with patriarchal ideals of feminine beauty, and 2) their perception towards exercise may be influenced by gender stereotypes. These two points give exercise potentially a
very different meaning to middle-aged women and in turn, may be embodied in contrasting ways. For these reasons, I have focused on women as opposed to both men and women.

I have worked with hundreds of middle-aged women during my personal training career. A handful of these women appear to endanger themselves exercising to enhance their body image. This is evidenced when one pursues an exercise that is far too advanced for them or exercises too hard, placing themselves in a position of risk of injury. Each of the women I am discussing share similarities regarding race, social class, and habitation. As white, upper-class, central Pennsylvanian, middle-aged women, they share similar moral codes and Lifeworlds. I recognize that because of my experience with the women I have trained, my interpretation of the phenomenon may present itself in unique ways. Although there is variation in attitudes amongst middle-aged women, for the scope of this text, my discussion will be based on the women I have trained rather than a generalization of the entire population of middle-aged American women.

**Experiencing their Lifeworlds**

Cosmetic surgery, fast and flashy cars, lavish purses, and expensive jewelry appear to give these women their sense of value. In a society that idealizes youth and beauty, middle-aged women may feel pressure to compete with younger versions of themselves to be noticed. Moreover, women who do not conform to these standards may “experience her body as ugly and alien” (Levesque-Lopman 1988). Due to the societal attitude that young and beautiful women are valued more than others, some women are inclined to take extreme measures to conform (Dolezal 2015).

American women are expected to adhere to contemporary beauty standards (Ponterotto 2016). King (2004) asserted that many well-documented fashion trends practiced by women are not only time consuming and expensive, they are also potentially damaging, such as corsets, cosmetics, waxing, cosmetic surgery, and high heels. Therefore, the pressure to conform to mainstream American body image standards can be resource consuming and damaging to physical and psychological health.

Dolezal (2015) discusses the notion of the “seen” body which is with what other people form conscious impressions of us. She argues that being “seen” by others is one way in which we experience what she calls body shame. Cosmetic surgery, extreme exercise, dieting, and high fashion all exemplify how women may go to great lengths to circumvent shame. Dolezal’s idea of body shame is a profound force in human experience and is resultant of the body itself. We,
humans, experience an embodied shame that not only intrudes on our psychological space but affects our bodies and how we experience them. From this standpoint, middle-aged women who endanger themselves through exercising may be attempting to mediate how society, one that idealizes youth and beauty, views them, and consequently their aging body. These women may feel like they have power through exercise, cosmetic surgery, and extreme dieting, in that they are able to change their bodies.

**Actors in their Lifeworlds**

Identified as typical actors (Schütz/Luckmann 1973) in this Lifeworld are 1) Mrs. Hardcore, who is driven by autonomy and power, is an over-achiever, and epitomizes strength, 2) Mrs. Insecure, who has low self-esteem, is self-conscious and often feels unworthy, 3) Mrs. Attention Grabber, who is flashy, bold, and extravagant and, 4) Mrs. Material Girl, who places importance on riches, material things, and is very worldly.

The actors I have identified have seemingly contradictory elements. For example, Mrs. Hardcore epitomizes strength, whereas Mrs. Insecure has low self-esteem. However, each one of them is motivated by having an ideal body image. Mrs. Insecures’ low self-esteem is a product of being an aging woman in a patriarchal society. Consequently, Mrs. Hardcores’ desire for power may be compensatory because of the pressure the aging woman feels to have an ideal body image. The aging woman amid a patriarchal society may feel she must position herself to try to look and be younger in order to be seen as meaningful thereby participating in risky exercise, and other potentially harmful body corrective measures, such as dieting and cosmetic surgery, for an improved body image.

Seeking attention with lavish clothes, jewelry, fast and expensive cars is a way one may attempt to compensate for being ignored in a society that places unequal, undue value on young, attractive women. Furthermore, Mrs. Hardcore utilizes her agency in ways that she feels is giving her power, such as changing her body by exercising to extremes, dieting, and cosmetic surgery.

**Typifications**

My typifications and stocks of knowledge all contribute to how I view the other (women), placing myself at the heart of the inquiry. Therefore, second-order constructs are important in the discussion of this phenomenon as it is me, the phenomenologist, that is interpreting the women’s Lifeworlds. I cannot ignore
that my personality and my work with these women, as their trainer, are intricately involved in my discussion of this phenomenon. Furthermore, my influence on them may play a role in how they are actors in my Lifeworld and vice versa. As I take an intense approach to fitness (I train my body very hard) I understand that my attitudes about exercise may influence how my clients feel about it. However, although I train hard, I also recognize, and stress to my clients, the importance of a balanced lifestyle which includes self-care.

This protocol reflects a lack of self-care and is the epitome of the phenomenon of middle-aged women who endanger themselves exercising for body image:

I just finished training five people in the morning hours before 9:30 am when Paige and I were scheduled to train. It was a beautiful spring morning: a little chill and a little warmth in the air. The fragrance of fresh flowers wafted about my fitness studio as I needed to leave the door open to regulate the temperature. This day I was feeling dreamy and aloof; spring does that to me, yet I regained composure as Paige walked through the door.

I noticed she was moving in a way that made me think something was wrong with her knees. I confronted her, and she sheepishly confessed that her knees had been tender for a while! I told Paige that we should focus on more gentler, appropriate exercises until her pain subsided. However, she didn’t want to take my advice. She continued by jumping up and down on a box. That was a sure way to blow out her knees for good! I felt so angry that she would not listen to me because I could predict how this would go. She would hurt herself and not be able to be as active, and she was at the age that it might be hard to regain her excellent physical shape.

Another issue is that she could walk away and associate the injury with her training here with me at my studio! A responsible, educated trainer would never allow clients to move in a way that they know is risky. Her defiance infuriated me. Not because she didn’t listen to me as much as she was placing herself in a position of undue risk.

At the end of our session, Paige and I began to “debrief” (like I usually do with my clients) by discussing how the workout felt and taking the time to talk about whatever she wanted. This time was different. She started telling me that I should ask for expensive bags from men, not jewelry. I don’t ask for anything. I don’t live in that world where material things become the objects of pursuit and having expensive purses and jewelry gives me value. All that she said this day befuddled me. I felt sad for her. It seemed as if her life was full of expensive things yet very empty. However, listening to her confirmed that I don’t need those things to be happy and the flowers began to smell stronger to me, I could hear the birds chirping, the weather was warming. As she walked out of that door that day I knew in my gut that I would never see her again. Instead of feeling upset, I went right back to feeling dreamy.

(J. Decker, protocol, 2019)

These women’s desire for a younger body image may compel them to take exercise risks and seem to outweigh their perception of the negative consequences associated with those risks. The motivations can be examined from an embodied perspective, in that women’s experience of their bodies relative to the social world and their multiple realities are profound and a part of meaning-making. Additionally, as Dolezal (2015) argues, women’s fear of shame is a powerful driving
force that is capable of causing these women to jeopardize health and safety for an ideal body. Middle-aged women who endanger themselves in exercise may feel a sense of personal power by changing their bodies. Further, it appears that as some women age, they feel that jewelry and expensive things may compensate for their aging bodies, giving them the attention they had in their youth.

**Imposed Relevances**

Women are profoundly impacted by how people critique their bodies. Higher status jobs and higher earning potential are given to women who wear cosmetics, thereby indicating that women who are perceived as more attractive have better social standing (Mileva et al. 2016). Socially imposed *relevances* (Schütz/Luckmann 1973) are possible factors that drive some women to risk health and welfare while exercising or through other potentially risky body corrective measures, such as extreme dieting and cosmetic surgery. Schütz and Luckman (1973) argue that the actions of other people "place themes before the individual to which he must turn himself" (p. 190). Therefore, because a woman who is perceived as younger and more attractive will have more social possibilities, it is reasonable to assume that many women would desire to remain young and attractive.

The pressure to conform to contemporary body-image standards becomes a socially imposed relevance for these women. Their shift to maintain equilibrium between the pressure of body-image, the social implications of such, and the perceived power of obtaining an ideal body-image. However, this pursuit is futile. The perceived power is not real power because power comes from autonomy or the ability to do. It does not come from catering to an intellectually ignorant society – in the sense that in this society the way the body appears becomes more important than how it functions, and the somatic aspects that make us intelligent and compassionate beings. Furthermore, in this phenomenon, the effort put into exercise is the result of subservience to a patriarchal society rather than an act of autonomy and personal power.

**Between Lifeworlds and Deathworlds**

The women I am writing about all experience pressure to conceal their aging body in a patriarchal society. In pushing themselves during exercise, they feel a sense of personal power. It appears as if, to them, the risk of injury outweighs the consequences of abstaining from the exercise. This mentality is echoed by Dolezal (2015) when she states that “physical pain or discomfort is preferable to
shame,” which, in her example, includes the prospect of disfigurement and even death as a possibility of ambitious cosmetic surgery.

A complementary perspective is that these women become addicted to exercise. Spano (2001), taking an intrapsychic stance, conducted a study in which 210 research participants completed: the Trait Anxiety Scale of the State-Trait Anxiety Inventory, the Obsessive-Compulsive Personality Scale, the Narcissistic Personality Inventory, the Commitment to Exercise Scale, and the Frequency of Physical Activity Form. A simultaneous linear multiple regression analysis demonstrated that anxiety and obsessive-compulsive traits were correlated to exercise commitment. Spano (2001) found that given some individuals view their physical appearance as their societal worth, these individuals may be inclined to incorporate maladaptive behaviors, such as excessive exercise, which can lead to injury and social problems.

The notion of compulsive exercise, “characterized by a craving for physical training, resulting in uncontrollable excessive exercise behavior with harmful consequences, such as injuries and impaired social relations” has been recognized since the 1970s (Lichtenstein et al. 2017, p. 1). From a physiognomic perspective, body-image becomes a significant reason an individual can become addicted to exercise (Lichtenstein et al. 2017) due to the idea that what people see broadly impacts one’s social standing and quality of life.

Jee asserts that exercise addiction is similar to other addictions (2016, p.68). I argue that the act of risk, as well as various addictions, contributes to an individual’s Deathworld. The actor falls further into despair the more they try to conform to unrealistic, fleeting notions of what it means to have social value. It is this attitude that contributes to the idea of a Deathworld (Bentz et al. 2018) in that the actions of the actors are driven by social forces that are damaging, which are not a product of love and caring intentions. Moving from a healthy Lifeworld of balance and self-respect to endangering themselves in exercise for body-image, is an example of how these women migrate toward Deathworlds.

Connecting Worlds

Our society is filled with pressure and power. For some, these elements may lead to a Deathworld, and for others, it may be the beginning of a Lifeworld. The pressure that addicts feel to remain substance-free can mean the literal difference between life and death. Some populations may feel pressure to conform to society’s standards even if it means risking health and well-being. The societal pressure related to the image and presence of our body in the intersubjective world of other
bodies is associated with various types of pressures, which may be dangerous to health and well-being in its goals, ultimately leading to bodily harm or death.

Society does not typically view addiction as a disease. A common misconception is that addiction is a moral weakness, or powerlessness, by those who lack education on the topic, or perhaps by those who have deep scars from an addicted loved one. It is true that in the addict’s Deathworld, we are weakened due to the power and pressure of the addiction, but I have learned, through the physical transformation through recovery, we find power in the pressure that is both physical and mental.

In the case of middle-aged women, they are not the only population that may risk health and welfare to achieve the ideal body image. This group of women experiences body changes that have a profound impact on their social relevance. The pressure that they feel to conform to body image standards may have a unique impact on their actions. A transformation of thought, one in which they put their well-being first, would allow these women to move from a Deathworld to a Lifeworld. Although they may have a perceived power from exercising to extremes, it is a fallacy because their actions are a product of others’ desires. However, the power and pressure, whether internal or external, which may be experienced through exercise can give all of these populations strength and an improved body-image, outside of societal norms, to not only break stigmas but to live in good health.

Sometimes compliance with standards does not result from social pressure, but from the pressure of a specific reality. The scientific world is filled with pressure, both external and internal, which scientists impose on themselves. Focusing on their own careers, functioning in a world of pressure focused on achievements, they forget about the benefits of cooperation. Paradoxically, entering the world of yoga, which directs the gaze on oneself, allows you to notice more around you and to stay open to others. Yoga relieves us of the pressure to be the best in comparison to others and allows us to be the best on our own.

In all of these examples, we notice the enormous power of pressure which forces people to improve their body, mind, or both. On the other hand, in society, there is pressure on power, again both power of mind and power of the body. Pressure seems to have more oppressive consequences, just as power is more motivating. By connecting deeply to our inner selves through physical activity we can transform and turn this negative pressure into a power that moves us from Deathworlds to Lifeworlds. Otherwise, without deep contact, our inner strength will come only from external pressure. This pressure condemns us to remain in our Deathworlds and interferes with our internal transformation, leaving only the transformation of the body for consolation.
References


Abstract: Darlene (wife of a United States veteran) and Michelle (mother of a United States soldier) shared their experiences of military culture as participants in a research project focused on collaboration between strangers. Using the process of phenomenological writing, these two women explore their worlds to gain an understanding of their current Lifeworlds. Darlene’s world is infused with her husband’s Deathworld through his depression and suicidal ideations. Michelle’s world becomes consumed by her son’s deployment to the war zone of Afghanistan. Through numerous digital/video conference calls, their lives began to change and transcend the difficulties faced. Understanding and a return to an acceptable Lifeworld (infused with Deathworld) have been the outcomes of this collaboration.

The purpose of this writing is to explore two phenomena: the lived experiences of two members of the military community and the collaboration between these two “strangers.” Both women belong to military families; one as a spouse and one as a mom. Darlene searches inward when faced with her husband’s depression, suicide attempt, and health issues. Her husband was an E-5 in the U.S. Army, he has been a veteran for over 15 years and he still struggles with life in the civilian world. Darlene continues to wrestle with his Deathworld that permeates her everyday Lifeworld. Michelle’s phenomenon is of a mom whose son, Carl, joins the Army at 25. Carl is, at the time of this writing, an active duty medic. Michelle explores the changes that occurred when she incorporated the military into her schema of being Mom. The addition of “a soldier” to the “mom” identity brought a Blind Fear into her experiences as a mom.

Keywords: Lifeworld, Deathworld, military families, warrior, depression, suicide, collaboration, phenomenological writing

Phenomenology and Phenomenological Writing

Phenomenological research has its roots in the works of Edmund Husserl. Phenomenology involves the study of the Lifeworld and brings real understanding by “actually doing it.” Studying through phenomenology, learning what people