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Reflections on promoting physical activity and the fitness industry: Conference report for

Elevate 2017, 10th to 11th May, ExCeL, London

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Reflections on promoting physical activity and the fitness industry: Conference report for  
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Professor Nanette Mutrie, interviewed here in SEPR, regretted that “commercial fitness has missed (or perhaps dismissed) the discipline of exercise psychology within its business” (2014, p.77). I share these concerns, so a flyer from the BPS took my interest, inviting DSEP members to the UK fitness industry’s annual convention: Elevate 2017. Not just a trade show, Elevate is an opportunity to hear about physical activity promotion from 200 speakers, with no registration fee. By advertising to DSEP members, the organisers clearly wanted psychologists to attend. What follows are my personal experiences and reflections on those two days.

The event attracted 4200 delegates to the ExCeL, in the hall which hosted boxing at the London 2012 Olympic Games. A trade show featured companies, organisations and their products, while a corridor of seminar rooms stretched along the old dock. The trade show also gave an opportunity to speak to workers in the fitness industry, find out how/whether it draws on psychology, and identify opportunities for psychology in an industry with which I was unfamiliar.

Four streams of seminars ran in parallel: *Physical Activity for Health, Inclusivity: Creating an Active Nation, Future Performance* and *Business of Physical Activity*. The organisers chose all the speakers; this was not a conference with open submissions. Within each stream, each 75-minute seminar had a theme (e.g. “Addressing the Least Active: Understanding Motivations, Attitudes and Lifestyles”) and featured four presentations, often with a panel discussion afterward. There were no plenary sessions.

Seminar presentations ranged widely, reminding me that promoting physical activity needs several disciplines and professions to work together. I was reminded of the COM-B model (Michie, van Stralen & West, 2011), where opportunity, capability and motivation are all needed for behaviour. Physical activity promotion can target any or all of these, and I heard many examples from the public sector, private sector, charities and researchers. A few speakers were psychologists, such as Marc Jones (responding under stress in high-performance teams) and Paul Chadwick (influences on behaviour using the COM-B model). A few speakers with a non-psychology background drew from mindfulness, self-determination theory, or connected physical activity to mental health. However nearly every speaker, regardless of background, invoked psychological ideas such as “motivation” and “inspiration”. I was struck by how many speakers without a psychology background bandied these concepts about in a way that was seemingly based on common sense rather than psychology.

At the trade show, some stalls showcased equipment or interiors for exercise facilities. Many others focused on IT systems, often collecting data from exercisers (e.g. heart rate, distance, calories etc.) and feeding it back to them: “Big data” was the zeitgeist. Much marketing material claimed the effect of using such data was “motivating” and “inspiring”, but these terms seemed only used in a common-sense way that was disconnected from any psychological understanding or theory. Many of these systems could be seen as using behaviour change techniques of goal setting, feedback and self-monitoring, yet there seemed little use of relevant psychological knowledge here. However perhaps it had been drawn upon in product development, unknown to the staff I spoke to. A few stalls represented companies which train personal trainers; I discovered only small components of psychology in the training, but sensed interest in adding more, although staff at the stalls worked mainly in sales rather than product

development. A few stalls represented organizations or charities promoting physical activity. One stood out – that of Diabetes UK – because the app it promoted explicitly used psychological principles such as self-efficacy to increase physical activity.

### **Psychology and the Fitness Industry: Reflections**

However, like Nanette Mutrie in her interview, I left regretting psychology's low profile in the fitness industry. In many products and services at the event, it seemed that psychology could play a role — but I saw little sign that currently it does. Although it was clear that the financial bottom line was paramount (as in any commercial enterprise), everyone I met was passionate about physical activity and open to anything – including psychology – that would promote it. However awareness about psychology's application to exercise was often low.

A psychologist might argue that the fitness industry has ignored psychology, and suffers from the myth that it is just common sense. Yet a non-psychologist would probably struggle to access much of our science from subscription-based journals, and to understand the technical language used. They would find few books that digest the science for non-psychologists, apart from a few university textbooks. They would struggle to find training in the psychology of exercise unless they took a university degree. They might find it difficult to get a psychologist to help them an affordable price and on a regular basis, especially when profit margins are tight.

As psychologists, perhaps how we offer our knowledge and services could better fit the needs and the structure of this commercial industry. Occupational psychology and consumer psychology have been more successful at working with industry and may have much to teach us. In his famous speech as APA president, George Miller (1969) argued that we need to “give psychology away” by teaching non-psychologists to use psychological principles in their work: “Our scientific results will have to be instilled in the public consciousness in a practical and

usable form so that what we know can be applied by ordinary people” (p.1070). What if the fitness industry could work in a more psychologically-informed way? There is much to gain by trying. Delegates were told that the fitness industry has 10 million UK subscribers and is growing. With its large-scale marketing, staff, facilities and online infrastructure, it can reach more people than any psychologist. Millions might benefit if we could provide psychological knowledge to the fitness industry in a practical and useable form.

I recommend Elevate to any psychologist, trainee or student interested in exercise. Human motivation and self-regulation are key ingredients in increasing physical activity. The population – and psychologists – could have much to gain if we represent our science and practice at these events.

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