Creating Inclusive Physical Activity Spaces: The Case of Body-Positive Yoga

Andrew C. Pickett & George B. Cunningham

To cite this article: Andrew C. Pickett & George B. Cunningham (2017) Creating Inclusive Physical Activity Spaces: The Case of Body-Positive Yoga, Research Quarterly for Exercise and Sport, 88:3, 329-338, DOI: 10.1080/02701367.2017.1335851

To link to this article: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/02701367.2017.1335851

Published online: 21 Jun 2017.

Article views: 46

View related articles

View Crossmark data
Creating Inclusive Physical Activity Spaces: The Case of Body-Positive Yoga

Andrew C. Pickett and George B. Cunningham

1University of South Dakota; 2Texas A&M University

ABSTRACT

Purpose: Within the modern cultural climate, those in larger bodies face high levels of weight stigma, particularly in sport and physical activity spaces, which serves as a strong barrier to their participation. However, given the strong link between physical activity and general health and well-being for participants, it is important to explore strategies that encourage participation of these individuals. Thus, the current research examined strategies that physical activity instructors use to develop inclusive exercise spaces for all body sizes. Method: This study employed a series of semistructured qualitative interviews (n = 9) with instructors of body-inclusive yoga classes to explore the ways in which they encourage participation for those in larger bodies. Results: Emergent themes from the current study suggested support for six factors for creating body-inclusive physical activity spaces: authentic leadership, a culture of inclusion, a focus on health, inclusive language, leader social activism, and a sense of community. Conclusion: This study revealed that leaders must intentionally cultivate inclusion in their spaces to encourage those in nonconforming bodies to participate. These findings have important health and management implications for the sport and physical activity context and provide a basic outline of practical strategies that practitioners can use to foster inclusion in their spaces.

Body-weight stigma, in which individuals are harassed for, relegated to lower social status because of, and face discrimination due to high levels of body fat, remains prevalent in modern culture (Puhl & Brownell, 2006). In the context of this societal hostility toward fatness, the weight-loss industry has thrived and perpetuated a message promoting “thinness at all costs” (Bacon, 2010). Those in larger bodies are perceived to be stupid, lazy, lacking self-control, and necessarily unhappy (e.g., Davison & Birch, 2004). These assumptions are particularly salient in the physical activity (PA) context, in which fat individuals are perceived as beginners or as incapable (Cardinal, Whitney, Narimatsu, Hubert, & Souza, 2014). Importantly, we note that in this article, the use of the term “fat” is consistent with fat studies literature and is not meant in a derogatory manner. Instead, fat studies literature advocates the use of this term as a neutral descriptor, similar to other descriptors such as “tall” and “short” (see Wann, 2009). Given the beliefs we have outlined, associating fatness with a number of negative traits, those in larger bodies often avoid PA entirely (Vartanian & Shaprow, 2008).

These beliefs about fatness are troubling for those involved in the delivery of PA. Zeigler (2007) noted that the purpose and scope of sport and PA management “should relate to sport and physical activity involvement for all people of all ages, be they normal, accelerated, or special in status” (emphasis added) (p. 298). Similarly, Cunningham (2014) argued that sport and PA scholars must engage in collective action to encourage inclusive and socially just spaces. As such, sport management must concern itself with practical strategies to improve access to PA, as it offers positive health and wellness outcomes to participants as well as economic opportunities for organizations (Pickett & Cunningham, 2017).

Regular participation in sport and PA has a number of physical health benefits (e.g., reduced disease risk, general cardiovascular health) and psychological benefits (e.g., improved mood, reduced risk for depression) for persons of all body types (see, for overviews, Blair & Brodney, 1999; Prakash, Voss, Erickson, & Kramer, 2015). For this reason, it is often recommended that individuals participate in as much PA as is safely and logistically possible. From an organizational standpoint, a first-mover advantage for firms that engage those in larger bodies should be noted, as fat individuals are a numerical majority in many Western cultures (Cunningham & Woods, 2011; Kerin, Varadarajan, & Peterson, 1992). That is, organizations able to engage a
more diverse set of bodies can position themselves to benefit from early access to an underserved market segment.

Unfortunately, the current model for PA is not conducive to participation for those in (or perceiving themselves to be in) larger bodies. Drawing from the work of Pickett and Cunningham (2017), we examined strategies used by organizations already seeking to create body-inclusive PA, particularly in the context of yoga. To do so, we conducted a series of qualitative, semistructured interviews with yoga instructors and facility owners who intentionally and explicitly build body inclusion into their business models. Therefore, this work is situated within a larger conversation surrounding fat acceptance in society at large (Cameron & Russell, 2016; Lupton, 2012; Murray, 2008) and in PA spaces (Duncan, 2008; Sykes & McPhail, 2008). Similar to the arguments of Health At Every Size scholars (e.g., Bacon, 2010), we argue that individuals of all body types can realize the benefits of PA participation and social acceptance. We suggest that stigmatizing practices against fat bodies in exercise or fitness spaces are counterproductive and therefore advocate a model of inclusive PA.

**Theoretical framework**

**Body-weight stigma and PA participation**

Participating in sport and PA requires a capital investment of time, money, and effort (physical and psychological) for everyone; however, for those in larger bodies, these costs can be particularly high. That is, the psychological costs to participate are much higher for fat individuals—a byproduct of strong body-weight stigma. Weight stigma can and does result in a number of negative health-related outcomes, including poor self-concept and psychological well-being, unhealthy dieting and eating behaviors, and PA avoidance (Puhl & Brownell, 2006; Vartanian & Novak, 2011).

In the current research, it is important to note that body-weight stigma is heightened in the sport and PA context. Sport and fitness organizations often project messages of body exclusivity that can be intimidating or insulting to those in larger bodies. For example, sport organizations often feature only thin or muscular bodies in their advertising or in artwork on their walls. The not-so-subtle subtext of these messages shows would-be participants what types of bodies are valued in these spaces and, accordingly, which types of bodies are not. As additional examples, fitness professionals and physical education teachers display antifat biases as they prefer to work with thin clients and students (Dimmock, Hallett, & Grove, 2009; Greenleaf & Weil, 2005). Further, exclusive hiring practices mean that staff in these facilities rarely deviate from the thin ideal (Sartore & Cunningham, 2007) and often exhibit antifat biases themselves (Cardinal et al., 2014). Thus, many individuals actively avoid PA in public spaces altogether as a means of also avoiding the stigma and shame attached to being fat in a fitness space (Vartanian & Shaprow, 2008).

**Strategies for inclusion in sport and PA**

In previous work, Pickett and Cunningham (2017) outlined a model that included six strategies for the creation of body weight-inclusive PA spaces, which we adopted as the theoretical framework for the current research. In this section, we provide a brief outline of their six factors of body-weight inclusion in sport and PA.

**Cultural commitment to inclusion**

Diversity-related initiatives require a strong cultural commitment within an organization to be effective (Cunningham & Singer, 2009). That is, organizations seeking to engage a diverse range of bodies must create an ethos of inclusion throughout (Kasser & Lytle, 2013). Staff members who consistently ensure that discriminatory or prejudicial actions do not occur in a PA space are crucial to creating this culture, as they regularly reinforce norms and standards (Bedini, 2000). Having a known and understood culture of body inclusion, we argue, is important in creating spaces that engage participants in larger bodies.

**Leadership commitment to inclusion**

Leaders are crucial in developing a culture of inclusion as they dictate norms and expectations (Doherty & Chelladurai, 1999). PA leaders who mandate body-weight inclusion are particularly important given strong antifat biases that often exist in these spaces. Leaders dictate the importance of inclusion and respect in two ways: explicitly stating these beliefs and modeling inclusive behaviors (Boekhorst, 2015). Given the particularly strong antifat biases of sport and fitness spaces, strong models in the form of organizational leaders become increasingly important to developing inclusive culture.

**Physical spaces**

Further, certain modifications to the physical space could be important in encouraging body inclusivity. For those in larger bodies, it may include modifications to equipment and exercise spaces (e.g., larger
treadmills, removal of mirrors and windows). Removing physical barriers to participation is effective in creating more inclusive spaces for those with disabilities (Dunn & Moore, 2005), and it would also apply to those in larger bodies.

Language
Whether intentional or not, divisive and demeaning language produces feelings of shame and marginalization. Therefore, careful consideration of words and phrases used in a PA space is important in developing a safe and welcoming environment. Language is particularly problematic when discussing issues of weight, given that medically accepted terminology reinforces antifat biases (Wann, 2009). As an example, the term “overweight” creates an arbitrary standard of weight for all bodies, which may or may not be appropriate for an individual. Further, the term “obese,” in its original Latin, refers to the act of eating, despite the fact that body weight and composition are related to a number of factors, apart from individuals’ dietary choices. Thus, inclusive spaces would also seek to create a more body weight-neutral language that is not demeaning or derisive.

Sense of community
A felt sense of community, developed through participation and acceptance in a particular setting, is important in combating stigma and improving one’s self-concept (Crocker & Major, 1989). Interestingly, sport and PA are often charged with the creation of community among spectators and participants (Warner & Dixon, 2011). Unfortunately, these communities are not currently welcoming to all, particularly those in larger bodies. Therefore, it is important to encourage community for a wider range of individuals.

Personal autonomy
It is also important for individuals to take an active role in creating their own inclusive environments in which to engage in PA. Drawing from self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985), we argue that individuals must have an interest in the activity, be confident in their ability to participate, and perceive a value in the activity to maximize the positive outcomes. As such, fat individuals should be able to have input in structures that would engage them best. By presenting individuals with an ownership stake in their participation, organizations can better serve them and develop participant investment.

The benefits of inclusive spaces are increasingly well documented and recognized—a trend that extends to PA (Cunningham, 2014). Therefore, we sought to examine the ways in which body weight-inclusive spaces are created and maintained. Given that the current landscape does not adequately address issues of stigma that preclude participation by those in larger bodies, we explored the ways in which leaders use each of the model’s factors to create inclusive spaces.

We first searched for PA spaces that explicitly encouraged body diversity. Although there are a number of individual sport and PA spaces that advocate for body acceptance (e.g., roller derby, certain dance facilities), they are relatively rare. However, we found a growing, organized movement advocating body acceptance and “activity for all” in the context of yoga (Klein & Koubas, 2014). Within this movement, yoga studios and instructors are working to develop PA outlets expressly designed to welcome those in nonconforming bodies, including larger bodies. Thus, these facilities served as an ideal research setting, as they explicitly attempt to increase body diversity and inclusion as part of their business model. Drawing from the model outlined earlier, we put forth the following research questions (RQs) examining the ways in which body-inclusive yoga studios approach inclusion:

In what ways are aspects of cultural commitment to inclusion (RQ1), leadership commitment to inclusion (RQ2), physical spaces (RQ3), language (RQ4), sense of community (RQ5), and personal autonomy (RQ6) used to create body-inclusive spaces?

Method
The current study was designed to explore the development of body-inclusive yoga spaces. We chose to employ a qualitative method as a means of exploring the complex intersections of body, inclusion, and PA. Therefore, we conducted a series of semistructured phone interviews with leaders and instructors of body-positive yoga classes and programs. The interviews were collected during a 2-month period and lasted 39 min to 98 min. Interviews roughly followed an interview guide while allowing participants to deviate from the original questions where they saw necessary. Our sample (N = 9) was purposefully chosen based on their positions in developing body-inclusive yoga spaces. The sample was intentionally diverse, with instructors from several cities across Canada and the United States, ranging in age from 30 to 65 years old, and of multiple racial backgrounds (see Table 1). Our sample was nearly all women. However, in the North American yoga community, most participants are women; thus, our sample was more representative of the wider context (Saper, Eisenberg, Davis, Culpepper, & Phillips, 2003). This research was approved by the
institutional review board, and all participants provided informed consent. Further, pseudonyms were not used in the current study at the request of participants; this decision is further discussed in the research findings.

We aimed to improve the reliability and credibility of the interview findings in several ways (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Interview recordings were transcribed verbatim, and the first author undertook a process of open, axial, and selective coding, from which general themes were developed. Within the first iteration, 25 first-order codes were identified. These codes were then mapped on to the theoretically defined factors. Additional themes were developed for codes that did not fit the existing model.

Table 2 outlines themes, first-order codes, and representative quotations. After initial coding, participants were contacted for follow-up member checking, in which they were asked about accuracy of transcription and intention of their meaning within the context of the themes. The first author then discussed the themes and confirmed them with the second author.

Following the recommendations of Creswell (1998), our interview data were also triangulated through multiple sources. First, immediately following each interview, the first author wrote initial thoughts into a reflexive journal. Journal entries were reviewed during the coding process as a way of reflecting on the first author’s thoughts and perspectives. Further, the researchers were granted access to multiple private social media spaces developed for participants in body-inclusive yoga spaces to interact online. By monitoring these spaces during a series of months, we were able to observe the interactions of participants. During these observations, the researcher kept reflexive journal notes as well.

## Results and discussion

This study examined issues of body weight in PA, with particular regard to the strategies used to combat stigma and create more inclusive spaces. In this section, we outline the ways in which the fitness professionals who served as participants in this study worked to reduce stigma, within the six-factor framework previously outlined, and we then discuss two emergent themes.

### Cultural commitment to inclusion

RQ1 examined the creation of a culture committed to inclusion. Each participant acknowledged an organizational culture of inclusion, lending support to its necessity in engaging those in larger bodies. Anna, for example, discussed the variety of bodies that were often present in her classes:

> From Day 1, I was kind of surprised at Curvy Yoga when I would see thinner people in class. At first, I thought, ‘Did these people go to the wrong class?’ What I’ve heard from them is that bigger bodied people aren’t the only people made to feel alienated from their bodies or that their body isn’t good enough. So we have all kinds of bodies.

Many participants noted the importance of seeing diverse bodies in choosing to first try a class and in continuing to return. Dianne, who is a woman of color and in a larger body, noted:

> Students have told me that when they walk in the door, they found the space very welcoming. I think what’s really incredible for people is when they step in and they see me behind the front desk or the other teachers in our studio that represent more of what you actually see out in the world. They feel a lot more comfortable.

Although there is often an element of surprise for individuals when seeing the staff for the first time, she said in many cases, seeing instructors of varying body types, ages, and abilities made the space less intimidating. Many of our participants echoed the notion that simply being in the space in a nonstereotypical body sent a profound message. Anna noted that seeing larger bodies move in class was important for those who are new to yoga or PA. Her physical demonstrations offered students a different understanding than those...
Table 2. Themes, codes, and quotations.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>General themes</th>
<th>First-order codes</th>
<th>Representative quotations</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Cultural Commitment to Inclusion</strong></td>
<td>Celebrating Body Diversity</td>
<td>“Our bodies are different, and they’re different for a reason, and it’s good to celebrate that difference. I was so blessed in a school class that I recently taught to have a girl with physical disabilities. I asked her to share some of her favorite poses—they may have looked different in her body, but we were able to make connections.” – Dianne</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Physical Presence of Fat</td>
<td>“People are more willing to try things when they see that I can do it. That’s the upside—is when people will move out of their comfort zones when they see that my body can do it and maybe theirs can too.” – Kimberly</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Standard Setting</td>
<td>“I have never seen cliques really in my space, and I think it’s because we set standards right off the bat. People here know how it is, whereas when I’ve gone elsewhere and I see that there are cliques, it’s to the exclusion of people who are not.” – Dianne</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Authentic Leadership</td>
<td>“I think [inclusion] happens when a teacher is intentional about it. I’ve seen it at, for example, CrossFit—where there is a heavy influence on community. Or the opposite when you walk into a gym class and its silent, just waiting for the teacher to show up, with nobody to welcome you.” – Amber</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Being More Than a Fitness Teacher</td>
<td>“I don’t have a sense of, ‘What do I contribute as a fitness instructor?’ In terms of what kind of workout I can give people. I have a sense of what I contribute as a human being and as [a] model of a person that brings a reasonable engagement with the body—in any condition. That is something really important.” – Kimberly</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Language</strong></td>
<td>Hierarchies</td>
<td>“I’m now a whole lot more interested in disrupting the hierarchy of bodies. That’s part of what I offer when I teach—the notion there’s not a wrong or less valuable way to have a body.” – Kimberly</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Marketing Messages</td>
<td>“When I put out my marketing, I make sure that I’m on the forefront of all of it and I choose to do poses that are accessible. I can do some of those acrobatic poses, but I don’t feature them because I want people to feel like this is accessible to them.” – Dianne</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“Full Expression of the Pose”</td>
<td>“I’ve absolutely gotten rid of the ‘full expression of the pose.’ I used to say that, but you could see people start to feel defeated when they couldn’t do something and morph into the cover model of YogaJournal. Instead, I don’t say ‘full.’ I tell people to get into ‘your expression of the pose.’” – Dianne</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Nonaccusatory</td>
<td>“When you say things like, ‘if you need a block,’ that assumes failure. More appropriately, let’s normalize the use of the block, show everybody the use of the block, and then use language like, ‘[L]et’s bring the floor up closer to us.’” – Elen</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Agency</td>
<td>“I offer suggestions and then let the student make their own adjustments. Letting them see what things feel like in their own body puts the agency back into their hands.” – Amber</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Removing Assumptions</td>
<td>“It starts with the very first question which I like to ask—Tell me about your experience with yoga.” So, not making the assumption based on looks, or whatever, but giving people the space to say they’re new, or they aren’t.” – Anna</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Sense of Community</strong></td>
<td>Fostering Interaction</td>
<td>“The students will talk back and forth. Like one of my students, he’s a hairdresser and doing a fashion show at the local art park. We all have a conversation about it and people sort of get to celebrate what’s going on in each other’s lives.” – Amber</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Social Spaces</td>
<td>“When you are consciously creating a space to be yourselves and meet their needs, it makes space more for community too. Creating places and ways for people to connect with each other.” – Anna</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Building Relationships</td>
<td>“Teaching yoga to those that have not necessarily felt welcomed is about building relationships and trust right from the get-go. It’s a grassroots thing about relationships and respect.” – Elen</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Permission to Be One’s Authentic Self</td>
<td>“I just encourage people to be in their space, on their mat, and to do what it is that feels good to them. I give people permission to be who they are—and I think that’s important because we don’t always get that in everyday life.” – Dianne</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Advocacy</strong></td>
<td>Feminism</td>
<td>“Feminist ideology allowed me to examine all of the media images around me, enforcing a one-dimensional standard of beauty. It helped me realize that maybe there wasn’t something wrong with me, but with the ideology of the dominant culture.” – Melanie</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Social Class</td>
<td>“I think one reason that it’s been successful is because I don’t charge very much money. People need it to be available to them and that’s one thing I can do. We don’t turn anyone away; we’ve started a scholarship fund that people donate to.” – Elen</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Activism</td>
<td>“If I’m given the opportunity to give historical context or to create equality, I’m sure as hell going to do it. I’m going to engage people however I can, and my philosophy is, I’m here to rock the boat as hard as I can.” – Dianne</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Focus on Health</strong></td>
<td>Fit Versus Fat</td>
<td>“I was still very active and fit, fat obviously, but that turned me off to places when they would treat me too delicately and assume that you can’t do anything” – Dianne</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Health At Every Size</td>
<td>“I definitely subscribe to Health At Every Size. Everyone’s health is individual, and that’s another tie-in for me. People can figure out what is right for them. So, I ask people to tune into their bodies and figure out what works for them.” – Anna</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Body Acceptance</td>
<td>“I’ve found that there are so many people, of every shape and size who are hungry for yoga classes that are body-affirming. Bigger people aren’t the only ones that are told that their body isn’t good enough.” – Anna</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Presented in the popular press. Thus, subtle cues created by the presence of more diverse staff and participants reinforced a culture of inclusion.

By creating standards and norms that celebrate a variety of bodies, our participants were able to cultivate a culture of inclusion. Cultivating this culture is important, as it has been argued that a culture of inclusion and commitment to diversity is necessary to realizing the benefits thereof (Cunningham, 2015b). As our participants engaged a number of body types and ability
levels, they subtly were reinforcing norms of value and respect for all that were powerful in welcoming and maintaining relationships with students.

**Authentic leadership**

In many ways, a culture of inclusion is built by the students and bodies present and the space itself. However, leadership support for diversity is crucial to developing inclusion (Cunningham & Singer, 2009). Therefore, RQ2 examined the ways in which leadership was important to creating body-inclusive spaces.

Authentic leadership was a strong theme in our data, as participants outlined a common leadership style, in which they engaged their students in an intentionally honest way and sought to empower individuals in their own wellness. Luthans, Norman, and Hughes (2006) noted that authentic leaders are defined by a commitment to owning and expressing one’s true self while in leadership positions. Participants from the current study acknowledged authenticity as crucial to creating a trust that would transcend traditional barriers in PA.

Many instructors noted that by acknowledging there are poses they themselves cannot or will not do and acknowledging their own body nonconformity among yoga teachers, they were able to connect with students in a deeper way. Kimberly, for example, discussed the ways in which her practice and teaching have changed in a deeper way. Kimberly, for example, discussed the ways in which her practice and teaching have changed due to aging and osteoarthritis. She noted that feeling pain or physical limitations she previously had not experienced made her better able to connect with certain students experiencing limitations. She recalled thinking, “Holy moly! A whole lot of my own experiences in my body were translatable to my students!”

Shaely discussed her early struggles in teaching, particularly with her own reservations about her body and societal expectations of what a yoga instructor should look like. “I often felt like when I was teaching I was trying to hold something in—like my stomach—or trying to make my butt appear less curvy in weird ways, which is very stressful.” Over time, as she began teaching a Yoga for Round Bodies course, her feelings began to change. She said, “When I taught that class, I really felt like I saw a bit of myself in all of these women who were showing up.” She further discussed how these connections made her a better and more authentic teacher who no longer felt the need to hide her own body.

**Physical spaces**

(RQ3 examined modification to physical spaces to create welcoming environments. Some instructors discussed minor changes, such as removing mirrors, but this theme was not salient. However, while some instructors noted cosmetic changes to the physical spaces, they also noted that major renovations were not necessary to create inclusive spaces. That is, many participants felt that other efforts were more important in fostering inclusion and therefore had not engaged in such modifications to their spaces. Thus, the current work did not support the idea of large-scale alterations to a physical space as necessary to fostering inclusion.

**Language**

The next research question (RQ4) asked about the importance of language in developing body-inclusive PA spaces. Each participant noted the ways in which language can either stigmatize or empower individuals in a fitness setting, as many had experienced prejudicial or demeaning language themselves. In response, participants often noted the need for more inclusive and accurate language in PA. Kimberly explained that many commonly used terms create hierarchies of worth for bodies. As an example, she explained the problem of creating “beginner” and “advanced” dichotomies with regard to certain movements in yoga:

Everything that is considered ‘beginner’ is correlated with ‘less than,’ and there’s this idea that you should start as a beginner and then progress. And yet, there are loads of people that should always be doing a pose a certain way—because of the body. It has nothing to do with being new to the practice—they’ve been doing that pose for 20 years, it works, and that’s how they should do it. So much of this stuff, these language choices, are rife with cultural baggage. There’s so much potential shame and stigma that go along with doing something for 20 years and still being a ‘beginner’ at it.

This recognition of hierarchical language and an intentional avoidance of it was a common theme among participants.

Conversely, Melanie noted the need for explicit language designed to challenge the assumptions that yoga is exclusively for thin, flexible bodies. For example, she described merchandise, such as T-shirts that say, “This is what a yogi looks like,” which she encourages people of all sizes to wear. Michael noted he includes a reference to the fat body type in his business’s name, Buddha Body Yoga, to explicitly make it known that those in larger bodies are welcome. Therefore, there was an explicit and intentional effort to convey inclusion in marketing efforts.

Our participants were careful in crafting language in their teaching and marketing to encourage inclusion. Signaling theory supports the notion that potential customers use cues given by an organization or individual to
evaluate the organization’s values (Connelly, Certo, Ireland, & Reutzel, 2011). Making their inclusive aims explicitly known was important in attracting those who are marginalized in mainstream fitness organizations. For our participants, it was important to use language that would regularly reinforce inclusion as part of their business model and as the core of their organizations.

**Sense of community**

In support of RQ5, participants stressed the importance of community building in creating inclusive spaces. Anna said:

I think community is really important. When you are conscious about creating a space where people are encouraged to be their authentic selves and meet their needs, it helps create community. Decreasing that feeling of being alone is so powerful. And really, so many of the people that seek out Curvy Yoga, or any other place, are looking for a way to connect. So I think it’s important to be as welcoming and supportive as possible.

She outlined a number of ways in which she worked to build community in her classes, which included introducing herself to new members and connecting them with other students, encouraging communication during class, providing physical space for interaction, and investing time into knowing students on a deeper level.

Michael characterized sense of community as “a chance for people to step outside of their own lives, to meet each other in another room, to see each other, to teach each other, to support each other, and then go back to their lives.” In that way, he noted that people were building social ties with each other that would encourage growth. Gwen had several strategies that she used as well to build community in her classes. She, for example, also eschewed the notion of silence in the classroom and encouraged students to interact with each other before, during, and after a session. She also encouraged students to ask questions throughout the class and reinforced that class should be a safe space in which participants are honest and seek knowledge together. Finally, she noted that community was important to the overall satisfaction and adherence of individuals. Amber summed up her notions of community by saying, “I think it speaks to our basic human need, in our gut, to belong. I try to build rapport and get to know students and build community so that they can belong.”

**Personal autonomy**

Our final strategy for engagement (RQ6) was an element of personal autonomy, in which individuals would have more power and influence over their experiences in inclusive spaces. Although some participants discussed empowerment, it was not a consistent theme across our interviews. Therefore, there was not sufficient evidence in the current data to support it as an important strategy.

The semistructured method we employed allowed for some deviation from the interview guide and allowed participants to share more of their experiences. Outside of our theorized strategies, two further themes were evident: social advocacy and a health focus, discussed next.

**Social advocacy**

An interesting theme developed around the notion of social justice advocacy. It was evident from the outset, in that no participant who was contacted chose to remain anonymous in the current study; in fact, the study protocol was altered, at the request of several early participants, to allow real names to be used. Kimberly articulated this sentiment by saying:

I would prefer that my comments not be anonymous. It is a big part of my life and my work to talk openly about these topics. I want to make sure that there is a face on these stigmatizing circumstances because they’re not individual and a big part of the problem is that people are ashamed to speak openly about these things.

In a similar manner, each of the other participants chose to waive the option of confidentiality.

Many of the participants were also social justice advocates for issues outside of body weight and used their work in yoga to advance these issues as well. For example, Elen offers many of her classes at a discounted price in a poorer neighborhood of her city, despite her full-price retreats selling out shortly after being made available. Recognizing that some students cannot afford even a reduced rate, she created a scholarship fund for those in her studio struggling with costs. She said:

People kept telling me, ‘I’d like to try yoga but … ’ ‘I’m too fat’ or ‘I’m not flexible enough’ or ‘I have a disability’ or ‘I can’t afford it’ or ‘I don’t have the fancy
clothes’ or fill in the blank here. People weren’t feeling welcome. There are a lot of people that can’t afford $20 a class, or even $10. Yoga is still for them. Yoga wasn’t started by White people in $90 stretch pants. For yoga to be inaccessible is kind of ridiculous to me.

Similarly, Cunningham (2015a) noted that in sport settings, leaders’ advocacy for participants related to inclusion. In particular, he noted that leaders’ support for sexual and gender minorities in their organizations helped foster inclusion. That is, a leader’s defense of marginalized others leads followers to feel safe and welcome, particularly when they have one or more marginalized identities. Therefore, as leaders engage in greater levels of advocacy for others, they help model and reinforce a culture of inclusion (Avery, 2011). Interestingly, perceptions of leaders as advocates tend to transcend a single context. That is, leaders who are seen as advocates for one group (e.g., sexual minorities) are also seen as advocates for others (e.g., fatness) as well. It was, therefore, important for the creation of an inclusive space to have a visible presence of advocacy, in which leadership would empower and protect participants.

**Focus on health**

Another recurring theme was an explicit focus on healthful movement, rather than a practice to lose weight. Many participants articulated lifelong struggles with body image and a desire to help others move past it and focus on health. Anna suggested the downfalls of weight-loss focus by saying, “I think when people are coming at it from a place of trying to change their bodies because their body is wrong, that can only drive [them] for so long.” Elen also noted the importance of a focus on health as well:

> There are so many yoga studios churning out instructors with a thinness focus, not doing yoga for holistic wellness— and that’s what we’re up against every single day. We’re not about six-pack abs. We’re not about what you’re going to look like in your swimsuit. [The thinness focus] is not reality. It isn’t accessible.

Consistent with others, each of our participants noted that cultural biases against fat individuals, particularly in fitness spaces, remain a strong barrier to participation (Vartanian & Novak, 2011). Thus, participants combatted stigma by adopting a health-based model of PA, where discussions of weight loss or dieting were not allowed. Conversely, discussions of feeling healthy and comfortable in one’s own body were encouraged. This finding is supported by Cunningham and Woods (2011), who found that a wellness focus, rather than an appearance focus, was related to a more positive evaluation and interest in joining a fitness club.

**Limitations and future research**

As with all research, the current study contained a number of limitations that may limit the transferability of our findings. First, the study used a small, nonrandom sample in a single activity. Future research should seek to expand outside of yoga to other body-inclusive sport and PA spaces. Further, the current study looked at inclusion only from the perspective of leaders. It may be instructive for future studies to examine congruence between the intentions of instructors and the felt experiences of their participants. Finally, the current study focused only on a single marginalized identity of participants. Future work should examine the impact of multiple marginalized identities (e.g., both being fat and a racial minority) on inclusion in sport and PA. Despite these limitations, however, the current study adds important findings to the study of diversity and inclusion in sport and PA.

**Conclusion**

This work sought to understand the hallmarks of body-inclusive spaces and found support for six strategies. In particular, our participants noted the importance of language, a cultural commitment to body diversity, authentic leadership, sense of community, leader advocacy, and a health focus in building their spaces. Of these, four factors had been previously identified (i.e., language, a cultural commitment to body diversity, authentic leadership, and sense of community), while two factors emerged in the current work (i.e., leader advocacy and focus on health). As such, each participant has sought to create more inclusive and accepting spaces for people of all body types to engage in PA. Our findings suggest that inclusive spaces are built through an intentional effort to both reduce stigma and increase individual self-perceptions and group cohesion. Interestingly, two of our proposed strategies (personal autonomy and physical spaces) were not supported in the current work. Although the current work did not support these strategies, other studies have suggested their importance (e.g., Pickett & Cunningham, 2017). Future work may look to explore these strategies further with larger samples or in different activities. However, using the strategies for which support was found in the current work, our participants created spaces that were successful in attracting and
maintaining adherence from individuals in larger bodies. These findings point to an untapped market for PA providers—in which a large segment of the population wishes to, but is effectively barred from, participating. Thus, PA managers should engage in inclusive behaviors as a means of improving accessibility for all.

**What does this article add?**

The findings of this work suggest that engaging larger individuals in PA is done through intentional effort by leaders and organizations. Instructors in this study suggested a number of practical strategies they use to encourage body diversity and inclusion in their spaces. While previous work has examined PA participants’ perceptions of body-positive practices (e.g., Cunningham & Woods, 2011), relatively few researchers have asked instructors about their intentional efforts to foster inclusivity. Our study showed empirical support for six practical factors related to developing body inclusion in PA—each of which can be easily implemented by others. Given the high levels of exclusion reported by those in larger bodies, it is important to further examine strategies and policies that encourage participation of those who are often marginalized in sport and PA. Thus, we hope that this work begins a discussion about the place of leader intentionality in developing body-inclusive spaces. Further, we encourage practitioners to use the strategies outlined here to make their spaces welcoming.

**ORCID**

Andrew C. Pickett  
http://orcid.org/0000-0003-0454-0517

George B. Cunningham  
http://orcid.org/0000-0002-1170-1780

**References**


