

# **PAMPERING, WELL-BEING AND WOMEN'S BODIES IN THE THERAPEUTIC SPACES OF THE SPA**

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## Abstract

This paper develops and extends recent work in geography on therapeutic landscapes and the body in an examination of pampering practices in the contemporary spa. Drawing on feminist research on health, gender identity and the body, the paper explores the importance of escape, relaxation and other strategies to combat stress on the well-being practices and routines of women. Using original data collected from interviews in two spas in the SW of England, the paper argues that a visit to the spa is increasingly being seen as an important part of women's wider health and bodily maintenance providing a space for relaxation and withdrawal from responsibilities of the home and workplace. The pampering treatments reinforce the therapeutic benefits of the spa creating a sense of luxury and a focus on the self. The paper locates these arguments within the twin theoretical concerns of the 'care of the self' and disciplining the body, suggesting that any attempts to understand the practices and therapies for maintaining bodily well-being must incorporate a recognition of their simultaneous role in regulating the size and shape of women's bodies.

## Key Words

Well-being, the body, pampering, spas, health, gender



## Introduction

This paper contributes to recent debates within geographical research on well-being, therapeutic practices and the body. It responds to concerns about the complexity of the relationship between health, place and identity in the examination of therapeutic practices and the conceptualisation of fitness and bodily maintenance. The paper asserts the importance of broad understandings of well-being in the study of therapeutic spaces that recognise the intertwining of ideas of physical, emotional and mental health and the relationship between the fit and the cosmetic body. As such it engages with and develops debates from several geographical literatures and, most significantly, brings together perspectives from work on well-being and health with research on beauty and the 'body industry'. The paper takes as its focus the contemporary spa, an everyday therapeutic space, and examines the ways in which spa therapies, especially 'pampering' have become central to the health and fitness routines and experiences of (in particular) women. The paper discusses the motivations for pampering in the context of a range of debates on health and gender identity and on the body. It explores the spa as a site for bodily maintenance and regulation and argues that pampering, as a strategy for stress-reduction, provides an excellent example through which to consider the theoretical and empirical interconnectivity of the care and discipline of the body.

Underpinning the paper are feminist debates on health and well-being. Specifically, the arguments raised by Moore (2010) and others (see Doyal, 2000) in discussion of a 'new' paradigm of health in which there has been a greater valuing of what have conventionally been seen as feminine attitudes to health and the body (in, for example, the promotion of

self-surveillance). This new paradigm with its emphasis on vigilance and bodily awareness has led to a sense of 'corporeal anxiety' (Hayles, 1997, in Straughan, 2010) in which women have been encouraged to turn the medical gaze in on themselves (Lupton, 2003) and see the maintenance of conventional attributes of the feminine body as a requirement of good health. The paper argues that central to the contemporary relationship between femininity and health is the notion of the body as a project of the self in which ideas of good health incorporate broader concerns around fitness and well-being and include physical, mental and emotional conditions. Such ideas require a commitment to caring for the body as a moral project in which the self and the body are seen as fundamentally intertwined. The individual has responsibility for the body and for conforming to dominant notions of health and well-being. The body is thus not separate from the self. These ideas have significant currency within contemporary geographical research on health and the body and have begun to inform, in particular, work on therapeutic landscapes in which a traditional focus on 'healthy environments' in respect to, for example, qualities of clean air, peace and stillness, has given way to an interest in the performative relationship between the body and place, the spatial practices of health and well-being and to broader concerns about the 'care of the self' (see, for example, Conradson, 2005).

This interest in the 'care of the self' as well as the wider concerns around the body as a moral project within the practices and representation of health and wellness has led geographers to engage with research on what Straughan (2010: 650) and others have referred to as the 'body industry'. This focus has opened up work on different spaces of bodily care beyond hospitals – for example laboratories, clinics, beauty salons in which a range of health-related technologies and treatments have been developed and practiced.

Geographers have also examined the construction of knowledges surrounding the practices that take place in these spaces and looked, in particular at the relationship between the clinical and the social (Philo, 2000; Greenhough, 2006).

This paper engages with work on the 'care of the self' in examining one particular aspect of the 'body industry', namely pampering. Pampering provides an interesting example of the intersection between health and well-being and the appropriate body. Pampering is often used as a rather 'catch-all' term for describing a range of practices in which the individual is indulged and through which their bodies are 'treated' using a variety of (often small scale) luxuries. Such luxuries take the form of products (oils, lotions, towels) and environments (use of music, comfortable seating, attractive décor). Pampering sometimes incorporates a sense of the exotic and is generally seen as something that the client doesn't receive at home or in their daily lives. Straddling the boundaries between the medical and the cosmetic body in well-being practices, it draws attention to the fluidity of such boundaries in contemporary gendered subjectivities. Central to my arguments here is the relationship between pampering as a therapy of bodily maintenance and care, designed to enhance the physical and mental well-being of the individual, and as a way of disciplining and controlling the body. While pampering can be seen, moreover, to fit closely with new ways of thinking about health, the interconnectivity of mental and physical well-being and the responsibility resting on individuals for monitoring, it can also be explored in its links with shifting gender identities and new pressures on femininity and the female body (especially within the workplace)<sup>i</sup> (Sharma and Black, 2001).

The paper also asserts that an examination of pampering in relation to well-being and the management of the self needs to recognise the importance of the spaces in which it takes place. Here I suggest that the modern day spa plays a valuable role in women's ability to access pampering as an activity associated with both well-being and beauty. The spa has been studied historically as a site of healing (see Gesler, 1996) and has been shown to be important as a space of spirituality and of social relations as well as a therapeutic space (Cayleff, 1988; Gesler, 1998; Williams, 2007). There is a need, argued in this paper, for the study of the modern spa to develop a more original approach and recognise its broader role in both health and cosmetic practices. The spa, therefore, is seen here as a space that brings together the care and the discipline of the body and in so doing promotes a holistic approach to health and fitness through practices that prioritise relaxation and emotional well-being in conjunction with programmes for weight-loss, healthy eating and exercise. As discussed in the paper, the use of spas has seemingly become much more widespread, especially amongst women. The paper articulates this growth in spa use as part of the medical and cosmetic 'pressures' for particular kinds of bodies. It recognises that while access to spas is clearly dependent on access to resources, it is regarded as generally more affordable – or at least of higher priority as something women are prepared to spend money on – than in the past. Having said that, the relatively high price of spa visits does restrict many clients and potential clients – a factor that needs to be recognised in thinking about the spa therapies as 'everyday practices'.

Before turning to look in detail at pampering as a part of contemporary health and fitness routines in the spa, the paper will situate the empirical research within debates that have

helped to shape recent understanding of the often complex and tangled relationship between well-being, the body and the self.

### **Pampering, health and stress**

In a study of the place of the beauty salon in women's lives, Black (2002; 2004) locates women's desire for pampering within medical/health discourses on stress. She notes the importance of relaxation, removal from 'normal life' and time to one's self as key motivators for women's beauty salon visits and, in particular, their involvement in pampering. Women, it seems, are seeking 'time out' from busy lives in which they are frequently juggling responsibilities at home, at work and with friends, time in which to recover from the stress involved in managing the multiple demands placed upon them. Black cites the work of Young in discussing the nature and proliferation of stress in women's lives. Young (1980) has noted the ways in which discourses of stress have become (in his view) overused, suggesting that the purchase of stress is partly a function of its naturalisation as an inevitable consequence of women's contemporary lives. Women, so Black goes on to conclude, are persuaded not that the cause of stress (the over-busy lives that result from managing work and home) should be questioned but that they need to seek to alleviate it through therapy (in this case pampering). Thus 'the woman's own ability to cope (with stress) is reinforced by pampering' (Black, 2002: 6).

The attention given to stress and the importance of relieving stress in order to secure mental health can usefully be located within ideas of a 'new paradigm' of health as mentioned above. Such a paradigm, Frayn and Lee (2008) argue, sees the female body as vulnerable and unstable – constantly at risk in a way that chimes with traditional notions of

the female body as 'ruled by biological cycles, hormones, cravings and emotional sensitivity' (Moore, 2010: 108). While historically, these ideas of vulnerability meant that women were required to be passive and restrained, recently they have reinforced a sense of responsibility and self vigilance. Thus, as Moore goes on to note, women are urged, in somewhat contradictory fashion, to make sure they engage in healthy lifestyle practices, caring for and monitoring their bodies, but at the same time accepting that they are at the 'mercy of biology'. Gendered analyses of the kinds of healthy lifestyle and monitoring practices associated with recent health care policy and campaigns (Lagro-Janssen, 2007; Nettleton, 1996), also suggests that women carry the additional burden of responsibility for ensuring the family's health<sup>ii</sup> and while such responsibility is not new, the added pressure of links between conditions such as obesity, diabetes and cancer with lifestyle and also screening programmes, increases this sense of responsibility. Women, it may be argued are under stress to ensure healthy lifestyle practices but the stress in itself can be a cause of ill health since anxiety and worry have been seen as an important factor in conditions such as heart failure and deficiency of the immune system (see Martin, 1994). Avoiding stress through indulging in relaxation practices such as pampering can be constructed as just as much a responsibility for the busy, multi-tasking modern woman as exercise, diet and fitness regimes.

The therapeutic and curative task of attending to stress can be seen within the broader concerns and practices of managing the self. Here I draw on work on other kinds of therapeutic practices such as yoga as well as research on the beauty industry to position pampering as a response not only to the need to reduce stress but also as an act of maintaining the self. Foucault's notion of the 'care of the self' has been influential to the



discussion of the therapeutic practices and spaces of self-reflection and transformation where an emphasis on managing the body is seen as part of a wider 'art of existence' (Foucault, 1986: 44). Care of the self is a set of practices or, more accurately, a general 'mode of life' located by Foucault in ancient times in which attention is paid to the soul and the body and reflection is turned in on oneself. Foucault talks of a 'whole vocabulary' in which the individual is commanded to 'transform oneself', 'develop oneself' and 'return to oneself' and identifies a 'whole set of occupations' (reading, meditation, health regimes, exercise, retreats, abstinence) that may usefully be employed in attending to the care of the self. Care of the self has been applied to the examination of various self management techniques – often associated with 'New Age' practices. As Lea (2009) again notes in her study of yoga, the proliferation of such practices means that we need to look carefully at the varying therapeutic possibilities that they offer and at the way in which they are individually constituted.

Clearly, as will be evident from the discussion of original research below, as a tool for personal management and care of the self, pampering (particularly one off sessions) can perhaps not be regarded as equivalent to practices such as yoga and meditation. It is relevant, however, to consider pampering as part of a broader strategy for promoting wellness and for attending to the relationship between bodily health and fitness and mental and emotional well-being. Pampering, as a therapeutic practice, allows the individual time free from stress, a time focused on the self and on the repair of the body both in relation to the self and in its attendance to the needs of others.

For authors such as Straughan (2010: 650), examining the care of the self requires that we consider the 'technologies, treatments and practical engagements' through which this care is performed. Straughan builds on geographical readings of Foucault's acknowledgement of place in the care of the self, examining work on medical spaces of care (by, for example Philo, 2000) to develop her own research on the beauty clinic. In this research Straughan (2010: 647) unpacks the treatments offered in the clinic and the ways in which they are administered. She draws attention to the biotechnical knowledges developed in the spaces of the laboratories and the ways in which they shape the treatments available. In so doing she locates certain 'cutting edge' beauty treatments used to 'pamper and groom the body' within a critical discussion of the beauty industry and the clinical gaze of the salon.

Like Parr (2002) in her study of embodied spaces of health information on the internet, Straughan argues that there is much to be gained in 'writing through' connections between the 'care of the self' and Foucault's earlier work on the medical gaze and the disciplining of the body. Such connections allow the practices and technologies employed in the care of the self to be situated within an appreciation of dominating medical power in which, as Parr (2002: 92) writes:

“(i)ndividuals and their bodies are increasingly subject (and subjecting themselves) to ..... knowledges which produce particular Westernised medical understandings of what a healthy body should consume, how it should move and what it should look like.”

Technologies of the body industry, and in particular the growth of cosmetic surgery, have prompted a dramatic shift in the ability of individuals to comply with dominant medical

understandings of the appearance of the healthy body. The normalisation of certain cosmetic procedure has in many ways reinforced the association between the healthy and the beautiful body and with it the existence of a universal ideal body. Tellingly, however, as Covino (2004: 50) observes while

‘the aesthetical surgical industry is remarkably progressive in its development of technological approaches to body modification...(it is also) remarkably conservative in its conceptions of the elements of beauty’.

A wealth of literature on gender, the social construction of beauty and cosmetic surgery (see Davis, 2003; Pitts-Taylor, 2007) has drawn attention to the different ways in which body industry can be read in terms of the tensions between discipline and empowerment. Cosmetic procedure have been seen as contributing directly to health and well-being by providing the means for (mainly) women to attain a more desirable body – Covino (2004: 105-6), for example, talks about the happiness, confidence and self-esteem associated with being able to conform to bodily norms and to perceived notions of attractiveness. As she writes:

“some see surgical beautifying as an advance in individual freedom, an indication of posthuman possibilities for identity and community and a cure for feelings of inferiority”

Conversely such procedure have also been criticised as promoting conventional and oppressive beauty ideals and contributing to the “already large number of persons who see their otherwise healthy bodies as defective.”

The desire for cosmetic surgery (and hence the power of the beauty industry) has been conveyed within this literature as bound up with the pressure to maintain certain gender identities. Such literature is increasingly recognising the complex and often contradictory relationships between masculinity, femininity, nature and the cosmetic body (see Davis, 1995; Holliday and Sanchez Taylor). Black (2002: 7) argues that key shifts in women's identities in the west have accompanied the transformation of women's role in the labour market and the 'creation of a new type of individual workplace identity'. The stress of maintaining a particular embodied femininity, she suggests, has as much to do with the demands of new forms of (mainly) service sector employment and also the increasingly competitive nature of the labour market for women involved in managerial and professional work. It is also suggested that the goals espoused by the beauty industry in relation to this form of femininity stress the importance of satisfaction for the self. Thus, Black (2002) argues, many forms of beauty therapy and pampering in particular are aimed at giving women pleasure for themselves – she cites the familiar 'because you're worth it' strapline, indicating ways in which beauty products and practices are aimed not exclusively at the male gaze but as something that a woman engages in '*for herself*'. The routine and regular involvement of women in pampering confirm this attention to the self as part of a broader strategy of stress reduction and health management, as noted at the start of this section.

### *Pampering and Therapeutic Spaces*

Engaging with work on self-management and the care of the self geographers have drawn attention to the spatiality of therapeutic practices. As noted above, an interest in Foucaudian ideas of bodily discipline and care have, in particular, focused attention on medical spaces such as the clinic and hospital while concerns around biotechnologies in

contemporary medical practices have extended debate to the spaces of the laboratory. This relationship between well-being and place is at the centre of geographers' work on 'therapeutic landscapes' and while traditionally such work has tended to focus on the physical qualities of therapeutic spaces – qualities such as remoteness, peacefulness and clear air – a recent more critical approach has prompted greater recognition of the 'complexity of (imagined and material) relations between bodies and place in the creation of 'healing' or 'restorative' modes of being' (Lea, 2008: 91). With this development has come an appreciation of a broader range of types of spaces within which therapeutic encounters occur. Of central concern here are the more everyday therapeutic spaces within which techniques of bodily and self management take place – in particular the beauty salons, spas, gyms and leisure centres where sites of exercise and fitness have often expanded and developed to include spaces devoted to recuperation, relaxation and pampering.

The therapeutic space examined in this paper is the spa. Again, the spa is a place traditionally studied as a physical site of healing capable of evoking a particular relationship between the body and the environment. The therapeutic properties of water have long been recognised as vital to the healing potential and development of a range of curative spaces (such as holy wells, baths and the sea as well as spas) from the 14th century (see Cayleff, 1988; Foley, 2010; Gesler, 1998;). The spa takes its name from the district of Walloon and Liege in Belgium where hot mineral springs were found to have a beneficial effect on certain skin conditions (Mak et al, 2009), although the curative affects of bathing in thermal springs had been recognised much earlier by the Romans (White, 2003). As Foley (2010) notes, the development of spa towns in terms of economic and social organisation

has been fairly well researched (see Gesler, 1998; Williams, 1999; 2007) as has their role in the market for health related tourism. Less well understood, Foley argues, are the embodied performances of health that are associated with the spa (Foley 2011). His focus in addressing this gap is the primary practices of ingestion and immersion – in other words the actual relationship with the waters of the spa and their physical and mineral properties. Foley (2010: 59) also recognises, however, that, ‘over time, the development of ancillary medical treatments in the form of massages, mud baths, electro-therapies and other treatments supplemented the taking of the waters’.

The examination of pampering in this paper is interested primarily with the space of the spa in terms of these wider practices and functions. The characteristics and quality of the interior (and sometimes exterior) spaces of the spa are clearly central to the relaxation and pampering possibilities of the spa and a crucial part of the emotional and affective relations taking place. Often overlooked in discussion of the spaces and practices of therapeutic environments are the curative benefits associated with ‘time alone’, escape and space to oneself. Certainly in the context of the points made above regarding women’s well-being and the role of pampering in the alleviation of stress, time out, away from the family and everyday pressures of busy working lives, is of crucial importance in understanding the use and appeal of the spa as a therapeutic space. While pampering is not necessarily a solitary activity and, indeed, is increasingly marketed and consumed as an element of a social and celebratory event, its value is related to its ability to remove the subject/client from their daily life in the provision of a ‘special’ place. Below I talk about the ways in which the value of this pampering space is imbued with luxury and enhanced through an association with escape and novelty.

The arguments rehearsed above concerning the conceptualisation of pampering as both an activity employed in the care of the self and in disciplining the body can also be applied to the spaces of the spa. Luxury and relaxation serve to enhance well-being and maintain the healthy body but the spa can also be seen as a space of surveillance where bodies are constantly subject to a disciplinary gaze. This gaze, while outwardly accepting and supportive to those seeking relaxation and healing, operates to promote a particular kind of bodily size and shape. As noted below, certain beauty therapies have become normalised as part of the 'spa experience' and as contributing to well-being and health. The recognition of the importance of mental well-being also serves to promote certain beauty therapies. As Black (2002: 71) again observes in relation to grooming and pampering practices in the beauty saloon "(t)hese treatments relate to maintaining a general standard of body aesthetics which is not related to vanity or to beauty but to a regular maintenance routine". Many treatments in the spa, similarly, make women feel better about themselves by helping them to fit in to expectations around appearance.

### **Pampering and the Spa**

The research which informs the next section of the paper is based on evidence gathered in interviews with three spa managers and two fitness workers. The interviews with spa managers were undertaken at the spa (2 managers were co-owners of the same spa). The spas visited were both in rural parts of the South West of England (Gloucestershire and Devon). Interviews were semi structured and free ranging lasting around an hour and a half and included a tour of the spa facilities and treatment rooms. The other two interviews were with women who had worked in spas as fitness trainers and now run fitness holidays.

Clearly, the managers have a particular perspective on the issues raised in the paper and their interview responses inevitably reflect their position as practitioners and not consumers of spa treatments. The quotes I have used from the managers have been carefully selected to illustrate either general points relating to spa use or more specific issues relating to the provision of treatments and the aims and practices of the spas themselves. Thus I have been clear not to use the responses from managers to convey the views and experiences of the spa consumers.

Spa consumers were surveyed using a brief questionnaire. This was undertaken with fifty spa visitors at one of the spas. The questionnaire of spa users (yielding 52 respondents) was self-administered and distributed and collected at one of the spas visited. The questionnaire was given out to visitors every day for one week. They were asked to complete it only once but to complete it and return it within the week. Most simply filled it in as they sat in the café or lounge area following treatments or time in the spa pools. While useful for some basic information from spa users, the questionnaire was not particularly detailed – as noted below, there is considerable scope for the development of some of the issues surrounding the consumer experience of spas – such development would require a much more detailed, probably interview based, survey of spa use. Additional data for this paper was also gathered from magazines, newspapers and websites advertising spas and the health and lifestyle benefits of spa treatments.

### *Popularity, Priority and Motivation*

Perhaps the first rather obvious point to make regarding the examination of pampering is its popularity. Any glance at contemporary lifestyle and women's magazines reveals the extent



to which the notion of pampering has become a common part of leisure routines and well-being practices. It is associated with the everyday and with celebration and is enjoyed by women of all ages. In many ways pampering has become synonymous with the modern day spa – many adverts for spas include reference to pampering and most offer ‘pamper days’ on a one off or regular basis. A website dealing with several spas invites readers to:

“Relax and unwind with a perfect pamper day at W. Spa.....If you're feeling stressed out and tired then a relaxing pamper day from W. Spa might be just what you need to get you back on your feet! We have a wide selection of pamper day packages let you unwind and de-stress with a memorable day of luxury. All of our pamper days have been specially designed to give you the ultimate spa experience that will take your breath away.” (<http://www.waterfallspa.co.uk/pamperdays.php>)

The popularity of spa visits was evidenced in my research by membership and visitor rates for both the spas; at the time of the interviews the Gloucestershire spa’s membership list was full at 500 – with a further 570 people on a waiting list. The Devon spa had no membership but dealt mainly in day or weekend/weekly visits and also reported very healthy bookings. Like other studies of spa use (Mak et al., 2009; McNeil and Ragins, 2004) my research revealed the vast majority of these visitors (85%) to be women. In other personal characteristics, however, there was more variation. Visitors were drawn from all ages and a range of occupations; the questionnaire included responses from many professional people such as IT management consultants, teachers, GPs and business managers, but there were also non-professional jobs such as auxiliary nurses, hairdressers and cleaners listed. As the manager of the Devon spa reflected:

We are not for the mega rich – we have just ordinary people most of the time who want a treat... You're getting people who are earning £6.00, £6.50 an hour and they'll be coming and spending £100, possibly £150 for a day.

The questionnaire also explored the frequency and regularity of visitors' spa use. It identified 43% of respondents to be regular uses of the spa (using the spa once a month or more frequently)<sup>iii</sup>. When asked how important their visit to the spa was over 40% of respondents said it was of 'high' importance while only 10% said it was of 'low' importance. Moreover, most respondents claimed that if they could they would chose to visit the spa more frequently (78% of the total). The factors that limited their visits were time and (to a lesser extent) money and childcare responsibilities.

Importantly in terms of this research, the vast majority of questionnaire respondents (80%) claimed 'relaxation' as a motivation for their spa visits. Also important were 'escape' 'pampering' and 'time to myself'. Respondents were simply asked to list motivation for visits with no prompting and many cited a combination of all these reasons. Health and fitness were cited by nearly half of all visitors (46%), again often in combination with the desire for relaxation although, interestingly, slightly more visitors mentioned 'beauty treatments' as a motivation for their spa visit (51%).

The importance of the spa as offering an opportunity for relaxation links very strongly to the discussion above surrounding the role of stress in everyday life and the health discourses around taking responsibility in terms of both physical and mental well-being. One of the ways in which the spa was seen to relieve stress was in taking visitors out of their 'normal'

environments, offering them a chance to escape from everyday life and a sanctuary from domestic and work responsibilities. As the spa managers explained:

“The escape element is very strong. Even away from humdrum lives as well as stressful lives – this is *their* little oasis – lots of them have the opportunity to join their partners or their children but they chose not to because this is *their* space”  
(Gloucestershire spa, original emphasis)

“We wish to provide an environment that is relaxing, re-energising. It’s a nurturing environment and it allows you to escape” (Devon spa).

However, it is not simply the provision of a space for escape and relaxation that is important here, it is the association of that space with luxury and indulgence that seemed essential to its ability to counter stress. The spa environment was discussed at length by the interviewees who saw the appeal of the spa and its ability to attract customers as very dependent on the ambience and quality of internal and external spaces of the spa.

Thus:

“There is no question, it does relax. From simple things like taking people out of their everyday lives and putting them in an environment where we don’t have mobile phones – cups of tea and coffee are brought to you and somebody is running around looking after you. Just that alone is a lovely thing to have” (Devon spa).

As will be returned to below, the protection of the ambience of the spa as a place of pampering is a high priority for the interviewees and requires a certain level of control and management.

As well as luxury, pampering in the spa is also associated with reward. A pamper session is something earned and deserved either as part of regular routines – as one respondent put it simply ‘as a reward to myself for working hard in my life’ – or as a one-off achievement (promotion at work, weight loss and retirement were all cited). Whether such rewards occurred on a monthly or weekly basis or as less frequent occasions, they seem to have been normalised as an activity that connected pampering with well-being and legitimised luxury and time to indulge oneself. In the Devon spa this was referred to tellingly as “guilt-free relaxation”. Here the spa managers were very conscious of the spa’s role in helping people to feel cared for – one commented that a lot of custom came from carers who

‘invariably say “we spend our whole life caring for others (and) want a day where we’re looked after ourselves”’ (Devon spa)

The observations in this section would seem to fit well with comments made earlier about the care of the self as an investment, as a project that indicated self-worth and as one which associated health and fitness with a more holistic sense of well-being. Many respondents said that pampering made them feel ‘privileged’ and ‘special’. Even where pampering was directly concerned with celebratory activities such as hen parties and birthdays, it was seen as a wider tool of self-management, giving value to life events and recognising the role of reward in maintaining busy and stressful lives. The following section develops the place of

the spa in bringing together practices of pampering with ideas about well-being and the healthy body.

*Pampering, Health, Well-being and Bodily Discipline in the Spa.*

Direct links were made in both the interviews and questionnaire between health and pampering that included but also went beyond the association between relaxation and well-being. For example, in the Devon spa attention was drawn repeatedly to the nurturing effects of pampering and the creation of an environment in which emotions could be released as the following quote articulates:

I'd love to get the doctors round here to start to realise the value of what it is we can provide for people... we have, quite regularly, people who are grieving brought along by friends and it's a very nurturing environment. We have examples of women who go through holistic relaxation therapy and they will be in floods of tears through the physical process that is taking place – releasing tension – better than a sedative any day.... (Devon spa).

The nurturing effects of pampering were discussed by the spa managers as being positive in the treatment of serious illness. All interviewees talked about the popularity of the spas amongst people recovering from cancer or suffering terminal illness:

We have a lot of women for pamper days at the spa who have cancer and all sorts of conditions and this is just a lovely, lovely place to recuperate (Gloucestershire spa).

In general, however, pampering was felt to contribute to a more general sense of health and fitness – a restorative and at times preventative benefit for the body and mind in general.

The following advertising for spas in Devon typically emphasised the health benefits of pampering:

This (pampering) should be compulsory; if more people took a few days out of their lives to look after themselves in fabulous places like this we'd happier and healthier.

[http://www.lorrens-health-hydro.co.uk/spa\\_breaks.php](http://www.lorrens-health-hydro.co.uk/spa_breaks.php)

While it needs to be recognised (as stressed in the discussion of methods above) that the quotes above are from spa managers or from publicity and so not from discussion with the spa users, the managers were talking from a close involvement with clients built up through the administering of the practices and therapies. Their comments were supported more succinctly by respondents who spoke, in the questionnaire of the ways in which pampering gave them energy, increasing their ability to cope and making them feel calm, happy and better about themselves. The interdependence of physical and mental well-being was very strongly articulated with many respondents noting the emotional responses they experienced with pampering and the bodily health that they associated with that.

The spa managers I interviewed were very clear in their belief that, in order to achieve the necessary and anticipated effects on well-being, pampering had to be of a high quality.

Both spas were, according to the managers, superior to their market competitors in the quality of the product they offered. They were careful, for example, in the selection of

'products' used in the pampering treatments and in the care and attention given to their clients. As one explained:

"We use something called *Repêchage* which is seaweed based. Very natural, not organic but then you can't pretend to be organic coming out of the sea ... but its all natural and doesn't have any of the 'nasties' in it. A lot of beauty products have quite nasty bases. The cheaper ones have got things that are carcinogenic in. My girls looked at the formulation quite closely and its really quite a healthy product" (Devon spa)

The discussion earlier in this paper emphasised the importance of links between the healthy body and the disciplined body, suggesting that the 'care of the self' needed to be understood as part of a regulatory process. The pressures placed on, in particular, women by contemporary health practices to maintain the body according to accepted ideas of appropriate size and shape, reinforce the sense in which well-being is dependent on bodily regulation. The pampering taking place within the spa, it could be argued, clearly brought together health and body maintenance – it aimed to relax and rejuvenate but also to control and regulate. In both the spas visited, the pampering experience was seen to be enhanced by the various associated 'treatments'. These were either booked as part of a 'pamper day' package or simply added on to the 'ordinary' spa visit. Many of these treatments were designed as cosmetic/beauty practices and aimed at making the body look good as well as feel good. In addition the availability of advice on diet and nutrition for those on a pamper day reinforced a message of bodily discipline as an essential part of relaxation and well-being practices. Thus while pampering encourages relaxation, rejuvenation and indulgence

as acceptable and even essential elements of women's health routines, my research on the spa contends that it does so within the context of bodily surveillance and regulation.

The place of pampering in the spa as both rejuvenating and regulating was clear in the attitude of spa visitors to the various beauty treatments offered. While relaxation was most frequently cited as a motivation for visiting the spa, considerable importance seemed to be attached to the purchase of cosmetic treatments. As noted above, over 50% of respondents to the questionnaire (54%) cited 'beauty treatments' as one of the main reasons for visiting the spa (and only 20% had not utilised such treatments as additional to the basic spa session). Pamper sessions tended to be routinely accompanied by other cosmetic treatments, often taken in addition to those offered as part of a pamper package. Moreover, the spa managers all stressed the importance of the cosmetic treatments to the wider spa business and in both spas plans were being developed for expanding the range of treatments provided.

While emphasising a 'natural' approach to bodily health and maintenance, the discussions with spa managers in both spas implied that certain cosmetic treatments were not only routinized but were expected/anticipated. In one spa the manager explained that they had 'consciously provided more treatments' so that when visitors came to the spa for a massage 'we will also do their normal waxing and nail treatments'. In the Devon spa a leg waxing treatment had been introduced recently on demand for women who had 'not had time to have their usual manicure and leg waxing before coming on a pamper day'. In both the spas I visited, stress was placed on the quality of the beauty treatments offered and it was this that was seen to separate these spas from their inferior competitors. As one said:



“Other spas are much more beauty orientated with a lot of painted bimbos doing the beauty therapies. Someone who is coming to us for a facial is not having what they have in a beauty salon... we don’t give, for example, a facial that’s less than an hour” (Devon spa).

Nevertheless, it was clear that the pampering experience offered by the spas incorporated a level of body maintenance that was about appearance as well as health and that in terms of well-being, fitness and beauty were firmly entwined around a set of assumptions about the size, shape and cosmetic appearance of the body.

In addition to relaxation and holistic therapies both spas offered a range of more conventional ‘beauty’ treatments. This included leg waxes, facials, pedicures, nail and eyebrow treatments. According to the manager of the Gloucestershire spa, beauty treatments represented the most lucrative part of the business with an monthly turnover of £70,000. She felt it was important to the spa business that the clients could come and get spa and beauty treatments together:

“Women need to be able to come for the spa but know they can get their ‘*normal*’ beauty treatments here” (emphasis added).

Indeed, in the business expansion plans of both spas, adding additional treatment facilities was a key driver. Expansion planned for the Gloucestershire spa, for example, was intended

to increase the number of treatment rooms from 7 to 12 to allow more beauty/cosmetic treatments to be offered.

What is apparent is the lack of clear separation between spa therapies for relaxation and well being and those associated with beauty and cosmetics. Interestingly, looking across questionnaire responses, many women who recorded 'fitness' as a key motivation for their spa visit did not use the gym or exercise classes but combined spa use (pool and sauna etc) with beauty therapies. Thus it seems that the desire for a particular and acceptable body is encapsulated within ideas of relaxation and well-being that form part of health and fitness regimes. Moreover, pamper days also blur the boundaries between relaxation and beauty treatments, frequently offering cosmetic and grooming treatments alongside massage and pampering therapies.

Finally, arguments raised above surrounding the importance of space in the context of spa practices and treatments, can also be applied to the disciplinary relationship between the spa and the body. The creation of an ambience of escape and relaxation was clearly very carefully managed and regulated in both spas. In the larger Gloucestershire spa in particular, controls were enforced on the behaviour of bodies in different spaces to ensure that the pampering experience was not compromised by unruly bodies and inappropriate behaviour. An important part of the management and regulation of spa bodies was the enforcement of certain rules and etiquettes. As one manager explained:

I have evicted one member who behaved inappropriately. I told a further two that if they step over the line one more time they'll be gone. I have no qualms about doing

that....When my ladies are sitting round in towelling robes they don't want a bloke to walk in and start exercising. You need to separate the spa facilities from the (other) facilities otherwise you change the ambience (Gloucestershire spa).

Of particular concern were the groups that visited the spas for a 'Celebration Day' (typically a birthday or hen party). Recognised as a vitally important market for both spas, managing such groups was seen as a challenge – especially in the larger spa. One of the responses to this was to be highly prescriptive about how their time in the spa was organised:

“we limit the groups by number to 6 or 8. I split them up for treatment so they aren't going around en masse”.

More broadly, reference was made by spa managers and fitness trainers to the role of nature and of the natural environment in the disciplining of spa bodies. The nurturing affect of the (very different kinds of) rural environment within which both spas were located was seen as an important factor in terms of the health benefits of spa, but the environment was also seen to have a role in controlling and regulating bodies. At the Devon spa, in particular, those on a pamper day were encouraged to walk in the grounds, take the path to the coast and benefit from the 'superb' countryside in which the spa is situated. As well as helping guests relax and unwind, the environment provided them with fresh air and exercise to help 'tone' muscles and encourage weight-loss (Devon spa interview). The role of nature in the disciplining of the body is a topic that has long interested geographers and sociologists in work on health, tourism and the development of countryside recreation (see Brown and Bell, 2007; Matless, 1995; Morris, 2009). Zweiniger-Bargielowska (2011), for example, explores the relationship between physical fitness and moral discipline in the planning and management of outdoors recreation in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

Elsewhere I develop this theme of nature further in the context of strategies for bodily maintenance and fitness (see Little, 2012). Here it is simply pertinent to note the recognition by the spa managers of nature's contribution to well-being and therapeutic practices and to note the central role of nature and in the care and discipline of the pampered body.

## **Conclusion**

This paper has explored the place of pampering within contemporary well-being practices and leisure routines and argued that it is of potential interest and importance within the study of therapeutic spaces. The paper has argued that emphasis within recent health discourses and leisure and fitness routines on the relationship between physical and mental health has helped to valorise practices of stress avoidance within wider notions of well-being and that the desire to reduce stress has in turn legitimated time spent away from routine roles and responsibilities and encouraged an investment in the self. Such trends in health and well-being practices and in patterns of leisure consumption are highly gendered, relating as they do not only to women's roles in the maintenance of family health but also to demands placed on women's embodied identities, especially within the workplace. Parallels have been drawn between pampering and the beauty industry in which practices of bodily well-being, fitness and maintenance have been constructed as both care and discipline, serving to relax and reward but also to control and regulate.

The study of pampering has drawn theoretically on two areas of Foucault's work; the care of the self and the disciplining of the body. This analysis has helped to demonstrate the ways in which bodily well-being and the practices designed to nurture the self both physically and

mentally are intricately tied in to notions of an appropriate and attractive body in terms of size, shape and fitness. The fitness and well-being practices employed in the care of the self serve, so the discussion of pampering has argued, to control the body and ensure that it stays within agreed (gendered) norms and expectations of the healthy body. Thus, following a theoretical position in which the care of the self incorporates a disciplined rather than an unruly body, pampering can be constructed as both indulgent and controlling in respect to health. Its therapeutic benefits provide relaxation in the countering of stress but at the same time cosmetic treatments associated with pampering signal the need for bodily regulation.

While the use of Foucauldian notions of care of the self and bodily discipline have been important here in starting to think about the different and co-constituted meanings of pampering as both a practice for the self and as a disciplinary practice, the use of such perspectives may also leave us with some outstanding concerns. Principally, is the extent to which women enter into or accept the 'disciplining' of the body. My recounting of the practices of the spa sees these as to some extent controlling or at least encouraging (in particular) women to adopt, strive for and valorise a particular kind of body (a body that is very slim, smooth and fit). Yet, as has been argued in relation to the power of the body industry (see Gimlin, 2007 Petersen, 2007) it may be that striving for such a body type represents a choice made by women and not a form of discipline. Perhaps, rather than seeing pampering practices or at least the desire for a slim, fit and conventional body, as a form of discipline, we should think about emancipatory possibilities that such bodies offer. Here we might draw on work that sets therapeutic and health practices within a governance framework and one that questions the extent to which women (and men) have the power

to resist such technologies of control and exercise power and choice over their bodies as active citizens rather than disciplined subjects (see Cruickshank, 1999). These questions are beyond the scope of the current paper but are certainly relevant to the continued examination of bodily strategies for health and well-being and the continuing growth of the 'body industry'.

The paper has argued that the contemporary spa represents an increasingly prominent therapeutic space and is particularly significant in terms of this relationship between care of the self and bodily discipline. While difficult to quantify, as noted, advertising, magazine features and leisure articles suggest spa use has become much more widespread and ubiquitous as a form of leisure activity. As a therapeutic space dedicated primarily to pampering, the spa demonstrates the coming together of practices designed to relax, indulge and treat with those aimed at control and regulation. The spa is a hitherto under-researched space in terms of both the evolution of well-being practices and also the development of the body industry. It is also a space that is increasingly familiar and prominent in the provision of health, fitness and beauty. In studying the spa this paper thus responds in an original way to a call to extend the study of health and therapeutic landscapes and to focus on the ordinary and everyday spaces of well-being (Conradson, 2005). It provides an example of the ways in which certain well-being routines and practices have developed from a treat to a regular part of health and leisure regimes. The spa is studied here as an example of the importance attached to time out and escape in the identities and leisure behaviours of, in particular, women and as a space in which the retreat from stress is fashioned by the 'body industry' into a set of practices and routines seen as increasingly necessary to the maintenance of health and well-being.

The paper has briefly alluded to the holistic character of spa therapies in the context of the segmentation of the market for pampering and beauty therapies. Spa treatments that were deemed to be more natural (either in the products used or the bodily responses stimulated) were seen as superior in terms of therapeutic value – particularly in the case of relaxation. In interview the spa managers were at pains to stress the emphasis they placed on natural therapies and the distance between the treatments they offered and those (much more invasive treatments) provided by the ‘beauty end’ of the pampering market. Having said this there appeared little discussion about naturalness in relation to the body itself and pamper treatments seemed to incorporate a set of assumptions about the kinds of bodies that were accepted and valued. A detailed exploration of the role and importance of ideas of nature went beyond the scope of this paper but there is clearly an important set of issues to be explored around the ways in which the natural is conceptualised, articulated and valued in embodied therapeutic practices and the spaces of well-being.

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## End Notes

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<sup>i</sup> While there is a growing market for activities and products concerned with pampering for men, pampering is much more commonly associated with women, particularly as a regular part of health and beauty treatments. The discussion of pampering in this paper relates mainly to women's activities, experiences and identities.

<sup>ii</sup> See Guthman and DuPuis (2006) on obesity in children and young people and responsibilities of mothers for providing 'healthy food'.

<sup>iii</sup> These data also included a group of guests staying at the adjoining hotel who, while visiting only a few times a year, claimed their trips to the spa were important and a regular feature of their lives.

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