Health hazard at the gym: instructor insecurity

In a business that focuses on the body, fitness and aesthetics, job insecurity introduces a paradox: those who take care of the body of others pay the price with their personal health. This is the story of Silvia, a fitness instructor and beauty coach whose career shows that job insecurity influences job organisation to the extent that it leads to injuries, illness and stress.

Berta Chulvi
Reporter for the Spanish Union Institute of Work, Environment and Health (ISTAS)

A true sports lover, Silvia worked for several years in a fitness centre before her body said “stop”.

Images: © Tania Castro (p. 28, 30)
"I always wanted to work in something to do with both sports and beauty," says Silvia. Silvia is Spanish, is 38 years old and has two professional titles, one in sports and one in aesthetics, and years of experience as an aerobics instructor, chiropractor and beauty coach in spa centres in Valencia (Spain). Vocation and passion led her to where she is today. However, her career shows the effect of job insecurity on the physical and mental health of staff. They help improve other people’s bodies while they punish their own in an endless race to achieve job security.

Silvia is the prototype of the young sportswoman. She studied administration and started her career working as a management secretary at various companies, but she soon recognised her passion was aerobics and beauty. Her trainer told her she had potential and she quickly decided to keep studying to enter this professional arena. Even though she had a three-year old son and had just agreed to a divorce, Silvia followed her vocation and did all she had to do to obtain the title of personal trainer. She also trained as an instructor for the elderly.

As a skilled professional she quickly found a job. Even before having the required professional certification, which "no company has ever asked me to show," says Silvia. "They do not require the certificates because they want you to believe they are doing you a favour and therefore you enter into a contract at a lower level than that of coach," she explains.

Between 2006 and 2014 she worked as an instructor. At first, in smaller gyms and fitness centres and, later, at low-cost fitness chains that disrupted the market and started the downward price spiral: "When I started, I studied in the morning and hosted aerobics training sessions in small gyms in the afternoon. At the time, your income was good, but you had one class here and another there. This was inconvenient, but they paid €15 an hour and sometimes even €20 once you had proven that you could fill up the class. An instructor with loyal customers was well paid. You often worked off the books, without a contract, which meant that if the number of customers decreased you could be sacked on the spot."

Once the low-cost fitness centre chains arrived, smaller gyms disappeared and the employment conditions changed: "now these companies find staff who are willing to enter into full-time employment contracts, who have to pound away eight hours a day for a salary that comes down to €5 an hour". Instructors like Silvia emerged from the economic crisis having paid a very high physical price: "You stretch your physical limits as an instructor. Six out of eight hours of a single day you are working very hard in front of the class." When a customer joins one of these chain gyms they want to attend demanding classes: "The customer wants to burn off all their calories within that single hour. You have to set an example, work at the same pace. You need to do all the exercises they do. If the class sees that the instructor does not work out as hard as they do or skips a few of the exercises, they are deemed to be lazy or out of shape, they often report you because you do not show them how to do the exercise. They work hard for an hour, you have to work hard all six hours that day."

Your whole body is affected. It is actually a job for the young. It is hard to keep the pace once you have passed thirty."

We soon discovered that the breaks between classes are not really breaks: "At most you have a one-hour break between three classes, but, during that hour, you are monitoring the area where people work out on machines, which means that even though your body gets a break your mind does not." Silvia then became the monitor for an enormous fitness equipment area. An area where there were up to 1000 people training at the same time during peak hours: "In an area this large there are always conflicts and tension between people because the rooms are massive. There are issues regarding whose turn it is to use specific equipment, people who have no experience who are not using the equipment as they should, people who get injured and even fights over the use of the equipment. You need to intervene and often the friends of..."
the people arguing or fighting meddle. Sometimes they help, but sometimes they make it worse," says Silvia.

**Protein consumption**

The important question on how to take this level of physical effort is answered as it is often answered in the fitness world. Protein shakes, nutritional supplements for sportspeople to regenerate muscle tissue and regain energy after training hard. "During that period, I was consuming many protein shakes," Silvia tells us, "because it is the only food we consume between classes that does not give us a feeling of heaviness." During an eight-hour shift, Silvia was drinking three or four protein shakes: "They tell you it does not have an adverse effect, but I have always thought that I damaged my gall bladder with all those special shakes. During that period, I drank a lot of L-carnitine, guarana and caffeine. Those products are hardcore."

During the period when Silvia was very active at the gyms, she suffered from gallbladder pain which finally meant she had to go to casualty to have her gallbladder removed: "I went to hospital on a few nights. They connected a drip and they cleaned me up. The analysis usually showed that the transaminases were all over the place." The doctors asked if she was drinking anything when they saw these results. Her GP finally recommended that she no longer drink these products: "He told me these were not healthy, that they generate a sand-like accumulation in the kidneys and that they could also affect her liver."

In the gyms and fitness centres, everyone recommends the protein shakes as it is one more product line to generate revenue at fitness centre chains. The protein shake business is growing: estimates show that the protein shake business revenue stream is currently 96 billion dollars worldwide. Mintel, a British market intelligence agency, indicates that 42% of male Brits between 16 and 24 years of age have consumed some type of protein product during the past three months. "Fitness instructors consume these frequently," states Silvia.

After they removed her gallbladder, Silvia took a one-month break before working as a fitness instructor again. No-one asked whether they had to implement changes at work: "They do not care. If you do not give the class, someone else will." It is the instructor who decides to take things slower after an operation: "When the class had to do crunches I would mark the rhythm and walk between the participants to see how they did and, once I was back in front, I demonstrated a new exercise."

The knees are one of the body parts that suffers the most: "I have nearly no cartilage of the knee and it shows." Foot injuries are another issue. Silvia has chronic plantar fasciitis from all the exercising. Muscle tears and ruptures occur daily among fitness instructors: "Your whole body is affected. It is actually a job for the young. It is hard to keep the pace once you have passed thirty."

**High psychological demands**

Silvia says there are often more than 50 participants in some of the classes. The instructor is on a small stage to ensure the participants can see the instructor. Alongside the physical demands, you have the mental demands which are just as important: "When you have to instruct a class of more than 50 people, you have some elderly participants and some who have never done any exercises. You have to be able to see and integrate these differences and you have to change the exercises on the fly during the class itself."

The instructor suffers because he or she cannot do their job well. The French psychopathologist Christophe Dejours calls this "ethical suffering": "During physical exercise, it is important to complete the movements as they should be completed. If you do something repeatedly wrong, you can injure yourself. However, when you see someone doing an exercise wrong you can, at that moment, only demonstrate the right way to do it from your stage. You do not know the names of the participants. You have to refer to them by their clothes and ask them to look at how you do it, but the class has to continue. You cannot interrupt the class as those who are doing it right would complain. You simply go crazy during such lessons."
Trainers in those sectors that are not really institutionalised are actually exposed to psychosocial superiority attitudes from participants: "I remember a lesson when a girl entered the aerobics class and told me she was also an instructor. She was watching me from the start. She was judging me. She would even make faces and say, I remember this step. This girl stressed me out, I even considered not giving that class anymore." Another stressful situation is when there are many elderly participants. These people were not very mobile. When Silvia lowered the rhythm a little, the more mobile participants complained. "This class has dropped in level" or "Today the class was not good at all". You heard them saying this within earshot or even to your face. You left while wanting to ask how you could please everyone.

**Overworked**

Silvia decided to change her job not due to the physical demands, but the fact that she had to combine it with raising a young child: "I was psychologically drained. Every day I had to prepare six different choreographies. In the evening, once I was off work, I was preparing dinner and planning the steps and writing them down in a notebook I kept in the kitchen. I used to fall asleep memorising the choreographies. You need to prepare different choreographies every day, you cannot repeat the lessons. If you repeated something, the participants would immediately tell you "We have already done this". The choreographies need to be memorised because the instructor cannot have a crib sheet during the lesson. These choreographies also need to be flexible: "You need to design a simple basic step that can become more complex depending on the level of the participants. And you need to find fitting music to accompany the moves. New music every day."

Silvia is actually describing working days that are, in essence, two working days to which household chores are added too. Silvia had a step in her home to check that the movements fit in with the music and rhythm: "Standing there and not knowing what to do is a nightmare. This also happened to me and I had to invent a choreography on the spot as you cannot just stand there." Add raising a child to the mix. Silvia has had no option but to take her three-year old to class. "I would tell him to sit near me while I taught the class. He behaved well. Sometimes he would dance a little, but he always behaved well."

The world of sports was not what Silvia expected it to be. "The body cult produces more disorders and upheaval than you think," explains Silvia. "People are obsessed. Pressure is high in the modern world. It is a competitive world. A disrupted atmosphere. Take the CrossFit trend, a fitness method designed to train Californian policemen and policewomen. It is high intensity, with weights and many repetitions with a high risk of injury. People register just to be able to say they do CrossFit. I would like to ask them: 'Is your body ready for CrossFit?' Sports are healthy, but you have to make sure it is really healthy for you."

**Beauty treatment rooms**

When Silvia left the fitness sector, she started to work in spa centres. First at a well-known company housed in commercial centres and later at a luxury hotel. "In the beauty sector, you find all sorts," Silvia comments. She has recently started to work at small-scale treatment rooms. I ask her to tell us about her work at the hotel. A luxury hotel in Valencia. "At the hotel, I worked as a chiropractor in shifts. I had a two-hour contract, but I worked six hours a day. The official working hours were so few that you could say I was paid per massage. It was one massage after the other because, nowadays, there are low-cost massages and these have decreased the price and the salary of the professionals." Companies tighten up the schedules of the staff to the point that they do not even have time to go to the toilet. "One massage is planned immediately after another. If you go to the loo you lose ten minutes and the schedule is messed up. And as soon as you mess up the schedule, every-one is angry at you," Silvia explains.

The stressful situation for the staff gets worse when the customers are not on time. "Say your customer booked a massage at 10 a.m. but arrives fifteen minutes late. The customer is aware they are late. But they still want their 45-minute massage and they check you do not miss a minute. They sometimes say 'You did not give me the full 45 minutes'." If Silvia says that the customer arrived a little late and that the next person is waiting, she knows it will create a conflict situation and that management will not support her.

"The customer takes his or her time to undress and lie down. After the massage, the customer is relaxed and takes his or her time again. You feel powerless because you cannot rush them out, but you have another customer waiting. You only have one room. You leave the room and the next customer is already in a bad mood because you are fifteen minutes late. 'We can go in in a moment,' you say. 'No problem,' says the next customer. But this already causes stress. The atmosphere is different when you are not on schedule. You note that the customer is fidgety. You try to make amends by doing something extra to show that you feel bad.
about the wait. You have to play along but the one that is stressed out is you.”

These delays are cumulative and when it is time for lunch you only have 10 minutes or even no time to eat. You do not complain. "There comes a time when you make it work. You play around with the calendar, you cut a corner here or there, otherwise you would be having words with customers all day. And the centre does not like employees who cause trouble. Often when they say “This customer has cancelled” you think ‘Thank God!’”

Even when a customer cancels you cannot stop working: "A cancellation does not mean you have nothing to do! You can never take a break, they expect you to restock and clean your room, etc. This was always the case, everywhere I worked. You can never stop working, only at meal times. And you cannot eat anything with a strong smell, because the centre will smell of it. Some beauty centres tell you what you can and cannot take in for your lunch. Fish is strictly forbidden. We have our meals in rooms without ventilation, they are stock rooms.”

This work rhythm causes arm injuries with time. "Imagine that you do 5 massages that take 45 minutes without a break. People like it when you apply pressure on both their circulation and muscles. One job caused tendinitis in me.” When I ask Silvia about the risk assessments, she laughs: “Never, not at the gyms, fitness centres or beauty centres, not once where the occupational risks assessed.” Silvia states there are also biological risks involved as a masseur. "We touch customers without knowing whether they have an illness. No-one asks them whether they are healthy before we work on them with our hands.”

Sexual harassment to boot

Silvia has had quite a few nasty moments. "One customer took my hand and placed it on his penis.” Silvia interrupted her work when something so shocking occurred and she even had to take care of what she said although the situation was violent to say the least. “You need to tell them the following without causing offence: Your massage has come to an end. I will wait at the reception desk. You have to wait for the customer at the reception desk, to see if the customer is willing to pay or not. The customer leaves without a care in the world. If you call management, they will not act. I told them and nothing was done. At most, they will bar them from the centre, but they usually do not come back because they are embarrassed.”

After a shocking situation you need to continue working, you have the next customer to attend to. “Once you have said goodbye to one customer you run back to the room to prepare it for the next customer. It is stressful. When you start the day and see that you have no break between appointments you think ‘My God, what a day!’ Of course, you pay the price at home. You get home very tired, you do not even want to eat, you are exhausted.”

It seems impossible to continue but you go back. “When you need to pay bills, you take every injustice, all unfair treatment, until you find another job. This is why we keep changing jobs all the time. You are always looking for something better, but every job is just as bad.”

A few days after we interviewed Silvia we returned to take some pictures. She tells us she has changed jobs yet again. She is hopeful. They have hired her as a training instructor at a company that sells high-quality beauty salon equipment. She is going to train the beauticians at the centres that purchase the equipment. She is going to travel throughout Spain. She is really excited because the company has demonstrated a real interest in her profile and Silvia believes she will finally open a new professional door. It has been difficult to make an appointment. “I have to prepare six training courses and I am working like crazy,” she writes in her email message. It is nice to see her happy.

I cannot help but remember Silvia at 28 years of age when she was working on aerobics choreographies while preparing dinner for her boy and I keep my fingers crossed hoping that this time it will work out: that the story of job insecurity and suffering does not repeat itself yet again.