

SELLING WELLNESS: THE CULTURAL POLITICS OF HOLISTIC HEALTH IN THE U.S.

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ABSTRACT

Currently, holistic health and lifestyle medicine are growing sectors of the U.S. health care market (Fadlon 2005). The term “holistic” entered the U.S. medical discourse in the 1970s and refers to the treatment of the whole person as opposed to the biomedical treatment of the medical condition itself (Whorton 2002). The aim of this research is to examine various representations of the practice of holistic health and wellness through the perspectives and experiences of holistic health practitioners and locates these representations within neoliberal, gender, and class discourses. Over the last eighteen months I conducted interviews with holistic health practitioners and field work at professional health conferences, a wellness retreat, and various community health education events. I found holistic health practitioners represent a wellness-centered lifestyle health as a privileged social status, however practitioners continue frame holistic health and wellness as a possibility for all on individual health choices ignoring the significance of class position. I argue that holistic health and wellness care offers a distinct orientation to health through the emphasis on lifestyle and the expansion of what behaviors and elements of life are related to health. Furthermore, holistic health and wellness are made visible through celebrity and popular culture. Celebrities promote wellness as an aspirational consumer lifestyle, which requires economic means and privilege to achieve. Finally, I argue these representations of holistic health and wellness also rely on notions of femininity and masculinity. Holistic health practitioners engage gender frameworks within holistic health interactions and wellness consumption is also represented as a material means to enact gender identities.