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Building Body Identities
- Exploring the World of Female
Bodybuilders

A Thesis submitted to the University of Kent
for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

By Tanya Bunsell

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March, 2010

Abstract

This thesis explores how female bodybuilders seek to develop and maintain a viable sense of self despite being stigmatized by the gendered foundations of what Erving Goffman (1983) refers to as the 'interaction order'; the unavoidable presentational context in which identities are forged during the course of social life. Placed in the context of an overview of the historical treatment of women's bodies, and a concern with the development of bodybuilding as a specific form of body modification, the research draws upon a unique two year ethnographic study based in the South of England, complemented by interviews with twenty-six female bodybuilders, all of whom live in the U.K. By mapping these extraordinary women's lives, the research illuminates the pivotal spaces and essential lived experiences that make up the female bodybuilder. Whilst the women appear to be embarking on an 'empowering' radical body project for themselves, the consequences of their activity remains culturally ambivalent. This research exposes the 'Janus-faced' nature of female bodybuilding, exploring the ways in which the women negotiate, accommodate and resist pressures to engage in more orthodox and feminine activities and appearances.

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Preface: My PhD Journey

A journey entails endings and beginnings, loss and retrieval. It offers a chance of change and renewal, but also a risk of disorientation and displacement. Researchers as voyagers, travel from familiar inner and outer landscapes into unknown territories with new horizons. They progress through an itinerary of developing meanings, both epistemological and ontological. Researchers-as-voyagers are engaged in a process of becoming, and of discovering a voice. The 'voyage' tenders experimental possibilities for alternative understandings of who they are, who they could be and what they know. It opens up transitional spaces for the formation of a new sense of identity. (Batchelor and Di Napoli, 2006:13)

The idea that research may be described as a 'journey' usefully highlights how events and relationships unfold during fieldwork in a manner that can change both the field under scrutiny and the individual researcher. It also usefully helps evoke a sense of the personal growth, change and renewal that can occur as the adventurer negotiates their surroundings in an 'attempt to make sense of themselves in the world' (ibid.:17).

Within this thesis lies multiple narratives, stories and journeys - not only of the muscular women themselves who embark on their own 'heroic' travels, including my 'key informant' Michelle's pathway to competition in Chapter 9, but of my own journey of discovery which has changed my viewpoint on the world. In my Methodology Chapter (2), I detail the ways in which I am (ontologically and epistemologically) inextricably entwined in the research project and how this inevitably impacted upon the findings and presentation of the thesis. However, it is only as this project draws to a close that I can reflect back and see just how far I have travelled en route to this point, and consider how different my research journey would have

been if I had started from the evolved (albeit more fragmented) post-essentialist feminist stance that I am now drawn to as a result of this voyage. Of course, that would have been a 'different me' telling a different story altogether. Nevertheless, this retrospective thinking demonstrates just how momentous and life changing this PhD experience has been. I am not the same person that I was when I began my research journey. In the words of Batchelor and Di Napoli (2006:13-14):

When you reach your destination you are different. The changes that occur are ontological as well as epistemological. They are the changes in who you are as well as what you know. They contribute to shaping your voice for being and becoming, as a person, as well as your voice for knowing.

It has been argued that researchers develop a new habitus as a result of their work, and I would suggest that this is especially relevant to the corporeal ethnographic and participant observation undertakings of researching female bodybuilders. As I became physically and emotionally immersed in the field and 'moved' through the research process, my interpretations of the world have shifted and transformed. My ways of 'looking' at what was occurring around me were thus changed by my shifting ways of 'being in the world'. Subsequently, my original theoretical framework shaped by second wave feminism, has come under attack and been challenged through the performative aspects of my research. My narratives (of self and research thesis) have changed as they have given way to new perspectives and new ways of seeing the world. This has not been a straight-forward linear process, but one of unease, struggle, vulnerability and insecurity, as I have fluctuated between certainty and uncertainty, trying to piece together conflicting evidence in relation to my ideological beliefs and my findings. It is through these spaces of confusion, tension and continuous questioning of thought, however, that creativity and growth can occur (Hegel, 1977). This has resulted for me in a new synthesis of thought and understanding, illustrated in the conclusions that I reached as I undertook the final stages of work on my thesis.

Before the reader's journey through the thesis begins, it is perhaps helpful if I briefly outline the forms of thought that have guided the structure, content and findings of this PhD. Throughout this thesis, I invite the reader to glimpse some of the rich and complex detail that makes up the lives and experiences of female bodybuilders, but I ask that you remain aware of my own 'shadow' presence as a researcher as I present these women in and through my writing. In so doing, you will not just be following the lives of these female bodybuilders, but my own walk through and beyond an initial ideological position, from certainty to uncertainty, from conviction to doubt, and onwards to a new beginning.

My journey started from a distinct second wave feminist perspective which suggested that women have been historically oppressed because of their corporeality and that gender inequalities have been justified for this reason. In line with these assumptions, my thesis was informed initially by the desire to 'empower women and eliminate oppression...driven by a strong ethical mission which translates into the improvement of people's lives (Barrett, 1996: 164,176). Due to the reasons revealed through my own biography in the Introduction chapter, I wanted to seek liberatory practices. I wanted to find an alternate and potentially empowering way of being in the world. I was not totally naive to the 'problems' of finding a practice that could liberate all women, but nevertheless I still expected, or more accurately hoped, to find that these muscular women could transgress 'patriarchal' notions of femininity and reclaim their bodies for themselves. However, as I became immersed within the ethnographic study, my body became 'an instrument of research' (Patton, 2002:45), in which lived experiences mediated my initial theoretical commitments. These 'practical lessons in the interaction between theory and experience' led me to question my starting assumptions (Blaxter, 2009:765). By 'acting as my own informant' (Rapport, 1995:269), I have become drawn to and aware of a more complex, contradictory and ambiguous understanding of women's empowerment and 'reclaimative' discourse than second wave feminism can explain. Indeed my ethnographic analysis of the life world of

the female bodybuilder revealed a picture of complexity and subjective difference beyond what I ever expected to discover.

As a result of this journey, the research you are about to read reveals a growing awareness of the limitations of traditional feminist theory, and progresses towards a more post-structuralist feminist position sensitive to the fragmentation, fluidity, and multiple voices characteristic of self-identities. This vantage point revealed to me a more 'sophisticated relational and dialogical understanding of gender' than is offered by conventional second wave feminist perspectives, and enabled me more effectively to explore the 'multiple and often contradictory subject positions taken up by these women' (Rich, 2002:10). However, as I discuss in the conclusion to this thesis, I do not believe that a post-structuralist theory cannot be taken up uncritically, but rather should be used as an eclectic tool to help develop feminist theory further. In particular, it should not be used as an excuse to avoid engaging with the embodied character of *lived* social action and social life. It is this conviction that informs my final call for more collaborative approaches to feminist theories of the body; approaches that understand bodies as complex and situated in discourse, but at the same time are able to acknowledge that we have real fleshy bodies that provide a phenomenological grounding for our being in and acting on the world.

CHAPTER 1.

Introduction

The body is a landscape infinite with suggestion, curiosity and incarnate possibilities...The way we care for it, nourish it, adorn it, display it, represent important statements about our culture (Cashmore, 1998:83).

As Gelsthorpe and Morris (1990:88) argue; 'one of the essential ingredients of feminist approaches is that theorizing has to *begin* with the researcher's own experiences. There is no other knowable place to begin'. For this reason, my introduction begins by providing some biographical details in order to illustrate some of the influences and processes that have informed this study. I then provide a sociological context for the study, before stating the aims of my thesis. I conclude by providing a chapter outline.

Storying myself

There are multiple motivations that propel interest into particular research areas. The very beginning of my research into female bodybuilders did not commence the day I began to engage with academic literature on the topic, nor was it the day that I first spoke to a female bodybuilder. It began long before that in the roots of my childhood. Indeed 'seeds' of thought around the subject matter were planted through what I now view as defining moments and epiphanies. These ideas and perspectives on the world grew and developed as they were nourished by sociology lecturers at college and academic studies at University. Thus the idea to embark on research into this area did not simply come from an abstract idea that was 'out there', but evolved through numerous experiences embedded within my own biography. Furthermore, the research could not have occurred without a whole web of other interacting, intercepting and intricate factors taking place, such as finding the right supervisor, funding and life timing. In this chapter, I try to utilise the 'sociological imagination' (Mills, 1959) by investigating how memories of my encounter with social norms and social scripts

in the past influenced my self-identity and have consequently impacted on the construction of the thesis (Douglas, 2009). This is commensurate with Cain's (1990:139) suggestion that:

The theory we produce should account for our own knowledge as well as that of those we investigate...[This] does not imply a smooth or continuous theoretical totalization but...allows for contradictions and discontinuities.

'Unveiling' the self, of course can be an uncomfortable experience that leaves me, the researcher, open and vulnerable to criticism. However, as feminists argue, I believe there needs to be transparency in our research, and that the 'personal' is indeed the 'political'. It should be noted here, before I 'story myself' (Douglas, 2009), that all biographies are partial, complex and fragmented. Nevertheless I have tried to account for some of my personal motivations that led me to explore this fascinating research area. According to Gordon (2008) all sociologists are storytellers, so this is my story:

My first encounter with a female bodybuilder - I had never seen a woman like that before

I wanted to learn to dance and act, so here I was, at Hilda Barrett's School of Dancing (set in the incongruous location of an Old People's home) having an elocution lesson. 'A, E, I, O, U', I pronounced out loud – as slowly as I could, trying to clearly articulate the vowels. 'No, no, no', the old, retired dancer shouted at me, waving her walking stick in the air. 'It's 'I', not 'I' – push the letter forward through your mouth, not back'. I tried again a few times and failed to win her approval. She sighed and turned her attention to the female pupil standing next to me. My mind began to drift. I looked up and saw a woman doing a gymnastic routine on the muted television screen. I watched her do the splits, one armed press-ups and even a back flip. I was awestruck, not so much by the routine, but by the combination of her skills and her appearance. I had never seen a woman look like that before. She was wearing a shiny bikini, displaying her tanned, muscular body. She had lots of make-up on and styled 'big' hair. She looked so happy, independent, strong and carefree. (Scenario 1, aged 8)

I know now that the woman performing the routine was a ‘fitness competitor’ (see Chapter 5, p.129). Unlike the majority of people who immediately react with repulsion at the mere sight of a muscular woman, her appearance, demeanour and capabilities immediately appealed to me. Even at that young age I was drawn to and fascinated by a woman so apparently possessed of herself.

Gendered sports – But...Why can’t I play football with the boys?

We didn’t have playing fields at my primary school. So every week, during games lessons, we got onto a coach that took us to a local secondary school to use their facilities. As usual, the girls wearing their pleated blue short P.E skirts got off the coach and headed over to the netball courts, whilst the boys in shorts or tracksuit bottoms ran over to the far field to play football. I turned to my female P.E. teacher and questioned: ‘But why? Why can’t I play football with the boys?’ (Scenario 2, aged 10)

I had grown up as a ‘tomboy’, a word rarely used now, but defined by the American Heritage dictionary (2009) as, ‘a girl considered boyish or masculine in behaviour or manner... who acts or dresses in a boyish way, liking rough outdoor activities’. From a very young age I didn’t understand why female and males were treated so differently. I couldn’t understand why gender was so important, nor why it prevented me from joining in boy’s activities and sports.

Body image

I swam far out to sea, embracing the coolness of the water after the heat of the scorching sun. I stopped to catch my breath, keeping myself buoyant with my legs and the occasional swish of my hands under the water. I turned to look back at the beach, situated on the Grecian Island of Samos. I could immediately locate my best friend. Unlike the other bronzed bodies stretched out on the beach, she was sitting by herself, covered from head to toe in dark baggy clothes. Not because she feared the damage the sun might do but because she despised her body so much. (Scenario 3, aged 18)

During my secondary school years, I had three close female friends and two of them had severe body image issues. One went through a short period of anorexia, another through a longer period of bulimia. Only one of my friends remained unaffected, the rest of us had low self-esteem, which we, at least at the time, attributed to our imperfect bodies.

Injury and the obsession with weights

It hurt so much. I couldn't move without a pain shooting down my neck, trapezius and upper back. Just breathing was painful. I felt sick. I was in hospital being checked over for any spinal injuries. The doctor did a series of tests, checking that my body was fully functioning and that my bodily sensations were responding normally. The X-ray had shown that my neck (the 7th Cervical) was broken and that my trapezius (traps) were badly damaged. To the fascination of the medical staff, my injury was the result of performing squats with a 100kg barbell. My muscles had adapted quickly to my new intense heavy training regime, but unfortunately my bones had not. My traps had literally torn the bone apart under the pressure of the weight.

The doctor told me that I was incredibly lucky and that with plenty of rest and time I would heal. He said I must be very careful in the future and I would have to wear a neck-brace for the next few weeks.

'When can I get back to work?' I asked. I knew if I wanted to train, I had to get back to my job as a Fitness Instructor. I was already desperate, knowing that I had only a window of 10 days before my muscles (which were not visible at the time) would begin to decrease. (Scenario 4, aged 18)

My debut as a serious weight trainer was over almost before it had begun. I recall the immense pain of the incident (which caused problems for several years afterwards), but equally I can remember the overwhelming frustration of not being able to train and the consequent realisation that I had become 'addicted' to exercise. This incident made me question both the power and restrictions of this

lifestyle. Although I continued to work and train in gyms, it was not until I began this research project that I once more began to use heavy weights.

My interest in weight training began around my 15th Birthday, when I asked for a set of dumbbells. The following year on my 16th Birthday I was given membership of a local gym. I remember the feelings of excitement and anticipation as I entered this underground gym – dimmed lights and loud music reminiscent of a night club atmosphere. It became my home, my refuge, my release. I embraced the endorphin highs and enjoyed the workouts, which consisted of variety of activities such as cardiovascular machines, running, aerobics, boxercise and circuits, as well as resistance weights and limited free weights exercises. It was not until I left college at 18 and became a full time, qualified gym instructor that I became more involved in weight-training rather than ‘keep-fit’, encouraged by two women who regularly trained with weights. I loved how I felt in the gym, both the atmosphere and the experience of the workouts themselves. I also wanted to embody traits of power, independence and a controversial beauty.

These social moments are just a selection of those that helped shape and define my identity, and influenced the way I now see and interpret the world. Perhaps, in light of my enjoyment of physical sports and weight-training, my questioning of natural gender roles and my peer group suffering from poor body image, it is not so surprising that I came to study female bodybuilders. I wanted to discover whether an alternate body project and way of being could provide a body of ‘content’, ‘substance’ and existential solidity in today’s society. These ‘experiential episodes’ also serve to introduce the key themes of the thesis: sports and gender, gendered space, gendered attitudes (feminism), weight-training, exercise, obsession, pain, injury, self identity, body-image and self-esteem.

The context

My desire to sculpt a body (using weights) symbolic of my desired self-identity was not as unique as I may have believed at the time. Indeed, over the last thirty years there has been a propensity to treat the body as a self-reflexive entity, a ‘project which should be worked at and accomplished as part of an individual’s

self-identity' (Shilling, 1993:5). Bodies, in this sense are viewed as 'corporeal surfaces on which the engraving inscription or "graffiti" are etched' (Grosz, 1994:63), as canvases that reflect the 'soul'. Individual 'body-projects' are situated within the context of an increasingly 'body focused' and 'body conscious' western society. Every day we are relentlessly bombarded with information about our bodies from the media, consumer culture, government, science and new technologies. Evidence for this is provided by the plethora of advertisements and articles in magazines, newspapers, and television programmes concerned with the health, shape, size and appearance of the body and by the invention of an ever-increasing array of products and technologies designed to modify the body. In addition, there has also been an unprecedented visibility of the body in and outside of consumer culture.

This unabashed display of the body has occurred for several reasons such as changing social attitudes to the body, the type of clothing worn, the environment (central heating/leisure wear), advertising, Hollywood, television and other modes of visual display (Featherstone, 1991). Furthermore, self-reflexive 'body projects' have flourished at a fragile time in history in 'post-modern/ high - or late-modern society'; an era characterised by uncertainty, a fragmentation of social life and a volatile economic environment. In this way, body projects can be seen as a form of control in an 'unstable' world. As Roseneil and Seymour (1999:4) suggest they can be seen as an attempt to 'anchor our sense of self in this maelstrom of social life, to create ontological security in a world of rapid social change'.

At the same time as there has been a new found emphasis on the individualisation of the body, social theorists have pointed out that unprecedented societal value has been placed 'on the youthful, trim and sensual body' (Shilling, 1993:3). This is demonstrated by Foucault's (1980:57) statement about bodily freedom; 'Get undressed, but be slimmed, good-looking, tanned!' In this way, the physical appearance of the body, including its size and shape, has not only become increasingly important to an individual's sense of self, but has come under increasing scrutiny from others. More than ever, people's bodies have become central to judgements associated with their social identity, sexual worth and even moral standing. Indeed, there is now a wide consensus in sociological

literature suggesting that the pressures to 'look good' have never been so strong (see for example Bordo, 2004; Grogan, 2004; Cash, 2004; Brace-Govan 2002; Featherstone, 1991; Jeffreys, 2005; Heinberg and Thompson, 1999; Littleton and Ollendick, 2003; Shilling, 2003; Rodin, 1992; Sullivan; 2004; Arthurs and Grimshaw, 1999). Under this societal pressure of bodily conformity, individuals are required to participate in habitual body maintenance regimes to 'improve' their appearance and health. Thus, according to Featherstone (1991), in contemporary consumer society there is an emergence of a 'performing-self' - one which focuses upon the display, appearance of the body and impression management.

This new emphasis on the body has been associated with a number of cultural phenomena including an increase in cosmetic surgery and a surge of eating disorders. More commonly still, it has informed the unprecedented numbers of people in the affluent west who now 'work out', on and with their bodies in one way or another. In this respect, American ideals of 'trim, taut and terrific' bodies, incorporating within their very flesh the appearance of efficiency and hard work so prized within social and corporate life, have become increasingly popular in Europe over the last few decades.

However, consumer society's obsession with 'working on the body' to attain hegemonic beauty norms and maintain social standing has not gone uncontested. Indeed critical commentators are quick to point out that 'body projects' perpetuate social inequalities: not everyone has access to the resources (such as time, finance, physical capabilities) to participate in 're-moulding' the body. Feminists, furthermore, argue that women are under more pressure to conform to beauty norms and an attractive appearance than their male counterparts. As Shilling (1993:8) explains, the body projects engaged with by some women 'appear to be more reflective of male designs and fantasies than an expression of individuality'.

Although the majority of 'body projects' conform to contemporary norms of appearance, there are some 'alternative' body modifications that seem to oppose and resist the unblemished, smooth, pristine ideal of the body's surface. Indeed, there has been a rapid growth in non-mainstream body modification practices, including tattooing, multiple piercings, bodybuilding, branding and binding. Curry (1993:76) believes that these represent 'a revolution in claiming freedom to

explore one's own body and claim the territory discovered as one's own'. Such unconventional forms of body modification have been met with an outcry of revulsion, disgust, pathology, horror and abject fascination by mainstream society and also by some feminists (Pitts, 2003). Others, however, have celebrated these 'hard-core' modes of body modification on the basis of their potential to effect a rebellion against western hegemonic norms of beauty.

In this thesis, however, I argue that we do not yet have enough evidence to assess whether these new practices are empowering and that there is a distinct need for more empirical research to be conducted in this area. This research needs to go beyond notions of the body as a 'text', in order to ascertain the actual processes and experiences associated with such modifications. This is not to downplay the importance of textual analysis, but it is to emphasize that this method alone is insufficient to analyse whether body modifications have the potential to empower women. As Budgeon (2003:42) argues, the experiential dimensions associated with the processes and practices 'through which the self and the body become meaningful' have often been left unexplored and untheorized. Against this background, I argue that it is essential to engage in the phenomenology of the 'lived' body in order to evaluate women's body modification practices more fully. This involves focusing on the experience of the body (including pain and pleasure), on the materiality of embodiment, and on the interconnections and interactions made by bodies, in order to explore how the self and identity are transformed and re-created. In this way, as Budgeon posits:

Bodies then can be thought of not as objects, upon which culture writes meanings, but as events that are continually in the process of becoming – as multiplicities that are never just found but are made and remade... Changing shift from asking 'what do bodies mean' to what do bodies do? (Budgeon, 2003:50)

This brief overview has highlighted the importance of the body in relation to understanding the world we live in, both in terms of individual self-identity, and in terms of the issues of social reproduction, control and social order. It has

also illustrated the complexity and enigmas surrounding body projects. I now turn to the specific body project engaged in by female bodybuilders.

Female bodybuilders - the scope and aims of the research

One of the more interesting and culturally significant examples of shaping and sculpting of the body is the recent growth in women's bodybuilding - a phenomenon that at once appears closely associated with the current focus on the body, yet also deviant in relation to conventional norms of femininity. Before I detail what is involved in the specific body project of female bodybuilders, it is worth exploring the relationship between socially acceptable (and encouraged) 'toned' female bodies and the transgressive muscular appearance of female bodybuilders.

In contemporary society there exists a hierarchy of approved or appropriate body shapes for women. Brace-Govan (2002) claims that those at the top of the hierarchy are bodies that oscillate between the physicalities of fashion models and Olympic athletes. Bordo (1993) and Hargreaves (1994) claim that within western white society, 'slender muscularity' is the current female bodily ideal; an ideal that requires far more discipline than simply being 'thin'. A slim body, according to these theorists, is now not enough; it needs to be taut, contained, wrinkle and 'sag' free. Brace-Govan (2002:1) argues, however, that 'although there is increasing interest in the active and somewhat muscled body for women, cultural representations remain fixed on slender and nubile'. Whilst I am generally more supportive of Brace-Govan's stance, it is worth briefly discussing the extent to which sports ideals have impacted on female bodies and to determine at which point 'muscles on women' becomes considered excessive by hegemonic standards.

Leigh Peele conducted a recent online poll with 2000 women, investigating what the term 'too bulky' means to women. Her results, despite problematic methodological issues, are worth citing:

- The majority of women don't like the look of muscle on themselves or others.

- The majority of women feel that men prefer the look of ‘lack of muscle’ on the body.
- The majority felt that Jessica Biel and Hilary Swank (in Million Dollar Baby) define “bulky.”
- The majority of the women expressed little interest in lifting weights, even if it didn’t result in a “bulking” effect.
- More women choose to be fat over muscular.
- Based on the actress looks, women prefer softer and trim over too lean or too muscular.

(<http://www.leighpeelee.com/bulky-muscles-and-training-females-the-definition>, accessed 02/06/2010)

Interestingly, according to this survey (and of course the pictures that were presented), Madonna was considered less muscular than Biel and Swank due to her low body fat percentage. Certainly in my own discussions I have found that Madonna’s physique is usually placed directly on the borderlines of an acceptable versus transgressive female physique. ‘Muscularity’ of course is always contextual. Whilst non-gym members may perceive Madonna as far too muscular, gym users more accustomed to muscular bodies may not. Likewise, compared to my students (aged 16-19) I may appear ‘big’, yet to the average sports person I may not. For this reason, it is perhaps helpful to turn to ideas on female muscularity that have been limited to the gym environment.

Dworkin (2001) argues that whilst there has been a fitness drive encouraging women to work-out with and on their bodies, in an unprecedented manner (see Bordo 1988 and Chapter 5 for more detail), there are still limits on muscularity. This ‘glass-ceiling of muscularity’, is negotiated on a daily basis by ‘ordinary’ (i.e. not extremists such as bodybuilders or anorexics) women within the gym sphere. Utilizing evidence from her ethnographic study, Dworkin claims that three-quarters of women articulated an intense fear of creating a physique considered too muscular, and consequently structured their workouts to prevent this from happening (e.g. limiting or refraining from weight-training, or lifting light weights). She points out however, that rather than limitations on muscular size being imposed upon these women, they are active participants who

individually define it, wrestle with it, nudge it and shape it. Thus she concludes that 'women in fitness sites are immersed in an area of continual negotiation as to the placement of the ceiling, which is in part influenced by historically shifting definitions of emphasized femininity' (Dworkin 2001:346).

Although Dworkin's and Peele's work is a step in the right direction, perhaps a typology, similar to Monaghan's (2001) on male muscularity is needed to explore the nuances of female muscle further. For the purposes of my study however, it suffices to note that female bodybuilders are 'transgressive' by their extreme muscularity, which is demonstrated by the extreme reactions people have to their appearance. Although a degree of toned and shapely female muscularity may be more acceptable than it once was. As Peele's research suggests, however, the borders of normality appear to be mediated through a neo-liberal, heterosexual consumer culture. In this context, while a subtle muscularity defined by an overarching femininity may be tolerated and even sometimes desired, a female body defined by muscularity is more likely to be viewed as a monstrous abnormality. So too is the very idea of female bodybuilding.

Female bodybuilders, indeed, are engaged in the pursuit of a visual ideal long viewed as the *antithesis of femininity*. Weight-lifting has a long history, stretching back to ancient Greece and Egypt, while the early years of bodybuilding are generally located in the period 1880-1930 (Dutton, 1995), but this is a *male* history. Eugene Sandow was one of the first exponents of bodybuilding - engaging in public performances of 'muscular display' and promoting the 'Grecian ideal' of symmetry and mass as a model of male physicality - but bodybuilding was widely viewed as an exclusively male phenomenon. The apparently inherent maleness of this activity has meant that it is not just the *appearance* of female bodybuilders that transgresses gendered norms but the choices, actions, experiences and patterns of consumption characteristic of these 'abnormal' women.

Females with large muscles evoke strong reactions from men and women, often involving disgust, discomfort, anger and threat. As a consequence Bartky (1988), a Foucauldian Feminist, was one of the first to herald female bodybuilders as resisting hegemonic norms by creating 'new styles of the flesh'. Feminists such

as Frueh (2001) also celebrate the hypermuscular women as creating aesthetic/erotic projects for *themselves* – and not for the pleasure of men. However, not all feminists share this view. Bordo (1993) argues that female bodybuilding lies on the same axis as anorexia, in terms of control and hatred of the body. This disagreement over the potentially liberatory capacity of female bodybuilding continues within feminist discourse. Do women who pump iron resist physical restrictions of imposed femininity, or are they engaged in an ultimately oppressive quest for ‘perfect bodies’?

What is striking about the debate over women bodybuilders is that no suitable empirical work exists that would allow us to begin to properly adjudicate between these views. Furthermore, the current theories imply that female bodybuilders either resist norms of femininity or are oppressed – as if it is simply a choice of one or the other, rather than a more complex situation that may require us to go beyond this binary opposition.

Over the last 20 years there has been a small but growing research tradition in this area. However, much of this literature - including St Martin and Gavey (1996), Aoki (1996) and Mansfield and McGinn (1993) - has focused on the *textual symbolism* of what this flesh represents. Little attention, in contrast, has been devoted to phenomenological issues involving the *experience* of the lived body. Frequently, the muscular body is referred to as a costume, or a ‘coat of muscles’ (Ian, 1995:75), but this neglects the actual sweat, effort and pain of the bodybuilding process. In order to assess whether female bodybuilding can be seen as resistant, transgressive or empowering, there needs to be in-depth research into the actual processes of bodily activity (Bartky, 1988; Lloyd, 1996:91; Bordo, 1992:16). In other words, there needs to be an exploration into the ‘carnal realities of the sporting body’; research that focuses on women’s phenomenological , sensual experiences and those processes involved in the corporeal transformations that take place as they train in the gym (Sparkes, 2009:27). The subculture of male bodybuilders has been documented in some detail (by Klein (1993) in the U.S. and Monaghan (2001) in the U.K), but no comprehensive ethnographical study has yet taken place exploring how female bodybuilders construct their identities in this male dominated environment.

In order to assess the liberatory potential of female bodybuilding, more in-depth research is needed into the daily lifestyles, identities, interactions (inside the gym and outside the subculture), and phenomenological experiences associated with this activity. Against this background, this thesis is a contribution to the 'filling in' and 'fleshing out' of this lacunae.

Aims and Objectives of the study

The aim of this research is to investigate whether female bodybuilding can be seen as an emancipatory and empowering transgression from hegemonic standards of femininity. Due to the broadness of this aim, it is helpful to break it down into key questions:

- Does female bodybuilding allow women to build a body for themselves?
- Does female bodybuilding allow women to construct an identity that they can be content with in contemporary society?
- Can female bodybuilders find pleasure in embodiment?
- Is the daily lifestyle of the female bodybuilder liberating or constricting?
- Are normative representations and social perceptions of female bodybuilders empowering?
- Are the actual bodybuilding processes resistant/transgressive/empowering in relation to social norms of femininity?
- Does female bodybuilding allow women to be less spatially restricted either inside or outside of the gym?

Although, the concept of 'empowerment' is pivotal to this research, it is extremely difficult to operationalise. Indeed, as it will become clear throughout this thesis, feminists interpret the term in different ways, depending on their beliefs and the context in which it is used. Furthermore, in the same way as explicit definitions of empowerment are rare (Gilroy, 1989), indicators measuring progress towards

empowerment remain even more elusive. Nevertheless, a useful definition of women's empowerment is offered by Mosedale (2005:252) as, 'the process by which women redefine and extend what is possible for them to be and do in situations where they have been restricted, compared to men, from being and doing'. Others agree with this approach, but argue for a more pro-active definition that affects gendered social roles and structures. For example Women Win (a charity aimed at empowering girls and women worldwide through sport) suggests that empowerment must effect an improvement in women's possibilities for 'being and doing' through an enhancement in 'opportunities for girls and women to gain awareness of their rights and capabilities, the courage and ability to make life-changing decisions, and access to resources, leadership possibilities and public structures'. Similarly Kate Young (1993:157) claims that discussions surrounding empowerment must include a 'transformatory potential', that takes into account the need to bring about permanent changes to women's political and social position in society. Thus, whilst some feminists believe that a practice can be considered 'empowering' even if it has a very small effect on an individual and personal level, others argue that 'empowerment' must have a profound impact on social relations and gender inequality.

Moving to the dimension of this issue most relevant to my thesis, whilst there are variants in the definitions provided by sports feminists advocating '*bodily empowerment*', the following interpretation has been popular in feminist literature:

Bodily empowerment lies in women's abilities to forge an identity that is not bound by traditional definitions of what it 'means to be female', and to work for a new femininity that is not defined by normative beauty or body ideals, but rather by the qualities attained through athleticism (such as skill, strength, power, self-expression) (Hall, 1990; Lang, 1998; Hesse-Biber, 1996:127).

This can be broken down into two related but distinct aspects.

- 1) Individual empowerment. This could comprise a number of elements such as gaining a sense of self-definition through taking control of the body

(both by manipulating the body's appearance and through the bodily practices and processes), body self-possession, bodily self-respect, bodily satisfaction, physical presence, skills and bodily competences (self-strength, autonomy, self-power) own choice and a life of dignity in accordance with one's values.

(McDermott et al., 1996; Gilroy, 1997; Willis, 1990)

- 2) Social empowerment. This could include challenging the objectification of women's bodies and re-defining gender roles by resisting the cultural processes which tend to define or control the female body.

(Hall, 1990; Gilroy, 1989; McDermott et al, 1996; Willis, 1990)

The purpose is not to provide an all encompassing definition, but rather to advocate the multiplicities of 'empowerment', which will be considered during this study. Furthermore, empowerment must be viewed as complex, sometimes contradictory, and a multi-dimensional concept that can be understood as a process (involving minimally individual and social dimensions) rather than simply an event.

As one of the central concerns of this thesis is the 'problem of female bodies', it is useful to provide a brief overview of some of the issues and perspectives commonly addressed within and adopted by this literature that relate to my concern with empowerment and oppression.

Female body politics/feminist perspectives on the body

Since the 1980's there has been an explosion of sociological informed 'body studies'. Feminist theorists have long focussed on bodily matters, however, and have a strong tradition of exploring the contrasting ways in which female bodies have been depicted, invaded, altered, decorated and, more recently, pleased (Brooks, 1995). Whilst the 'female body', may have been at the centre of the feminist agenda, how it has been viewed and consequently what political action should be taken in relation to its empowerment has varied tremendously over

time. It is therefore perhaps unsurprising that feminist thought on the body continues to be diverse.

In Chapter 2, I document and discuss the long standing relationship of women to their bodies. Without wishing to duplicate this here, I shall now provide a brief synopsis of the major feminist approaches to the body. Historically, in western society, the body has been viewed as the devalued 'other' in the Cartesian mind/body dichotomy. The body has been seen as a natural, fixed and unchangeable material object, which must be overcome in order to free the mind to pursue rational and intellectual thought. This option of transcendence, however, according to second wave feminists, has only been open to men. Women, due to their bodily processes and association with nature have been seen as being rooted in their biology and consequently seen as intellectually inferior [to men]. Thus, women have been negatively equated with the body as a phenomenon that precludes their empowerment as social subjects.

Feminists initially tackled this 'body' politic problem in broadly three different ways: (1) The body should be ignored, (2) the body should be overcome, (3) the body should be celebrated. The first group of feminist thinkers rejected biological determinism and argued that the differences between men and women's bodies have been exaggerated and socially constructed in order to retain patriarchy (e.g. Spelman, 1982; Oakley, 1972; Haslanger, 1995; Millett, 1971). Thus the links between nature/women/body can and should be dismantled to create equality between the sexes. The second group of feminists, despite coming from both liberal and radical perspectives, both describe the reproductive system as a physical burden which needs to be overcome. For instance, Simone de Beauvoir ([1949] 1952) compared it to a 'carnivorous swamp' and the radical feminist Firestone (1979) embraced a future where advanced reproductive technologies might liberate women from the 'oppressive' 'natural conditions' of childbirth. What both groups of feminists arguably have in common, is a desire to achieve empowerment via the attainment of intellectual equality with men according to masculine standards.

The third group of feminists (e.g. McMillian, 1982; Griffin, 1978; Daly, 1984) which for simplicity I shall bracket under 'essentialist feminists', have argued in direct contrast that the female body, far from being negative, should be

'reclaimed' and celebrated. Essentialists believe that women's reproductive capabilities are unique and awesome, and should be guarded jealously against the incursions of male dominated biotechnology (Birke, 1999:63). Furthermore, they claim that women have special emotional abilities such as interpersonal skills, nurturing and ethics. However, the problem of this approach is that it replicates a biological determinism that has historically been responsible for women's second class status. In addition, it also universalises men and women's bodies, and likewise their inevitable separate roles in society, consequently 'trapping' women in their bodies.

Ironically, the above perspectives, which can be reduced to social constructionism versus essentialism and biological determinism, end up reiterating the detrimental masculine western dichotomous thinking (e.g. mind/body, culture/nature, reason/emotion) - as each privileges one side over another (Gatens, 1996). For some feminists, the influence of postmodernist and post-structuralist thinking has provided a way of overcoming and escaping this dualist trap. As the belief in a singular reality floundered under postmodernism, so too did the notion of a singular 'body' that could be identified. Indeed 'the' body - now often seen as a discursive construction, opened up to become multiple bodies, marked not only by sex, but by race, sexuality, class, disability and so on (Birke, 1999). With this reinterpretation came a more 'fluid' approach to embodiment, and also the mind/body dichotomy.

Foucault's work has held great appeal for some feminists as it positions 'the body' within discourse, as an historical and cultural entity rather than as a biologically fixed essence (McNay, 1991). To simplify, Foucault sees 'the body' as a text formed by [bio-]power. This idea of a 'docile body' that can be shaped, manipulated and constructed lends itself well to a feminist explanation of patriarchy, as it links the daily lived practices of the body, to regimes of discipline and regulation that shape behaviour and appearance. In this respect, Bartky (1988) and Bordo (1993) have developed a Foucauldian feminist approach highlighting how women's bodies are under constant surveillance and disciplinary practices such as keep-fit, health care, fashion etc. These approaches are discussed in more detail in Chapters 3 and 4.

Whilst there is not enough space to do any real form of justice to these approaches, recent French feminist writers such as Irigaray, Cixous, and Kristeva have also had a huge impact on feminist thought. Whilst these writers have very diverse ideas, all have been inspired by post-structuralism and psychoanalysis and seek to comprehend women's biological and social existence, and its symbolic constitution, in and through linguistic discourse (Williams and Bendelow, 1998). Furthermore they are united in their ambition to contest dichotomised modes of (male-stream) Western thought by suggesting an alternative process of feminine desire – one in which the masculine privileging of optics, straight lines, solids and self-contained unities, gives way to more pluralised notions of fluidity and flow (Williams and Bendelow, 1998:125).

The dilemma for feminists is whether it is possible to construct a theory that accounts for biological 'fleshy' material bodies as well as societal and discursive inscriptions/textual analysis. Butler's feminist post-structuralist work (utilising a Lacanian interpretation of 'sex' - see Butler 1990, 1993) has been seen as step in this direction. Rather than implying that there is no physical body she claims that 'language and materiality are fully embedded in each other' (Butler, 1993:69). At the same time she postulates that 'there is no reference to a pure body which is not at the same time a further formation of that body' (Butler, 1993:10). Her influential work on performativity highlights how traditional embodied dichotomies (e.g. male/female, heterosexual/homosexual) are actually precarious constitutions, which are ironically both undermined and reasserted through abject body performances (I explore Butler's work further on p.91 and p.96). Like other feminist postmodernists and post-structuralists who go beyond the binary, Butler has been accused of being too abstract in her work and not focusing enough on 'fleshy' bodies. For this reason I now turn to those who advocate a more material form of 'corporeal feminism' (Grosz, 1994:4).

Grosz (1994) argues that in order to create a sophisticated theory of 'corporeal feminism' six factors must be taken into account. First, the Cartesian mind/body dualism must be avoided and exchanged for some sort of 'embodied subjectivity' or 'psychical corporeality'. Second, the focus on corporeality should not be bound to one sex, or for that matter race. Third, there needs to be a rejection of a normative singular body in favour of multiple and diverse bodies.

Her fourth factor calls for an avoidance of biological and essentialist explanations. Her fifth factor states that models need to represent a dialogue capturing the ongoing interconnectedness of the 'inside' and 'outside', the body and the mind, without resorting to the reduction of the mind to the brain. Lastly, Grosz states that by viewing the body in a different light, theorists can rise above the binary instead of taking sides. This alternative understanding of the body is explained in the following quote:

[The body should be viewed as]...the threshold or borderline concept that hovers perilously and undecidedly at the pivotal point of the binary pairs...In the face of social constructionism, the body's tangibility, its matter, its (quasi) nature may be invoked; but, in opposition to essentialism, biologism, and naturalism, it is the body as cultural product that must be stressed (Grosz 1994: 23-24).

Grosz supports this six pronged approach to corporeal feminism by providing a model. Adapting Lacan's analogy, she depicts this complex relationship between bodies-and-minds as a Mobius strip (i.e. one circuit around the strip indicates a continuous movement over one plane, and the object returns in inverted form). Symbolising infinity, the Mobius strip represents the inseparability of 'inside' and 'outside' whilst at the same time acknowledging that they are distinctions between them. This model enables Grosz to further claim that the body is neither, whilst also being both; the private and/or public, self or other, nature or culture.

Other feminists have moved even further away than Grosz, from the discourse and textual analysis frequently affiliated with postmodernism and post-structuralism. The phenomenological work of Merleau-Ponty (which argues that the self cannot be separated from its corporeality) has been taken up by feminists such as Marion Iris Young (1990) and used to create a theory that focuses on the differential forms of '*gendered* modalities, structures and conditions of our embodied being-in-the-world' (Williams and Bendelow, 1998:117). It is this pioneering feminist phenomenological approach that I engage with during this thesis, and explore in more detail in the following Chapter (2).

It is clear that the body, and its role in the empowerment and oppression of women, has been a subject of passionate concern for feminists. In recent years,

through the development of feminist post-structuralist and postmodernist thought, the dualist Cartesian of mind/body has come under increasing attack and new ways of conceptualising the body have been envisioned. The new challenge lies, according to Shildrick and Price (1999:12), in developing an inclusive ‘bodily’ theory :

[Not] in the hope of recovering an authentic body, unburdened of patriarchal assumptions, but in the full acknowledgment of the multiple and fluid possibilities of differential embodiment’.

Chapter Outlines

Chapter 2 sets out to explore the underpinning theoretical and methodological issues of my research. There are two main purposes of this chapter. The first is to describe how the research was conducted and analysed, and to justify the methodological tools employed. The second is to discuss the epistemological and ontological concerns of the investigation using a reflective approach as, ultimately, the shape and nature of ‘what’ is known is inevitably entwined and intimately connected with ‘how’ it is known (Stanley, 1990). Thus epistemology, methodology and empirical data are indissolubly interconnected. In the second half of the chapter I explore my own relationship to the study and ‘field dilemmas’ that arose and analyse how these in turn impacted upon my research and findings. Whilst Chapter 2 appears to stand alone before the main narrative of the thesis commences, it is a vital chapter that not only sets out the details of how the research was conducted, but also explores the difficulties and complexities of the investigation. In it, I provide a personal account that reveals my own position within, and my perspective upon, the research, in the same way as I ask the female bodybuilders to provide a personal account of themselves. As Markula (1995:425) decrees ‘personal experiences must be considered to fully grasp the lived issues of female and feminine bodies, as what may seem oppressive to theorists may actually serve as a means for power for women involved’.

Chapter 3 provides a brief western history of women's corporeal oppression, acknowledging the importance of the past in shaping the present day context in which bodybuilding occurs. Here, I seek to demonstrate how discourses surrounding women's bodies have been used to justify gender inequalities, before illustrating how these ideologies become culturally inscribed on the body itself via normalised oppressive practices of body modification.

These powers of patriarchal jurisdiction have not gone uncontested, however, and Chapter 4 focuses on how women have used their bodies as 'sites of opposition'. This Chapter begins by highlighting the importance of the women's movement in the development of 'reclaiming' discourse. Despite apparent progress, however, the current political landscape for women - according to many feminists - still looks oppressive. The destructive obsession with beauty and the corresponding increase of mainstream beauty focused body modifications, have lead some to advocate alternative body projects as a way of resisting hegemonic norms and 'reclaiming' their bodies to empower themselves. Chapter 4 concludes by exploring these various radical and controversial body modifications, before assessing them through the lens of contrasting feminist perspectives.

In Chapter 5, I outline the neglected history of female bodybuilding, before moving on to review the small but increasing corpus of literature on this subject. Much of this work comes from feminists who have had strongly divided reactions to this relatively new but growing phenomena. Whilst advocates claim that female bodybuilding is a way of empowering and liberating women, others see it as another form of entrapment in the guise of choice and agency (Bordo, 1988). The Chapter finishes by noting the absence of research into the actual practices and processes of female bodybuilding, and argues that more empirical research needs to take place in order to *evaluate* these contrasting arguments.

In order to rectify this neglect into the interactions and embodiment of the female bodybuilder, Chapters 6,7,8 and 9 draw upon my empirical data. Chapter 6 focuses on the identity, experiences and lifestyle of the female bodybuilder outside the gym environment. The chapter begins by demonstrating the costs and consequences female bodybuilders confront when transgressing the gendered interaction order (Goffman, 1983). It then explores the various strategies that the female bodybuilder pursues in attempting to preserve her sense of self against the

stigma and marginalisation that she faces in society. In the final section of this chapter, I look at the limitations and further difficulties associated with maintaining an identity as a female bodybuilder - specifically the detrimental consequences of investing too much in the body's appearance. As the first substantive empirical chapter, it also introduces the recurring and prominent theme of the 'Janus-facedness' of female bodybuilding.

In Chapter 7, I explore the 'life-world' (Husserl, 1936 [1971]) of the female bodybuilder in the gym. This chapter provides an ethnography of the gym through the employment of the under-explored consideration of 'space'. Here, I argue that female bodybuilders perceive the gym as 'home', as a hospitable sanctuary that, at least in part, shelters them from the negative interactions of wider society. The first part of the chapter describes how the environment of the gym is organised into highly distinctive gendered spaces, moving beyond a focus on 'place' onto an investigation into how identity is constructed and expressed, as well as how social relations are produced, negotiated and contested in this area. In the second part of the chapter, I explore how female bodybuilders, despite stigmatisation, use their spatial transgressions and deviance to their own advantage, by using a more phenomenological understanding of space.

Chapter 8 investigates the actual phenomenological experiences of the female bodybuilders as they train in the gym - looking at how the women's subjectivities are expressed, lived and created through their bodies. It juxtaposes a view of bodybuilding as a 'masculine overcoming' of pain and injury (and the security of developing and living in an 'armoured body') against the actual experiences of female bodybuilders. I begin by depicting the bodybuilder's 'culture of pain' and noting how this is interpreted by critical feminists and others as being part of a detrimental hyper-masculine force that subjects the body to more self-hatred, pain and violence. I then turn to the voices and experiences of the women themselves as a way of assessing whether there are alternative, non-pathological readings of this culture.

In Chapter 9, I turn to the most important part of the life of the female bodybuilder - the competition, an event that deals with the culmination of their ambitions and 'sets the seal' on these women's identities. Drawing on Victor Turner's (1992) work on liminality, this chapter analyses the consequences of the

competition. While Turner's depiction of ritual cannot be mapped wholesale onto the phenomenon of female bodybuilding, it serves as a useful heuristic means of exploring how the women involved in this subculture seek to develop new identities and resolve the status problems experienced in their ordinary lives. In this way, the chapter questions whether the competition provides a 'liminal' stage, whereby women pass from an identity of being 'just' a woman who trains hard, to the identity of a female bodybuilder - an identity associated with a new role in society, with new rights and responsibilities. In addition, it also analyses whether this could more adequately be captured by Turner's notion of the 'liminoid'; an escape from daily life, but nothing that leads to a permanent recognised status in society that would elevate these women from their deviant role which they occupy. In order to adjudicate between these two opposing possibilities, this chapter follows the journey of 'Michelle' (a bodybuilder of 5 years), my key informant, from the start of her preparation to compete, to that moment of climax.

In the concluding chapter I summarise and draw together the main themes of my research. I return to my main research aim and use my findings to assess whether female bodybuilding can indeed be an emancipatory and empowering transgression from hegemonic standards of feminine embodiment. I then proceed by discussing the possible limitations of long-term female bodybuilding body projects, and call for further research in this area.

This thesis explores the lives and experiences of the 'bizarre' world of female bodybuilders. It explores the double-edged sword and 'Janus-facedness' of female body modifications and in particular, muscular female body-projects, by looking at the positive and negative processes, practices and interactions associated with this lifestyle.

Chapter 2: Methodology - Researching Female Bodybuilders

Introduction

The particular methods and techniques chosen and used when conducting research have a profound impact on both the research process and the substantive findings. The intention of this chapter is to explore this relationship in connection with my investigation into female bodybuilders. For the sake of clarity, and to make my work more accessible to the reader, the chapter is divided into two sections. However, in the same way as the ethnographer cannot easily be disentangled from the research itself, themes do at times overlap with each other. The aim of the first section is to describe and justify the methods employed during my research. I begin by contextualising my approach within a theoretical framework, before accounting for the various methods utilised during the project, including data collection and analysis. The purpose of the second section is to provide a more transparent, 'messier' and open account of the 'ethnographic self' (Coffey, 1999), exploring the moral dilemmas and issues I encountered during the research and how these impacted upon my study and my findings.

SECTION I

Theoretical Background

The overriding aim of the research was to facilitate a rich portrait of the values, practices, norms and, above all, the lived experiences of female bodybuilders. With this aim in mind, my research approach sought not only to analyse the wider milieu in which female bodybuilding occurred, but to explore via ethnography and interview the interactions and phenomenological experiences associated with this activity.

Feminist phenomenology and body pedagogics

Phenomenology is a very broad term that encompasses a range of diverse academic theories. Simply put, the origins of phenomenological thought focused on the 'lived' experiences as understood from the first person perspective. Throughout this thesis I use the term to refer to the school of philosophy associated with the work of Maurice Merleau-Ponty, who describes this technique as 'a manner or style of thinking' without any prior formal experience or education (Merleau-Ponty, 1962, viii). As Wertz (2009) notes 'in focusing on the person's ways of being-in-the-world, phenomenology descriptively elaborates structures of the I ('ego' or 'self'), various kinds of intentionality (experience), and the constitution of the experienced world'. Like others within the phenomenological tradition, such as Heidegger and Sartre, Merleau-Ponty postulated that the body, as a mode-of-being in the world, was always embedded within the social and contextual fabric of society. The search for a 'pure' form of transcendental bodily essence would consequently be a futile endeavour. However, these phenomenologists adeptly argued that as all experience is embodied - the body is a living, breathing and moving phenomenon that actively interprets and interacts with the world - nothing can be done or understood without the medium of the body. Merleau-Ponty, took this theoretical approach one step further and postulated that consciousness itself is embodied, and consequently 'we are our body' (1962:206). As Crossley (2001: 123) puts it; 'the corporeal schema is an incorporated bodily know-how and practical sense: a perspective grasp upon the world from the "point of view" of the body'.

Feminists have criticised traditional phenomenology and the work of Merleau-Ponty for overlooking women's experience and omitting any gender specific analysis¹. This neglect however, has been rectified, at least in part, since the pioneering work of Iris Marion Young in the late 1970's, and the explosion of research into female embodiment in the late 1980's by feminist scholars such as Sandra Bartky, Christine Battersby, Susan Bordo, Judith Butler and Elizabeth Grosz (which have been touched upon in Chapter 1). Young argues that the increasing popularity and significance of 'the lived body' in Women's studies is

¹ It should be noted that Simone De Beauvoir's groundbreaking scholarly work has more recently been attributed with having more in common with the work of Merleau-Ponty than to Jean-Paul Sartre's (Young, 2005).

understandable, given that much feminist thought has focused on the ways in which women's bodily differences have been used to justify structural inequalities (see Chapters 1, 3 and 4 for more detail). Thus as Young (2005:4) declares, 'inquiry about the status and malleability of bodies in relation to social status is a matter for us [feminists] of some urgency'. Feminists such as Kruks, Marshall, Grimshaw, and increasingly Grosz have joined Young in advocating the importance of phenomenological descriptions of the lived body experience to feminist theory and practice. Kruks, for example, believes that feminist phenomenology provides the potential for women to empathize with each other's embodied experience, opening up the possibilities of creating social criticism and political activism.

It was Marion Iris Young's (1990) paper 'Throwing like a Girl', which initially drew me to this theoretical approach. This essay, by reworking Merleau-Ponty's *Phenomenology of Perception*, seeks to explore the way in which women's movement and motility is restricted. Young suggests that 'it is the ordinary purposive orientation of the body as a whole towards things and its environment that initially defines the relation of a subject to its world' (1990:134). However, she also argues (drawing also on the work by Simone De Beauvoir on immanence and transcendence) that women's bodily movement is experienced and inhabited in a different way to males. Taking this difference as the starting point for her own feminist analysis, Young suggests that there are three commonalities of female embodiment in relation to action/movement. Her first point is that women tend to live their lives in 'ambiguous transcendence', refraining from throwing their whole bodies into movement and viewing their bodies as a 'fragile encumbrance'. Secondly, the female body suffers from 'inhibited intentionality'. Instead of believing in their bodies and physical capacities, women limit themselves by thinking 'I cannot'. Last of all, Young identifies a 'discontinuous unity' between women and their bodies as well as between their bodies and their environment including the space that surrounds them.

Young's other essays engage more with women's 'fleshy body' and lived experiences providing thick, vivid subjective descriptions of, for example, menstruation, pregnancy, clothing and being breastfed - depictions which may

otherwise have remained invisible and stigmatized in Western philosophical thought. Furthermore in one of her more recent essays 'Lived Body Vs Gender' (2005) she calls not simply for just a development of feminist phenomenology of the lived body, but also for a reconfiguration of gender. These two approaches are reflected in her work on female embodiment, which are on the one hand 'expressive' and on the other 'critical'.

Young's work on female bodily experience and space provides a useful tool to aid the investigation of female bodybuilders and 'empowerment' – helping us explore how these women use their bodies, feel about their bodies and experience their bodies. As she herself admits, however, due to the influential writing of post-structuralists and postmodernists which highlight the impossibility of discovering a "pure' embodied experience prior to ideology and science...one can no longer say that phenomenology is a rigorous method, but more that it is an approach to inquiry' (2005:8). Thus, whilst phenomenological description of the lived body provide a unique and useful contribution to the analysis of female bodies, it needs to be considered alongside other approaches such as deconstructionist and psychoanalytical theories. However, as Grosz (1994:236) convincingly points out, phenomenology remains essential as 'without some acknowledgement of the formative role of embodied experience in the establishment of knowledge, feminism has no grounds from which to dispute patriarchal norms'.

Despite the recent work by feminists on embodiment, phenomenological theorists have been criticised for their lack of engagement with empirical data (Kerry and Armour, 2000). In this context, Sparkes (2009) and Hockey and Allen-Collinson (2007:117), call for 'insights from other theoretical perspectives' in order to "flesh out" the analyses. Research into 'body pedagogics' using ethnographic work, alongside interviews may potentially bridge this gap and provide a more holistic, grounded and empirical account incorporating the carnal realities of the lived body. Shilling (2007:13) defines the analysis of body pedagogics as involving the study of:

the central pedagogic *means* through which a culture seeks to transmit its main corporeal techniques, skills and dispositions, the embodied

experiences associated with acquiring or failing to acquire these attributes, and the actual embodied *changes* resulting from this process.²

Body pedagogics involves ‘deploying the body as a tool of inquiry and vector of knowledge’ (Wacquant, 2004:viii). If then, as Bourdieu (1997/2000:41) declares, humans ‘learn by the body’, it is imperative that researchers become immersed in the culture being investigated and ‘strive to acquire the appetites and the competencies that make the diligent agent in the universe under consideration’ (Wacquant, 2004 viii). In this context, body pedagogical accounts fit in well with, and complement, ethnographic approaches of research.

In summary, a central theme of my investigation was an attempt to explore the ‘body pedagogics’, or corporeally relevant aspects of education and socialisation (Shilling, 2007, 2008b; Shilling & Mellor, 2007), involved in becoming and being a female bodybuilder. While I do not use the terminology of body pedagogics, preferring to pursue my explorations in a less formalized manner, my research approach incorporated aspects of phenomenology from a feminist perspective, as a way of exploring the means, experiences and outcomes of women’s bodybuilding via ethnography and interview.

Feminist ethnography

Ethnography ‘seeks to capture, interpret and explain how a group, organization or community live, experience and make sense of their lives and their world’ (Robson, 2000:89). Whilst this method was originally associated with anthropologists studying non-western cultures, since the 1920’s ethnographic research has been undertaken by sociologists.

In the 1920’s and 30’s, the Chicago School employed participant observation as a favoured sociological research method, and this method became synonymous with the names Whyte and Burgess, and other subcultural theorists at later dates. Stuart Hall (1980:23-24) claims that supporters of the Chicago School, ‘were sensitive to the differences in ‘lived’ values and meanings that differentiated subcultures from the dominant culture’. They ‘stressed the importance of the ways

² Emphasis in original

in which social actors define for themselves the conditions in which they live – their definitions of situations’ (ibid.). Even more recently, cultural studies scholars have taken to investigating groups and subcultures within their own society. The captivating nature of ethnographic work therefore ‘rests in its ability to offer rich and detailed knowledge of a group’s distinctive way of life’ (Lowe, 1998: 1670). As Ferrell and Hamm (1998:225) note, the participant observation and immersion in the life of a group central to ethnography provides a way of ‘getting inside the skin of one’s subjects’ by gaining empathy with, and to an extent, sharing the lived experiences of those ‘emotions, sentiments, and physical/mental states that shape their responses to this world.’ Habitual presence in the researched environment, combined with observation and supplemented by interviews that can range from casual conversations to more structured dialogue, can build trust and enable the researcher to develop a layered and nuanced picture of the cultural milieu and its occupants (Krane and Baird, 2005:94; see also Cresswell, 1998). Ethnographic research methods, in short, provide a means by which it is possible to understand the ‘culture of a group from the perspective of group members’ (Krane and Baird, 2005: 87).

Furthermore, these sympathetic and experiential methods utilized and endorsed by ethnography, that complement phenomenological insights, appear ideally compliant with feminist research (Klein, 1983; Reinharz, 1983; Mies, 1983; Stanley and Wise, 1983). Both approach ‘knowledge’ as contextual and interpersonal - citing the importance of respect, connection and empathy between the researcher and participant. For these reasons, there has been a growth of ‘feminist ethnographers’ in recent years, emphasizing the quality of relationships within the research and ‘the quality of the understanding that emerges from those relationships’ (Reinharz, 1983:185).

However it would be wrong to assume that there is a singular approach to ‘feminist ethnography’ and the body, or even that there is a consensus that this approach is even possible (Stacey, 1988; Abu-Lughod, 1990). In the same way that there is no universal ‘feminist’ way to do research there are differing and controversial theories over ‘*how* it should be done’ and indeed ‘*what actually is*’ feminist ethnography. For example, how can feminist ethnography be defined? Is it the style of writing and genre? Does it depend on the sex of the author? Is it

about the commitment to feminism or the object of inquiry? (Dauth, 2009:15). With these questions in mind it is useful to briefly sketch the influential theories on the topic in order to situate more clearly my own approach to this thesis. Whilst I do not have the space to explore the many divergent perspectives put forth by various critical theorists (see for example Stanley and Wise, 1990; Visweswaran, 1994; Strathern, 1987; Bell, 1993; Kirby, 1993; Skeggs, 1995), I have selected feminists who may be seen as representative of various schools of thought.

Essentialist feminists such as the radical Catherine Mackinnon, argue that women have different bodies and likewise a 'different voice' (Gilligan, 1982) with which they experience and interpret the world (for example ethics, writing style, priorities, biology, relationships). According to this perspective, men have owned the sphere of objectivity and used it as a strategy of male power (refer to Chapter 3 for more detail). Thus as feminist anthropologists have noted, the subjective experiences of women have historically been devalued and dismissed as 'popularized accounts' (Dwyer, 1979). For example, wives of male anthropologists (e.g. Elizabeth Fernea), unlike their husbands who wrote in an objective, positivist manner as a scientific account, wrote from the first person perspective in a more critical, reflexive and 'subjective' narrative (Visweswaran, 1994). Within this context, Second wave feminists embraced the notion of reflexivity (critiquing the dogma of objectivity) in their research and sought new forms of expressing themselves through alternative writing genres and styles. It was believed that research should be women-centered - conducted *by* women, *on* women and *for* women - using bodily experiences as pivotal to explorations of the social and personal world.

However, as notions of a 'universal woman' began to be dismantled and replaced by a more inclusive and differentiated understanding of 'gender' - intersected by other formations of identity, such as class, sexuality, race, age and disability - the idea of a 'feminist ethnography' fell under suspicion of re-enacting western assumptions of biological essentialism. In response to this argument, Abu- Lughod (1990) claims that rather than presenting a universal woman, feminist ethnographers - by exploring issues such as sexuality, marriage, motherhood, education, poverty and illness - can discover what it means to be a

woman in a variety of contexts and thus highlight the diversity of gendered experiences. Furthermore, she argues, this approach puts women and gender firmly on the political map - as a genuine concern of inquiry.

For 'native' anthropologist Diane Bell (1993:28), 'feminist ethnography', is an inevitable approach to her research. To Bell, feminist ethnography is characterized by making the experiences, knowledge, practice, feelings, thinking and being of women, not only visible, but as a political act of recognizing the particular knowledge of women, thus decentering men's ethnographic position. She further declares that there is no ungendered perspective on reality, and that all ethnographies are situated, contextual and partial. Bell's work does not ignore the male sphere (including their lives, work and opinions), although she claims that she does not privilege their experiences and assessments at the expense of females. Stacey (1988) however is very critical of Bell and Abu-Lughod, arguing that a feminist ethnography is impossible. She believes that because of the close relationships that are formed during field work, the inequality of the relationship between the researcher and researched leads to exploitation – contradicting the values of feminism (an argument I shall contest on p.51).

Whilst I believe we need to be cautious not to become essentialist about what a feminist ethnography might be, and need to be aware of the criticisms of which that postmodernists remind us of (e.g. Kirby, 1993; Clifford, 1986), I do believe that feminism plays an important role within ethnography. As Dauth (2009:16) points out, feminist ethnography can be used to help rethink the notion of difference between and within the genders (and across race, class, culture etc.). In addition it can develop 'one of the main inquiries of ethnography' that is of a critical, self-reflexive and political way of not just talking about social issues but actually *experiencing* it.

Methodological tools and my research

Although there has been a recent growth of ethnographic studies across a range of sports and leisure activities (e.g. Markula, 1995; Sands, 2002; Bolin and Granskog, 2003; Wheaton 2004; Sparkes, Partington and Brown, 2007; Sparkes,

2009; Monaghan, 2001), quantitative and interview methods still dominate the field of sports studies. Moreover, research into the 'sporting body' appears hesitant to engage in the 'lived experiences' of athletes. This is perhaps somewhat surprising given that many participants' cite phenomenological and sensuous elements in their experiences, and that sport is a very obvious and highly visible example of embodied practice (Hockey and Allen-Collinson, 2007:118). Qualitative research methods furthermore, provide the only way to gain opulent, substantial and deeply textured data essential to understanding people's lives and lived experiences. Moreover, ethnographic methods appear particularly suited to revealing the 'ways of life' pursued by the marginalized group that is female bodybuilders. They enable the researcher to avoid the suspicions that may be raised by a one-off or occasional interloper to a culture that is frequently derided by outsiders, and facilitate embodied experience to be gained of an activity that remains underinvestigated (Sparkes, 2009).

In terms of the study of female bodybuilders, while a number of studies have focused on the textual meanings and symbolic representations of women's muscle, they have frequently neglected the actual practices and daily lifestyle of female bodybuilders. Subcultures of male bodybuilders have been documented in some detail by Klein (1993) in America, and Monaghan (2001) in the UK, but ethnographic studies of female bodybuilders are at a premium and there exists no comprehensive study in the UK of how they construct their identities. In particular, there is a dearth of investigation into those phenomenological issues involving either the lived and emotional experiences of how the female bodybuilder's physique is constructed, or how their 'assault' on conventional norms of feminine appearance is received both inside and outside of the gym. In this context, the purpose of my study was not to generate representative or produce large scale quantitative data, but to uncover the 'processes' involved in the relation between women, bodybuilding and space which have not as yet been identified by current literature. The very nature of qualitative research is to create authenticity, rather than reliability, with the intention being to produce a genuine understanding of people's lives (Silverman, 1993).

By adopting participant observation, I was able to collect detailed empirical data, revealing the complexities, subtleties and interconnectiveness of

the subculture of female bodybuilding (Denscombe, 1998:149). Moreover, by utilizing the method of participant observation, I was able to 'hang around' and 'watch the action' (Pearson, 1994:ix) and consequently obtain information that I would never have thought of even asking about (Whyte, 1984). According to Silverman (1993) authentic ethnographers think, feel, touch, smell and live in the field and then contextualize the experiences within the wider social frame. This approach allows the person to work their way through the dense cultural fabric of the social world under investigation, in order to obtain an 'empathic understanding' and to try and 'see things as those involved see things' (May, 1997:136; Denscombe, 1998:69).

Qualitative interviews were also incorporated into my study to enable otherwise marginalised 'voices' a chance to be heard (Becker, 1997 [1963]). To have relied solely on participant observation may have resulted in important data being lost, as subcultural understandings are frequently taken for granted by informants and may consequently remain unspoken (Monaghan, 2001). Interviews provide access to situations which would otherwise remain unexplored (Burgess, 1984:106). For example, they allowed ingress into the biographies of individuals thus enabling me to acquire details of situations where I was not present.

Overview of the study: Research sites, access, sample, interviews, profile of the women

My two-year ethnographic study took place in the South of England (from 2006-2008). The majority of the ethnographic study focused on one site, a gym located in a large city that formed part of the biggest health and fitness club group in the world. This gym possessed an extensive free weights area (as well as fixed weights and cardiovascular work-out areas) and retained over four thousand members during the course of the research (see Chapter 7 for a description of the layout). Catering for a wide range of clientele, from female and male bodybuilders to casual aerobic exercisers, the gym marketed itself as a provider of good facilities at a low cost (i.e. aimed at lower income individuals and families). Once initial contacts were established in this gym, the study spread out into other sites and eventually covered a total of six gyms in the region as well as involving

my attendance at bodybuilding competitions³. Three of the gyms were of the health and fitness variety (similar to the depiction above). The other three were of a more 'hard core' type. Hard core gyms are distinguished from the former by their sole focus on weight-training - either for bodybuilding or power-lifting purposes. These gyms, also referred to as 'spit and sawdust' gyms, consist of basic facilities and do not endorse the luxuries of nice changing rooms or attractive décor⁴. Two of the 'hard-core' gyms in the study appeared run down and worn out, and apart from exercise bikes, were kitted out with simple free-weights equipment such as dumbbells, barbells, squat rack etc. The other hard core gym had a far more extensive range of weight-training equipment such as resistance machines and also provided limited cardiovascular equipment (such as treadmills, bikes and rowers) for clientele.

The fact that I was a qualified personal trainer, with over ten year's experience of working in various gyms and knew the basic gym 'linguistics'⁵ and basic 'body techniques' of weight-training assisted me in gaining rapport with female bodybuilders. Indeed, my first encounter with my key informant 'Michelle' (bodybuilder of 5 years) arose when she offered to 'spot' me in the weights area, whilst I was doing a dumbbell chest press exercise (Michelle is profiled in more detail in the second section of the chapter under 'relationships in the field').

During the period of the study I immersed myself in the daily routines of this lifestyle by training, dieting and interacting with female bodybuilders. While I did not regard myself as a bodybuilder (my identity in the research is explored in Section II) I became sufficiently strong enough for these women to take me seriously when working out with them, while not being so visibly muscular that I

³ Quotes by gym members are coded according to an allocated gym number (between 1-6, 1 being the main site) and for the sake of clarity given a number in the sequence that they are used within this PhD thesis. For example, (Male gym 2:5) translates as a comment made by a male gym user, in my second research site, and the fifth person within this gym to be quoted in this thesis.

⁴ The hard core gyms in this study all had signed pictures or posters of bodybuilders on the wall. In one of the gyms, porn magazines were kept on the reception counter.

⁵ Hobbs (2001:214) argues that participant observation allows the researcher to 'learn the language of the host community'. Whilst I was familiar with everyday 'gym lingo', elements of bodybuilding discourse, particularly in association to competitions, were an enigma to me at the start of my research. For example, 'Christmas tree' refers to the pattern of extreme muscle definition, located on the base of the lower back that can be seen on competitive bodybuilders.

was unable to pass as an 'ordinary user' to other gym members and to those friends and family members of female bodybuilders that I interviewed. My preparedness to engage in long hours of serious weight-training (an activity considered unfeminine and deviant by gender norms) also helped convince the female bodybuilders that I spoke to that I was sympathetic and serious in wanting to understand their activities and commitments. Being a woman also made it easier for me to raise and discuss intimate issues with them - ranging from unwanted body hair to sexual relationships. Gaining this degree of immersion involved me in the following practicalities: getting up at 5 am to train for several hours with female bodybuilders, learning new body techniques and exercises (including the use of training equipment such as wraps, belts and chalk), going to competitions, waking up aching every day, eating protein every two hours, taking supplements such as creatine, glutamine, tribulus, zinc and essential fatty acids (EFA's), as well as spending a vast quantity of time talking about bodybuilding, reading magazines, participating in on-line bodybuilding forums, watching DVD's and building friendships with female and male bodybuilders.

Junker (1960:38) makes the point that it is often difficult to make a distinction between covert and overt participation in 'real life' research and suggests that the 'practising field worker may find his position and activities shifting through time from one to another of these theoretical points, even as he continues observing the same human organization'. My participant observation was generally overt. As a result of my feminist stance (discussed in section II) I was open with my interviewees as to what my research was about and was happy to discuss any issues with them. There were also times, though, when it was 'impractical to seek consent from everyone involved' (Murphy and Dingwall, 2001:342), such as when I was training and observing in the public domain of the gym. During some field work I didn't automatically introduce myself as a researcher, but would explain my presence if asked. In one instance, when I worked backstage at two major bodybuilding competitions (in order to try and capture the ambiance and environment of these key occasions in female bodybuilding) I was asked by a couple of inquisitive male bodybuilders 'why I was there?' and told them about my research. Generally though, perhaps due to being a relatively young, slim, toned female, I was accepted in the field and my

position was rarely questioned.

During the research I kept a field diary of my experiences which acted as both a research log - detailing significant events during the course of the research - and a reflective account of my experiences of undertaking the research and 'sharing the life' of a female bodybuilder (Krane and Baird, 2005: 96). I assumed a 'participating-in-order-to-write' approach (Emerson et al. 2001:356) and trained my 'consciousness to the task of remembering' (Lofland and Lofland, 1995:90). Notes made in the field acted as memory 'joggers', recording particular scenes, key phrases, words and bodybuilding terminology. These were scribbled down in my training diary in the gym, and discreetly on a note pad when observing bodybuilding competitions.

In addition to this ethnographic immersion in the gym environment (and tracing in rich detail the lifestyle of the female bodybuilder via my key informant), interviews were conducted with twenty-six female bodybuilders to elicit detailed personal narratives (Mishler, 1986). These were supplemented by a total of seventy-six interviews with friends and family members of these women and other gym users which contextualised the lives of female bodybuilders; allowing an insight into the intimate relationships and interactions that impacted upon the identity of these women. I used Moser and Kalton's (1971:271) definition of an interview: 'as a conversation between interviewer and respondent with the purpose of eliciting certain information from the respondent'. By this means I was able to obtain thoughts and views on a wide range of issues such as: how they felt about the female bodybuilder in question, why they thought she was doing it, and what effects the lifestyle had on both the female bodybuilder and her relationships.

Interviews were facilitated initially through my key informant, Michelle, a female bodybuilder I got to know in the initial stages of the research. As I became more integrated into the subculture, however, contacts in gyms and bodybuilding competitions spread throughout the female bodybuilding community. Fourteen of the interviews with female bodybuilders were prearranged and were tape-recorded (and later transcribed). These took place at a convenient location for the participant, which included their house, my house, the

gym and a coffee shop and ranged in duration from forty minutes to over eight hours on some occasions. With one exception⁶, the interviews were conducted face to face, enabling me to not only prompt and probe as appropriate, but to use body language to help establish rapport and trust. Furthermore, being physically present, allowed me to check for factors such as tone of voice, hesitation and facial expression that might otherwise be concealed. The format of the loosely structured interviews contained themes that I wished to explore (for example, motivations, identity, femininity, empowerment, lived experience, interactions and so forth) but was flexible in nature with the intent of creating a free-flowing ‘conversation with a purpose’ (Burgess, 1984:102). The interview schedule was therefore modified according to the content of the discussion that ensued (Geertz, 1973). Brewer describes the benefits of this approach in the following:

[It] let[s] new themes develop serendipitously thus increasing the richness of the data, and to access life on the ‘inside’ to represent it accurately allowing ‘participants’ to discuss issues tangential to the question in hand, to be open, to articulate their tacit perceptions, feelings and understandings using language and ideas of their own...[preserving] their conceptions, meanings in the analysis and text (Brewer, 2000:67).

The tape-recorded, prearranged interviews adhered to the ‘Statement of Ethical Practice’ guidelines produced by the British Sociological Association. In accordance with these recommendations, participants were given a consent form outlining the purpose of the topic, telling them exactly what would be required and gaining their permission to take part. All interviews were based on the principle of informed consent (Homan, 1991) and participants were given the right to review and withdraw any of their data up until publication. Confidentiality and anonymity via pseudonyms were assured. Before each interview I also explicitly explained that I would be the only one to listen to their interview for purposes of transcription.

Seventeen of the female bodybuilders in the study were either competing contemporarily or had competed in the past, and their ages ranged from twenty-

⁶ This was conducted through the internet (using a ‘virtual method’). The interviewee was a university lecturer who had recently emigrated.

three to forty-eight years. All these women were dedicated to maximizing their muscular size and definition. While several worked out in 'hard core' bodybuilders gyms, dedicated exclusively to building muscle, most trained in public gyms closer to home and adequate for their needs. Their occupations were concentrated in the working and middle-classes (ranging from fitness instructor, to office worker, to university lecturer). Half of these women had degrees, and all but two of them were white British (the others were black British/Afro-Caribbean). The majority of the women were in heterosexual relationships and five had children⁷.

⁷ The question of female bodybuilder's sexual orientation has frequently been raised during the course of the thesis. However, it is difficult to find accurate statistics on the general population's sexual orientation, let alone female bodybuilders who may wish to hide their preferences due to the stigma attached (refer to http://www.statistics.gov.uk/about/consultations/downloads/2011Census_sexual_orientation_background.pdf). Whilst the majority of the women in my study were in heterosexual relationships, there was a higher proportion of lesbians/homosexuals in my sample (23%) compared to the national average (3-10%). I do not claim that these findings are representative of British bodybuilders, but more that they give an indicator. What perhaps is more interesting is Hans Klein's (female bodybuilding journalist) interpretation of the situation, expressed in the following abstract (cited on his blogs and in personal conversations):

What actually made me start thinking about this issue was seeing the way that female bodybuilders – whether or not they identify as gay – interact with each other. When you see two female bodybuilders together, it's obvious there is an instant intimacy between them, even if they have only just met. I think it comes from a sense of a shared struggle. The idea that female bodybuilders bond with each other way in a unique way leads on to another issue. I've heard some female bodybuilders express the view that they are not attracted to women in general but only to other female bodybuilders. In other words, they are not "lesbians" in the conventional sense but something that is actually far more specific than that term suggests. They are attracted to female bodybuilders not because they fetishize muscle like a lot of male fans of women's bodybuilding, but because they see so much of themselves in other female bodybuilders. This may also be why, when you have two female bodybuilders in a relationship, the urge to merge is so strong.

In this way, it is extremely difficult to categorize and 'label' the sexual orientation of female bodybuilders.

What is of most significance to the non-bodybuilding social variables that could be used to differentiate these women, however, was their lack of salience in relation to the responses and comments of both these female bodybuilders and those others with whom they interacted. Thus, the pursuit of muscle was articulated consistently by all the female bodybuilders in the study as the central feature of their self-identities, and this was reflected in the emphasis placed on musculature by their friends, family and others. What mattered, first and foremost, was that these women were devoted to the pursuit of muscle. This is the context in which I identify the female bodybuilders in this study exclusively in terms of the time they spent pursuing this goal.

Epistemological issues

Participant observation has come under fire from more positivist scholars, who argue that the approach is 'too risky', 'unscientific' and simply 'too difficult' (Maguire, 2000). Within this broad spectrum of criticisms, the main concern is that the researcher may 'go native', and consequently create a biased, subjective, impressionistic and idiosyncratic account in the write up (Cohen and Manion, 1994:110-11). Rock (1979) argues that by trying to inhabit two contradictory roles simultaneously, as both 'insider and outsider', the researcher is positioned in an awkward tension that 'can never be wholly dispelled' and will undoubtedly lead to an 'irreconcilable disparity between interpretation and analysis' (1979:68). Hammersley and Atkinson (1983:102) suggest that in order to generate sound data, researchers using participant observation must immerse themselves in the field, yet at the same time retain some sort of intellectual distance: 'For it is in the 'space' created by this distance that the analytical work of the ethnographer is done'. While this is an 'ideal' theoretical model, out in the field this is a somewhat more difficult task to implement and my 'tensions' or difficulties with retaining this combined role are explored in more detail in the second section of this chapter. I did, however, take certain steps in order to minimise the risk of 'going native'.

First, the practice of 'withdrawal' and 'return' (Rock, 1979) was used, meaning that lengthy periods in the field were interrupted by time spent outside the social milieu being observed. This allowed me more time to reflect upon events, and to interact with, and be with, friends and family unrelated to the bodybuilding subculture. Talking about some aspects of my work with academic colleagues, also enabled me to not only have a 'theoretical sounding board' (Sparkes and Partington, 2003), but helped to reiterate and re-establish my identity and work as an ethnographer. My research diary also created a 'space' of reflection, enabling me to scrutinise my role as both a researcher and participant observer. Secondly, by being overt in my participant observation, the female bodybuilders under study were clear about my role as a sociologist, thereby providing, at least in theory, a form of 'social distance'. By associating with more than one sub-section of the bodybuilding culture (in the sense that I interviewed

and mingled with various bodybuilders from different bodybuilding federations and non-competitors, who did not necessarily know or interact with the other female bodybuilders who participated) I was also able to explore different perspectives and insights which helped me to avoid over-identification with one particular group (Rock, 1979).

Despite the implementation of the above strategies, epistemologically, I believe that value-free research is impossible (and not the goal of feminist ethnography) as it will unavoidably be affected by the values of the researcher - regardless of what standpoint is acknowledged - and in some circumstances may lead to a prioritising of accounts (Devine and Heath, 1999). Indeed, phenomenologists frequently take the view that:

The ability to put aside personal feelings and preconceptions is more a function of how reflective one is rather than how objective one is because it is not always possible for researchers to set aside things about what they are not aware (Ahern, 1999:408).

On a similar vein, critics point out that interviews are not infallible due to such issues as; interviewer bias, power dimensions and leading questions (Borg, 1981; Bailey, 1994; Burgess, 1984; Mason, 2002; May, 1997; Oliver, 2004). Furthermore, participants may mislead the researcher either intentionally or subconsciously. As Denzin (1989) argues, all storytellers change, omit, select either purposefully or unintentionally aspects of life experiences, to make them more important and interesting. However, whilst interviews may not uncover 'the truth', they are still the elementary means by which human experience is organized and understood (Freeman, 1973; Holloway and Jefferson, 2000; Burgess, 1984:189). Thus, the analysis of personal narratives lends itself well to a phenomenological account.

Managing and Analysing the data

Miles and Huberman (1994:429) warn that there is a real danger in qualitative research of being swamped by the sheer mass of empirical data

collected, especially when it is conducted by 'inexperienced or lone-wolf researchers'. Indeed one of the problems with ethnography is trying to strike the balance between being sensitive to the mundane (Parker, 1974) and being inundated by an insurmountable amount of data to analyse. This is particularly problematic given that the more one becomes involved in the group being studied, the more the complexities, ambiguities and contradictions in people's lives are revealed. Nevertheless, there has to be a point at which the researcher decides that sufficient data and adequate 'saturation' has been reached: e.g. when themes become reoccurring and new material starts to decline. Moreover, as Kvale (1996) points out, if the researcher is not careful there can become an inverse relationship between the quantity of data produced and the quality of interpretation, analysis and evaluation that can reasonably take place. The actual coding of data has also been identified as playing a fundamental role in organising qualitative data and creating sound analysis. As Fielding elaborates:

The role of coding is to stimulate the identification of analytic themes, organise the data so that the strength of its support for those themes can be determined, illustrate themes by providing quotable material, and support data reduction by representing its key features and identifying redundant, peripheral or irrelevant data (Fielding, 2001:456).

In addition to this, Seale (2005:300) postulates that a 'good coding scheme relates data to the literature review and is the bridge between research materials and theoretical points'.

With these issues in mind, my research data from observations and the field diary were categorized according to the theoretical concerns of the research project (summarized at the beginning of this chapter), and the interviews were also subjected to a content analysis in order to establish emerging themes from the research (Weber, 1990). This facilitated a two-way interchange between data and theory that informed each other throughout the duration of the research. In practical terms this meant sorting and sifting through the interview transcripts, field notes and documentary sources and noting emerging themes and categories, whilst at the same time bearing in mind my research questions and aims. As a result of this process, the dominant Chapter themes were chosen. These centred

around the most prominent aspects of the life of the female bodybuilder – outside the gym (interactions, identity and regimes), the gym (space/movement and pain), and the competition (the ritual and the subculture).

Instead of utilizing a qualitative computer analysis package, I preferred to use a more kinesthetic method of handling and organizing the data, using multiple copies of all the data, folders/organizers, flip chart paper, pens, highlighters and a ‘cut and paste’ manual method. There are several reasons why I chose to use manual data manipulation (see also Maher, 2001). Firstly, it is argued, that computer aided packages (such as Nud.ist and the Ethnograph) impinge on creativity, dull the initiative and leave little scope for ‘inspirational flashes of enlightenment... reduc[ing] analysis to a mechanical chore’ (Denscombe, 1998:219). Computer analysis likewise creates distance between the researcher and the data. Furthermore, it cannot pick up on the subtleties of linguistics and implicit meanings – rather it can only analyse the text (i.e. pick up key words) literally or superficially, which can result in it being decontextualised from its original intention. For these reasons, I decided to use Miles and Huberman’s (1994) detailed kinesthetic methodological approach laid out in their book as a template. Miles and Huberman (1994:30) describe this procedure as simply a ‘classic set of analytic moves arranged in sequence’ – although they do acknowledge that there are many good alternative analytical approaches and that research analysis by its very nature is an interactive and ongoing process. Nevertheless, Miles and Huberman (1994:30) suggest the following process for analyzing qualitative data:

- Affixing codes to a set of field notes drawn from observations or interviews
- Noting reflections or other marks in the margins
- Sorting and sifting through these materials to identify similar phrases, relationships between variables, patterns, themes, distinct differences between subgroups, and common sequences.
- Isolating these patterns and processes, commonalities and differences.
- Gradually elaborating a small set of generalisations that cover the consistencies discerned in the database

- Confronting those generalizations with a formalized body of knowledge in the form of constructs or theories

Miles and Huberman elaborate upon these in far more detail in their established book 'Qualitative Data Analysis: an Expanded Source book' (1994). They advocate that in the same way that quantitative data is demonstrated to undergo 'rigorous' procedures, so too must the processes of qualitative data analysis be well documented. However, whilst I fully endorse 'openness', I question that we can so easily compare the two types of data. I suggest that qualitative is more fluid, and susceptible to constant reflexivity and re-evaluation.

In practice I found their systematic approach to be far more complex, time-consuming and demanding than originally anticipated. Advantageously, it did allow me to become extremely familiar with the data, compelling me to engage with reflective practice throughout the process of data categorization, interpretation and analysis. While I used their work as a guide, however, I preferred to engage with a more dynamic relationship between theory and method which I described on p.41.

So far in this chapter I have provided an 'ideal type' of the research methods used in this study, explicating the broad principles I followed in seeking, categorizing and analysing the 'finished' data. In the next section I depict the less 'sanitized', more complicated account of the events that occurred during the research process in the actual getting of this data.

SECTION II - Confessing the 'ethnographic self'

It feels like there's a black hole, a vacuum pulling me towards it, one minute I'm running towards it and the next I'm trying to pull back. But the lure is there. The obsession. It's all encompassing. Bodybuilding haunts and comforts my dreams and waking hours. Maybe it's the hardest place to be – sitting on the fence. Feeling the power, the draw, but still being unable to commit. Sometimes I delight in it, but other

times it feels like a weight, a burden. The religion of 'muscle'. Today I feel overwhelmed. My brain and body both hurt. Ethnography was not the easy option. I'm both hooked and fascinated - yet want to run away. The bizarre world of bodybuilding is taking over.

[Diary entry 04/09/07]

On paper, ethnography can appear deceptively simple and yet in reality it is a 'messy business' (Pearson, 1994:vii) that requires the researcher to be both adaptable and persevering in their quest for 'verstehen' (see Ferrell, 1998). Regardless of how many sanitised accounts of 'research methods' texts you read, however much you think you have prepared yourself fully for all events, I discovered that the path of real life research rarely runs smooth (Hobbs and May, 1993). The intention of the following script is to provide a more 'fleshed out account'- warts, bruises and the occasional callus and all - of some of the dilemmas and events that occurred during the research process, and to identify and unravel some of the complex relationships and interconnections between myself and the research.

It perhaps should be noted, that researchers who have adopted and utilised a theoretical confessional written stance in their research, have been criticised for being unprofessional (Willis, 2000). Furthermore, 'confessionals' (Van Maanen, 1988) are often perceived as narcissistic, self indulgent, exhibitionist and unhelpful accounts (Lofland and Lofland, 1995:14), that dwell in the fictitious, subjectivity of the arts and must be separated off from 'scientific, objective, value free research'. However, as I argued in the last section, I believe that no research can remain pure, untouched or unpolluted, as it is always constructed by 'subjective' human beings. Moreover, if Conquergood is correct in claiming that 'ethnography is an embodied practice...an intensely sensuous way of knowing' (1991:180), how can a researcher try to comprehend the world from another's perspective and yet in the same instance remain detached? As Coffey (1999:8) convincingly points out:

Ethnographic research is peopled – by researcher and researched.

Fieldwork is itself a 'social setting' inhabited by embodied, emotional, physical selves. Fieldwork helps to shape, challenge, reproduce, maintain, reconstruct and represent ourselves and the selves of others.

In this way, regardless of intention, the researcher becomes embedded in the very social world that they are studying; 'it is not a matter of methodological commitment, it is an existential fact' (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1983:15). My ethnographic work is thereby inevitably a product of my own experiences, both past and present, and my own 'sociological gaze'. The findings are inescapably fashioned by who I am, what I have witnessed, and those I have encountered. Research findings are furthermore complicated by the actual writing process itself - which is inescapably a mediating experience, consisting of a retrospective account which is inevitably an approximation to experience. Consequently, the writings, quotes and findings, belong to a highly edited process that incorporate personal scrutiny, selectivity and interpretation. Reflexivity and reflexive accounts are therefore an essential part of the research process. Not that this reflexivity will of course prevent bias and politics but will allow myself and the reader 'to consider the implications of these issues on how the research was conducted and the substantive findings that emerge' (Devine and Heath, 1999:7). Aptekar (2002) nicely encapsulates this perspective:

The fact is all ethnographies involve abstractions of actual experience. The process of abstracting involves deciding on which phenomena are worthy of putting into words, how much each event will be emphasized in the document, and how the experiences are combined to form ideas, concepts, and hypotheses. In short the whole document, its form and content, is a matter of choice. What makes ethnography valuable as well as valid is that this process is clearly defined. The goal should not be the elimination of the effects of personality, but a clear and concise description of it. (Aptekar, 2002:224)

In the sections that follow, I unveil my own relationship to the research enterprise and explore 'how fieldwork shapes and constructs identities, intimate relations, an emotional self and physical self' (Coffey, 1999:5).

Negotiating the field – body work and blending in

As Tunnel (1998) articulates in the following quote, doing real life research is a learning curve and challenge with no definitive protocol by which to follow:

It is an ongoing lesson in how to relate to divergent groups of people, establish rapport, win confidence, and assist participants in opening up and revealing those subtle complexities of social life that are most fully tapped through qualitative methodologies. Such strategies demand that researchers take risks, weigh ethical considerations, ponder just what assurances of confidentiality actually mean, and question just how far they are willing to go to obtain data while at the same time protecting their data, their academic integrity, and their co-participants. (Tunnel, 1998:217-218)

Building trust, rapport and kudos are essential components of ethnographic research, particularly when researching ‘deviant’ subcultures. Impression management becomes paramount if one is to blend as much as possible in the field, as ‘what our body looks like, how it is perceived and used can impact upon access, field roles and field relationships’ (Coffey, 1999:68). Conducting research on female bodybuilders inevitably required a great deal of ‘body work’ - as both a performative presentation-of-self and as physical labour. As I lacked the large muscles that signify being a female bodybuilder, performing an acceptable bodily appearance was particularly imperative. At bodybuilding competitions and during daily interactions with female bodybuilders, I dressed down and wore predominantly jeans and t-shirts, in order to blend in as much as possible with the group that I initially ‘hung around with’, who wore causal and comfortable clothes (such as tracksuit bottoms and combats) and little or no make-up⁸. Coffey (1999:73) points out that ‘ethnographers also span body boundaries during the course of fieldwork’. Supporting Coffey’s observation, I found that the very

⁸ The dress code of female bodybuilders inevitably varied depending on the social context and individuality of the person. At competitions there were several female bodybuilders who dressed in a ‘hyperfeminine’ style that called for attention (e.g. very short skirts, low tops). In contrast, I deliberately dressed down in order to draw as little attention to myself as possible during the fieldwork.

physicality of gym work required me to use my body in different ways than I was used to. New body techniques and exercises had to be learnt, which were sometimes frustrating, embarrassing or felt uncomfortable to grasp. Training with others can also be a very intimate and sometimes awkward activity, as bodies are in close proximity and ‘spotting’ and ‘correcting’ require touching and physical contact. One particularly ‘controversial’ exercise for example, was ‘Donkey Calf raises’, which required me to sit on my training partner’s back, whilst she bent over and did calf raises - much to the amusement of some gym spectators! My bodily postures changed too, as I observed and unconsciously copied my gym partners, realizing that I had done this only as a result of the responses of others. For example, my male gym friends began to tease me, that in the gym I walked ‘like I had beach balls under my arms’. My body began to grow in both strength and size during the course of the research⁹. At my peak I put on almost 2 stone of muscle and water, with an increase of 3 inches on my thighs and 2 inches on my arms. Despite these physical changes, compared to a female bodybuilder or even an elite female athlete, for example a sprinter, I would still be considered just ‘toned’ to many ordinary people and especially to bodybuilders.

Whilst the majority of female bodybuilders accepted my presence, acknowledged my empathy and willingly confided in me, gaining this ‘access’ did not go totally uncontested. In one episode, before a prominent female bodybuilder would let me interview her, she put me through a kind of ‘initiation test’, to check my seriousness and passion for training, by first fixing me up to train with a twenty stone male bodybuilder. Another female bodybuilder directly asked my key informant: ‘Can she be trusted? What does she know? Have you told her about steroids?’ Johnson (1975:121b) convincingly argues that:

Personal relations of trust are the basic ingredient for a research project which intends the collection of truthful [valid] information, data which retain the integrity of the actor’s perspective and social context.

However, there is always a cost that arises from creating a relationship based on ‘trust’, as a researcher cannot selectively decide which data they wish to be

⁹ In the gym, my one rep max reached the following: Bench:72.5kg, leg press:330kg, squat:110kg and dead-lift:125kg

'trusted with' and which events and situations they are willing to be present in, especially when they cannot be foreseen (Punch, 1994). In my case, one of the most controversial moral, ethical and legal issues was that of steroids. When I set out to do the research, I perhaps naively wished to avoid the subject of drugs altogether. Partly for legal reasons, but also because I did not want to reiterate the sensationalist stereotypes of female bodybuilders as simply deviant 'steroid freaks', but to focus instead on the more mundane, daily routines, identity and existence of these muscular women. However, whilst I haven't explored the issue of steroids in detail within this thesis, drugs do of course play an integral part in the lives of most bodybuilders. Whilst men frequently told me about their pharmaceutical endeavours, perhaps as a masculine badge of honour, women were sometimes less forthcoming due to the associated gender stigma. The reasons for this were articulated by one male casual gym user in my study, who remarked '*men taking testosterone are just enhancing what is already in their bodies, whereas women are putting something in to their bodies which isn't 'natural' and is therefore mucking around with their sex*' (Male, Gym 1:3)¹⁰. The issue of drugs and female bodybuilders is therefore particularly controversial, as it impinges on so many people's sense of what is natural and central to biological sex. It is perhaps worth reiterating here (as it was mentioned at the end of Chapter 5), that steroids are not the only drugs used by bodybuilders to achieve their appearance. For example, drugs are used as a stimulant to strip the body of fat (e.g. ephedrine, clenbuterol), to promote sleep during competitions (e.g. Gamma-Hydroxybutyric acid (GHB), also known as a 'date rape' drug) and to increase cell production (e.g. Growth hormone).

Issues of risk, danger and illegality that can arise during ethnographic research have been discussed and documented in some depth, particularly by criminologists who favour ethnographic methods (see Polsky, 1967; Inciardi,

¹⁰ There are two points to be made here. Firstly, far from being unnatural, women *do* of course have testosterone in their bodies. Denying this can be seen as a tactic employed to erase the commonalities between the sexes and assert a fallacious biological dualism on which can be justified social and cultural inequalities. Secondly, however, this assertion makes reference to a hormone that is key not only to *cultural representations* of male and female, but to actual *physical transformations*. Consuming testosterone to 'excess', via steroidal drugs, is associated with several bodily changes in female bodybuilders including receding hairline, facial hair, a growth in clitoris size, a lowering of voice tone and, often, increased sex drive and an increase in the frequency and intensity of orgasms.

1993; Ferrell, 1998; Hobbs, 1988; Jacobs, 1998; Patrick, 1973; Parker 1974; Brajuha and Hallowell, 1986). Within my field research, I was routinely required to negotiate risk, danger and illegality as I illustrate in the following incident, which occurred after working back-stage at a bodybuilding competition for the first time:

After working for 8 hours straight; it was finally time for a food break... Michelle and I left the show and entered a nearby 'Noodle-bar' restaurant, where we met up with a few of her bodybuilding friends. One of them, 'Eric', was a well-known bodybuilding drug's dealer in the south of England... After we had eaten, 'Eric' said he would pay for my meal. I politely declined. He insisted.

[Field notes, October 19, 2007]

This scenario was a particularly illuminative 'epiphanic' moment (Denzin, 1989, 1997), highlighting the discrepancy between my own moral code and the social expectations of the situation. Whilst I hadn't wanted to feel in any way 'indebted' to a person whose illegal activity conflicted with my own values, I nevertheless unhappily complied. In the name of academic research, I was forced to re-evaluate my personal ethical boundaries. On other occasions I was present when drugs were taken or injected and regularly engaged in discussions around their use¹¹. In these situations I negotiated my own moral code¹². Whilst not participating or condoning the drug taking myself, I did not condemn the actions per se. I felt that if I had removed myself from the situation or voiced disapproval, it would have impacted negatively on my research, damaging the rapport that had taken so long to build up. I also felt that to 'label' the drug taker as 'bad', or deviant, or to

¹¹ Anabolic steroids (amongst many other drugs that were used by female bodybuilders) are legally classified as a 'Class C' drug within the United Kingdom. Possession or importing steroids with 'intent to supply' (which includes giving them to friends) is against the law, and could possibly lead to up to fourteen years in prison with an unlimited fine.

¹² I am well aware, that by engaging in a discussion of my research ethical issues, I am falling into the trap of trying to 'justify' my own moral behaviour, which Humphries and Truman (1994:14) warn against. Nevertheless, I still believe that 'confessions', despite their limitations, provide another dimension that helps to illuminate the intricate nuances of the milieu under study (Maguire, 2000).

stigmatize and exclude the issue of drug taking without trying to understand it, would be to ignore the multiple interpretations, motivations and identities of users (Mattley, 1998:156).

Relationships in the Field

Relationships based on trust – covering a wide spectrum of intimacy and engagement - are an integral and important part of the research process. This is reinforced in the case of female bodybuilders as they belong to a very small and intimate subculture. Indeed, Grogan (2004) estimates that there are only thirty female bodybuilders who compete in the U.K within a year (refer to Chapter 5). Due to this tight network and the controversial issue of drug taking, it was therefore essential that their identity was protected using pseudonyms and that confidentiality was assured. However, even within these ‘privacy constraints’, I still debated as to how much I should divulge about these women’s lives. As Homan (1991:154) points out: ‘it is common for researchers to be troubled with feelings of guilt that they have betrayed their subjects’.

During my research I encountered an exciting soap opera of events; from tales within the lesbian community, to sex-changes, relationship affairs, party drugs, cosmetic surgery and ‘damaged’ lives. When writing up, I discovered there was a fine line between capturing an accurate and colourful representation of the daily life style of the female bodybuilder, and revealing upsetting and potentially harmful material. As Ribbens and Edwards articulate, in this uncomfortable position I felt ‘placed on the edges, between public social knowledge and private lived experience’ (1998:2). Ultimately though, the protection and welfare of my participants had to be put at the forefront of my research. I felt that I did not have the right to misuse this privileged position of being allowed into the lives of these women, and indeed, without their help, trust, time and dedication, the research could never have taken place. Indeed, I had decided from the outset of my research (exploring the relationship between empowerment and female bodybuilding) that the foundations of my methods were built on the premise of feminist research (see Wilkinson, 1986; Wise, 1987; Bernhard, 1984, for more information). While it is perhaps more accurate to refer to feminist methodologies in the plural, the core of this ideology, according to

Klein (1983), resides on the idea that research is concerned about women's issues, taking into account the needs of women and their experiences with the aim of improving their lives in some way. As unequal power relationships often reside within investigations, feminist researchers actively support a 'partnership' approach that locates the 'researched' on the same critical plane as the 'researcher' (Hobbs, 1993). Thus, within my study I hoped to diminish the potentially exploitative nature of ethnography (Stacey, 1988) by creating a dialectical and reciprocal relationship based upon co-participation (Lather, 1988). Some researchers using a feminist paradigm have in more recent times noted however, that the concept of an oppressed, powerless, respondent is at least a partial myth. Although power dimensions inevitably exist throughout the research process, according to Olesen (2000:255) 'power is only partial, illusory, tenuous and confused with the researcher responsibility'. Furthermore it is contextual, whilst I am placed in a more powerful position when writing up the findings, during the actual fieldwork I regularly felt that the power dimensions were tipped towards my informants.

With regards to the recorded interviews, many female bodybuilders claimed to have found it a positive experience, providing them with an opportunity to speak out ('a voice') and a chance to tell their 'side of the story'. Several commented that they found the process interesting and thought-provoking, giving them a space to reflect upon issues and their own self identity. Some of the narratives of verbal abuse by strangers and the antagonism most received for choosing their way of life was hard for these women to talk about. I appreciated their trust, their openness and the bravery they demonstrated discussing these issues with me. Due to some of the distressing accounts, I found the ethics of deciding which stories and quotes to select as difficult, as even with these women's permission, I was concerned about reiterating their personal pain by having it in print. In the end, after 'conscience seeking' activity, I decided upon which quotes to use and in most cases double checked with the participants that I still had their permission. The 'transformative consequences of the research process' (Coffey, 1999:246) undoubtedly also had some detrimental effects on the lives of these women. For example, my key informant became far more aware of the negative interactions (stares, comments and so on) that she received from outsiders following the probing of these issues with her during interviews and

field work encounters. In another instance, nevertheless, during a particularly challenging time in her life, she cited participating in the research as a motivating factor for bodybuilding that enabled her to carry on 'doing what she was meant to do'. Consequently, I found that the research process has the potential to change the lives of those under study, both positively and negatively, regardless of the intention or indeed the desired outcome.

Key Informants and Best Friends

Intimate friendships forged through the research process, are not only complex in nature, but have a considerable impact on the findings of the investigation undertaken. As Coffey (1999:47) puts it:

The friendships we experience are part of the contradictions and ambiguities that denote the essence of fieldwork. Friendships can help to clarify the inherent tensions of the fieldwork experience and sharpen our abilities for critical reflection...Moreover they firmly establish fieldwork as relational, emotional, and as a process of personal negotiation.

Although my background was very different to Michelle (my key informant), we had many things in common that helped us to establish an immediate bond. For example, we were both of a similar age (late 20's), had a slightly non-conformist approach to society, had been to university, had both been personal trainers at the same chain of health and fitness club's and had both an initial desire to weight-train from a young age. Living in close proximity to each other also meant that we would spend a considerable amount of time in each other's company. Friendships formed during ethnographic research are a contentious issue, with critics pointing out the difficulties of playing the role of both researcher and friend (Crick, 1992). Hendry (1992), in his account of the problematic research issues that derived from having an intimate relationship with his key informant, reflects on both the advantages and disadvantages:

In general, during fieldwork, it might be thought better to avoid expressing negative opinions about matters close to the hearts of

informants. In other words, one can really only pretend to be a friend. Nevertheless...I sometimes grew tired of the role I was playing, and made the mistake of revealing this to my host, as friend, rather than as informant...however, my mistake actually led to a deeper understanding of the people I was investigating (Hendry, 1992:172).

Being immersed so deeply in the research, and as an apprentice ethnographer, meant that there were times when I mishandled events and failed to manage situations appropriately. In one situation I made the mistake of telling Michelle and her partner (Jo) what a gym member had said to me. In this event, a male gym user, who I hadn't spoken to before, came up to me whilst I was training and insisted that I should 'drop the weight' (reduce) so as not to become too masculine and unattractive like a female bodybuilder. Jo reacted by immediately confronting him - arguing that he shouldn't be allowed to 'get away with it'. By forgetting my role as a researcher I had 'disturbed' the social milieu unnecessarily and precipitated an uncomfortable and upsetting scenario.

Coffey (1999:42) notes that close relationships are particularly difficult to maintain when the researcher has left the field as 'fieldwork relationships are clearly situated within social, cultural and organizational contexts...[and are] tied up with the actual pursuit of fieldwork'. Furthermore, interpreting events and analysis in the write-up can also cause divides and tension. Using the example of her own research key informant 'Rachel', Coffey explains that in the write up of events, both interpreted the situations in different ways;

I was writing about Rachel's activities, interactions and career. But I was writing for an academic audience and not for her. She evidently felt hurt and betrayed by me.

In light of the difficulties Coffey mentions above, I was highly concerned when I began writing that I may be damaging my friendship with 'Michelle' and exposing her private life to public scrutiny. Our friendship consequently had a substantial influence on how I presented my findings. Although I originally planned to focus more on my apprenticeship, body pedagogics and the micro-details involved in my key informants life, I decided (6 months into the research) to broaden out the analysis and depersonalise it somewhat by incorporating more empirical data from

different research sites and interviews with other female bodybuilders. In this context, key informants, friendships and relationships created in the field have a huge impact on how we navigate the social world - on the study, who we meet, who we initially interact with and how we begin to interpret the world that they inhabit. Inevitably, this in turn, effects both the selection and depiction of events in the write up, which are themselves shaped by the changes the researcher undergoes during the research process.

The difficulties of writing up: Writing Ethnography

Ethnographers adopting a constructionist epistemological stance and feminist ethnographers argue that reflective practice must be engaged with at all stages of the research process and that issues surrounding 'subjectivity' need to be discussed and acknowledged when writing up the findings and conclusions (see Lyman, 2002 and Rorty, 1999, for more details). In this section of the chapter, I therefore look at some of the contentions encountered in the writing-up process, focusing on the practical difficulties of capturing the complexity of human lives and phenomenological experiences, and the problem of evaluating other's lives.

There are many external factors that shape the content of the research, including the restriction of words and time limit governed by the requirements of a PhD thesis itself. In light of these constraints, when writing-up I frequently felt caught between representing the diversity of the lives and experiences of the female bodybuilders and doing them adequate 'justice' (as each human life is unique, complex and filled with ambiguity and contradiction), and uncovering the underlying themes of homogeneity that existed amongst female bodybuilders that were comprehensive and comparably easy to disseminate.

Another point to be made is that 'experiences' expressed by female bodybuilders are always filtered through language and interpretation. Furthermore, language can never replicate or mirror the social setting under observation. As Ferrell and Hamms (1998:15) posit:

The lived reality of crime and deviance and the dangerous subtlety of method which can take us inside it exist beyond any easy language, beyond capture in data sets or statistical summaries. Instead, these accounts can at best be understood as translations, as inherently incomplete efforts to transfer the immediacy of lived experience into narrative.

Moreover, it is exceptionally difficult to capture the emotions, sensations and passions of the body in use (for example whilst training), as issues surrounding the 'lived body' are entwined and incorporated so much into the female bodybuilders daily lives and corporeal schema that they were rarely reflected upon. Wacquant (2004: xi-xii) articulates a similar dilemma in his fascinating ethnographic study of boxing. He reflects over the challenge of trying to 'account anthropologically for a practice that is so intensely corporeal, a culture that is so thoroughly kinetic'. He rhetorically asks: 'Would I know how to retranslate this comprehension of the senses into sociological language and find expressive forms suitable to communicating it without in the process annihilating it's most distinctive properties?' Indeed, this is a strong criticism by post-structuralists and discourse analysts who claim that trying to grasp the elusive 'lived experiences' of the body are a futile and time-wasting endeavour. Despite these limitations however, Willis contends that the written words and translations of the researcher still have a purpose:

This speaking is not one of displacing the indigenous 'voice' but of 'voicing' its otherwise silent body. This must be done in the spirit of respecting, recording, illuminating, and learning from forms of sensuous subordinate meaning-making and self-making, even as they may be distorted and constrained by unpropitious conditions (Willis, 2000:120).

The ethnographers role, according to Willis, is therefore to develop and act as a 'human dialogue' that widens and deepens human empathy, knowledge and understanding. 'Good' research is consequently that which fulfils these criteria and develops greater 'Verstehen' for the social group under study.

My ethnographic self

As I alluded to earlier, researchers need to be careful when writing-up that they are not 'judging lives' simply based on their own view point and biography. As Willis (2000:120) warns us: 'No ethnographer should say "this is how it is", or "I know better than you do about your life"- as what may be a detrimental practice for them, may be a positive one for others. Indeed, within my own research I discovered that what was an empowering practice and fulfilling identity for my key informant - wasn't one for me. Whereas bodybuilding provided her with meaning, purpose and identity (by way of structure, goals and fulfilling her heroic 'destiny') in an increasingly complex and post-modern world, for me the culture felt restricting. For her, keeping a training diary and monitoring her food habits, provided her a way of keeping in control and allowing her a sense of measureable achievement and progress as she reached her goals. In contrast, I internally rebelled against any kind of regime and structure or doing exercises that I didn't enjoy or found to be uncomfortable. Several of my diary entries consisted of moans, regarding how much I hated the leg press and tricep dips, and how I occasionally found the workout's too structured and uncreative. These were the bad days - the frustrating days, when I didn't achieve my goals or enjoy the process. However, for the majority of the time I felt privileged to be training with such a dedicated and charismatic person, and embraced the adrenaline highs and feelings of accomplishment when the workouts went to plan.

I deeply admired the strong, confident manner of my key informant/friend 'Michelle'. Gender didn't seem important to her - she was simply 'Michelle'. I almost envied her ability to be able to focus on herself, her own goals and desires, rather than the daily juggling act of trying to put other relationships first. Despite my respect for her and our strong friendship, despite my passion for training, my desire to build muscle and the friendships of the amazing and complex women I met during the course of my research, I could never fully embrace the bodybuilding lifestyle. Reflecting on this, I realise that however much I may try to be neutral, when I began the research I was not a 'tabula rasa' mentally or physically. My life experiences, biography, upbringing and socialisation had already shaped me. Physically, I had my 'preferred' body techniques and methods of training, and was used to working out by myself and in my own way. Equally, I

was contained by my prior feminist perspectives (Lockford, 2004). My feminism rebelled against the 'no pain, no gain' mantra of the masculine cosmology of the bodybuilding world and reacted against their obsession on the body's appearance. As my role of gym user changed to that of researcher, I could no longer relax in the gym in the same way as I had previously - I was now continually observing, reflecting and scrutinising.

If Cooley (1922 [1902]) and Mead (1962 [1934]) are correct that our identities are shaped significantly by our interactions with others (see Chapter 6), then perhaps (risking melodrama) my identity has passed through a 'crisis' during this research project. For example, my self-identity, particularly in terms of body image regularly felt 'under attack' during the research investigation, due to the relentless stream of unsolicited contradictory comments made about my appearance. This is demonstrated in the following examples:

Do you take steroids? (Male, sports masseuse, Crete)

Are you a boxer? (Male, gym user, Canterbury; Male, gym user, High Wycombe)

Are you a bodybuilder? (Male, gym manager, High Wycombe)

Do you take anti-estrogens? (Male, gym user, Kent)

In the same time period that I received these comments, I was asked whether I actually trained at all (especially when people learnt of my research topic), and I was told on several occasions that I have 'no muscle'. For example:

How come you were training for two years with female bodybuilders, but didn't put on any muscle? (Female, University conference, Bristol)

You're 'toned', but you're not muscular at all (Male gym user, Kent).

You haven't got legs, you've got 'pins' (Female, Portsmouth).

These conflicting interactions undoubtedly impacted on my sense of self and added to the confusion of my own position during the research.

Whilst I felt the attraction to bodybuilding, I still had reservations

(regarding the self-obsessiveness of the sport, and the total focus on physical appearance), and due to my lack of muscularity (not helped by being a tall ectomorph, with high estrogen levels) I never felt completely accepted by the bodybuilding subculture as an insider. Many of my diary entries refer to the frustrations of not being able to build muscle, the impossibility of achieving the desired look of muscles and curves without cosmetic surgery and drugs, and the difficulty of coping with illnesses and shoulder injuries which prevented training. Through my bodybuilding apprenticeship I learnt to read and value my body in a different way. My inherited vascularity became a source of pride, rather than something that was negatively associated with old age and ugliness in women (a couple of male bodybuilders jokingly nicknamed me the 'vein'). My legs however, thin by normal standards and prized in wider society, became a hindrance and source of exasperation for me within the bodybuilding culture. Whilst I became desperate to build my legs and 'butt' up, most of my friends outside the culture were trying to slim theirs down. Fitting in neither with 'normals', nor identified as a bodybuilder, in some ways positioned me in an advantageous location from which to research the subculture, though it wasn't always the most comfortable space to occupy.

This further demonstrates the awkward position that the ethnographer must assume and deal with during the research. I have no doubt that becoming hypersensitive to these 'identity', 'body image' and issues of 'belonging' were influenced by my own personality and self-awareness during the research, and it is possible that another 'sociologist' evaluating and exploring the world of bodybuilding would have been less influenced by the impact of their surroundings. For the majority of researchers however, who wish to empathetically try and 'get into the skin' of their participants, the experience of the research will have a profound effect upon their self-perceptions and the world around them. Thus in the same way as the natural settings of the field are disturbed by the research process, the researcher's lives are also changed.

Addendum

As I write this, I still have a foot in the fieldwork (over a year after I

officially 'left' the field) and regularly participate in discussions with female and male bodybuilders. I am still good friends with Michelle (and others within the subculture) and regularly meet with her and sometimes train together. Although I have begun to disentangle myself from the subculture of bodybuilding (e.g. my training and food regimes are less intense and I have already lost almost a stone in muscle), certain bodily practices have remained with me and become ingrained into my soma. I still apply fake tan, am more self conscious in the gym than I used to be, lift comparably heavy weights and 'skimp' on the cardio work. I still train in a relatively hard core gym (adopting postures considered 'unfeminine' during training) and consume a protein and carbohydrate drink straight after a workout. This illustrates some of the difficulties of 'leaving the field' after research has finished, especially in feminist ethnography where its ethical nature is not of the 'hit and run' (Kelly, 1988) variety exemplified by many research projects (where the researcher only gets involved up until enough data is retrieved and then disappears), but involves emotions, relationships, trust, integrity and commitment. Remaining partially in the field has also made me aware of the changing nature of research and the impossibility of capturing more than a glimpse of these women's lives.

Indeed, female bodybuilders lives are not static, they are (like their bodies) forever evolving and changing and remain unfinished entities. The ways, for example, that these women interpreted and experienced the world at the start of my research may be very different to how they navigate the world now and in the future. Thus my findings are specific to a certain context and moment in time. This point is demonstrated by two recent examples involving Michelle. The first situation occurred when I recently asked her to check the details and accuracy on my final version of my competition chapter. After she had read it she said, '*Yes that was how I felt then, and it was real. But that's not necessarily the same view as I have now*'. A far more harrowing example regarding the nature of lives in transit, is extracted from a recent mobile phone message. Michelle, although frustrated at times, has generally shrugged off the attitudes of others – in terms of the looks, stares and comments she receives regarding her muscular appearance. However, recent gossip and accusations at work that she has had a sex change have really hurt her.

Sometimes I think I'm fucking crazy. Why am I here? Am I just wasting my time. People make jokes, they just don't understand me, they just don't see my real side. I act like shit don't phase me, inside it drives me crazy – my insecurities could eat me alive. I grow colder the older I grow. I wish they'd just fuck off.

(Michelle, mobile phone text, 20/01/2010)

This intimate, raw, very personal insight into Michelle's life is new to me. She has always appeared so stoic, so strong and impenetrable and has refused to compromise her beliefs. Furthermore, I hurt when I read it, I feel anger and pain for her and concern for the life she has chosen, and hope sincerely that she continues to find meaning and purpose in the world of bodybuilding.

Conclusion

This chapter has exposed the disparity between the abstract theoretical textbook manual on 'doing' ethnography and what actually takes place in the field. 'Real life' research is a much messier, complicated and chaotic business than is often acknowledged. Ethnographic methods provide an unsurpassed insight into the lives and experiences of female bodybuilders. However, accessing this rich and textured social landscape does ultimately come at a cost. As an apprentice ethnographer entering uncharted territory, I had to negotiate my own moral tightrope - by deciding to what extent I was prepared to go in order to obtain data, whilst at the same time protecting my participants, and being able to justify my actions to my own conscience. As a consequence of these negotiations, my individual choices have impacted vastly upon the research direction, processes and findings. By providing a partial 'confessionary', I have hoped to offer a more open and reflective account that acknowledges the part I have played during the entire investigation and how this will undoubtedly influence and shape my conclusions.

The chapter has also highlighted the importance of friendships and how they are intimately connected to, and forged, during the research process. Furthermore, I have argued that it would be naïve to utilize ethnographic methods

and try to retain an 'objective' space from which to analyse and observe 'the phenomena', as ourselves, our bodies and our emotions are entangled within the project itself. Ethnography is a deeply emotional affair; 'we can and do feel joy, pain, hurt, excitement, anger, love, confusion, satisfaction, loss, happiness and sadness' (Coffey, 1999:158). We are not autonomous, objective robots, but human beings with feelings, emotions and bodily sensations. Indeed, how would it be possible to analyse the lives and experiences of female bodybuilders and to ignore my own lived experiences and emotions throughout the process? During the research I have frequently felt guilt, burdened, exhaustion, frustration and confusion, but these feelings have been matched by the positive feelings of curiosity, anticipation, excitement, energy, enrapture, bliss, vibrancy and laughter. Ultimately the only way to comprehend this bizarre world, as I have argued throughout this chapter, was to become drenched and saturated in a subculture that has to be experienced as a sentient affair so as to be understood.

CHAPTER 3. A Brief Western History of Women's Corporeal Oppression

The ritual denunciation of women constitutes something of the order of a cultural constant, reaching back to the Old Testament as well as to Ancient Greece and extending through the fifteenth century. Found in Roman tradition, it dominates ecclesiastical writing, letters, sermons, theological tracts, discussions and compilations of canon law; scientific works, as part and parcel of biological, gynaecological, and medical knowledge; and philosophy. The discourse of misogyny runs like a rich vein throughout the breadth of medieval literature.

(Bloch, 1987:1)

Women in sexist society are physically handicapped.

(Young, 2005:42)

Introduction

Throughout history the female body has been a contested site - 'a battleground for competing ideologies' (Conboy et al, 1997:7). Discourses, ideologies and practices surrounding women's bodies have been used to justify gender inequalities and legitimise women's subservient status. Women, in western society, have been positioned as opposite and inferior to their male counterparts on grounds of their corporeality. In relation to this, feminists have argued further that women's physical bodies have been disciplined, controlled and contained through a number of diverse methods in order to effect the retention of patriarchy. The purpose of this chapter is twofold. Firstly, I provide a chronological outline of biological ideas about women's bodies (from Greek philosophy and Christian theology to scientific theories) which, despite their differences and changes over time, all rely on naturalistic concepts that have been used to undermine women's position in society. The second purpose is to illustrate how these ideas have actually been used to shape women's bodies and lives. After providing a brief

political history of these biological theories, I then demonstrate, using some historical examples of body modification and fashion clothing, how these oppressive ideas surrounding women's bodies actually become culturally inscribed onto the body itself via normalised oppressive practices. It is not my intention to produce a complete or detailed chronology of women's bodily oppression. Rather, my aim is to highlight some of the key elements of women's corporeal persecution, which according to second wave feminists have been implemented at different times in history in order to control and regulate the female form, to seek to ensure that women fulfil a subordinate role in society.

SECTION 1 - Oppressive ideas

Traditionally, western thought has promoted the idea that human beings are made up of 'two opposed dichotomous characteristics: mind and body, thought and extension, reason and passion, psychology and biology' (Grosz, 1994:3). These bifurcations of being, however, are not neutral descriptions. Instead 'dichotomous thinking necessarily hierarchizes and ranks the two polarised terms so that one becomes the privileged term and the other its suppressed, subordinated, negative counterpart' (Grosz, 1994:3). Consequently, the association with the pursuit of truth and knowledge of the 'higher' realm of the mind has been pitted against the unruly, irrational temptress of the body. As Sullivan and Murray (2009:1) elaborate:

The body has been conceived (and thus constituted) as a natural, biological entity, the fleshly shell of a soul, a self, and/or a mind that is superior to it. Given its status as both prison – or dungeon (*sēma*) – and property, the brute matter of the body (as object) is conceived as that which the subject must transcend, transform, master.

Women, due in part to the symbolic possibilities afforded to others by their possession of reproductive systems, have always been perceived as more embodied than their male counterparts and have subsequently been 'naturally

disqualified from equality with the male' (Shildrick and Price, 1999:3). Specifically, women have been viewed as tied to the natural conditions of their embodiment: menstruation, pregnancy and childbirth. Men's embodiment, in comparison, has been seen as far less restrictive, enabling their minds much more freedom to engage with and pursue activities within the cultural sphere (Shilling, 1993:43). Thus, whilst men have been associated with reason and rationality as 'minds', women have long been associated with bodily, biological processes and as walking 'wombs'. Women's bodies have therefore been perceived to control their minds, whilst men's minds have been viewed as controlling their bodies. Furthermore, feminists have argued that the female form has been treated with fearful abject fascination, as the place where life and death are reconciled (Kristeva, 1980). Championing this perspective, Shildrick and Price (1999:3) put forward the following argument:

The very fact that women are able in general to menstruate, to develop another body unseen within their own, to give birth, and to lactate is enough to suggest a potentially dangerous volatility that makes the female body as out of control, beyond, and set against the force of reason.

This vivid depiction contrasts sharply with the image of the self-contained male body and the heroic masculine ideals of a 'strong, stoic, resolutely independent, self-disciplined individual who holds himself erect with self-control, proud of his capacity to distance himself from his body' (Bologh, 1990:17). In short, 'women just are their bodies in a way that men are not, biologically destined to inferior status in all spheres that privilege rationality' (Shildrick and Price, 1999:3).

Women's lives and nature have long been associated with their bodily functions (Spelman, 1982) and consequently women's bodies, according to second wave feminists, have become central to their history of oppression and 'disempowerment'. Thus throughout Western thought and history, women have been positioned as the devalued other, the 'negative' in the gender dichotomy. Feminists, such as Braidotti (1994:64), claim that "She" has been 'forever associated to unholy, disorderly, [and] subhuman' phenomena. The association of

women with ‘monsters’ and being less than fully human, dates back as far as the Ancient Greeks.

Greek philosophy and the inferiority of women’s bodies (Circa 4th Century BC)

Pomeroy (1975) claims that in Ancient Greek society women had little status and were governed by the principal duty of reproducing children, particularly sons. Influential scholars and philosophers at the time, such as Plato and Aristotle, have been accused by feminists of being instrumental in the transmission of misogynist theories and determinist ideologies. Aristotle argued that women’s lowly status in society was fair, due to their corporeal inferiority. He believed that women were ‘defective by nature’ due to their inability to produce sperm which was considered to be the vessel for a complete human being. During sexual intercourse the man was understood to produce the essence of the human or in other words the superior ‘soul’ or ‘form’, whilst the woman only provided the nourishment; the inferior ‘matter’ (Generation of Animals, I, 728a). Consequently, females were associated with the lowly, material body. Whitbeck (1976) has named this theory of human generation, which Aristotle championed, as the ‘flower pot theory’. This theory relies on the belief that women have insufficient ‘heat’ within their bodies and are unable to ‘cook’ their menstrual fluid’s to produce the necessary ‘seed’ (semen). Hence women’s only contribution to the creation of a human being is the providence of matter or a ‘field’, where the embryo can grow. Similarly, if an embryo is deficient in natural heat, it will fail to become fully human and hence create a female. Thus Aristotle claimed that a ‘woman is as it were an infertile male’ (Generation of Animals, I, 728a) and that ‘a male is male in virtue of a particular ability, and a female in virtue of a particular inability’ (Generation of Animals, I, 82f). Aristotle also holds that as nature has decreed that women lack a soul and intellectual capacity, they must rely on a man for protection and discipline:

It is best for all tame animals to be ruled by human beings. For this is how they are kept alive. In the same way, the relationship between the male and female is by nature such that the male is higher, the female lower, that the

male rules and the female is ruled (Aristotle, *Politica*, ed. Loeb Classical Library, 1254 bc 10-14).

Portrayals of the female body in Christian theology: unstable, corrupt and a source of temptation

Early Christian philosophers similarly took up the theory that women were afflicted with a natural defectiveness, with St Thomas Aquinas arguing that a woman was an 'imperfect man', an 'incidental' being (de Beauvoir 1949:129). In the book of Genesis in the Bible, this belief is symbolically represented by the creation of Eve from Adam's rib. Furthermore, it was Eve's moral weakness that led her to succumb to the serpent's evil temptations and it was her that seduced Adam, leading to the fall from divine grace as: 'women's nature makes them inherently more susceptible to sexual desire and other passions of the flesh, blinding them to reason and morality and making them a constant danger to men's souls' (Weitz, 2003:4). As a result of Eve's transgression, God said to her, 'I will greatly increase your pains in childbearing; with pain you will give birth to children. Your desire will be for your husband and he will rule over you' (Genesis 3:16, New International Version). This is re-confirmed in the New Testament when Paul writes to Timothy declaring that the ills of the world are due to Eve's disobedience:

For Adam was first formed, then Eve. And Adam who was not the one deceived; it was the woman who was deceived and became a sinner. But woman will be saved through childbearing- if they continue in faith, love and holiness with propriety (1Timothy 2: 13-15).

By virtue of Eve, the Original Sin becomes sexualised; 'her temptation to eat the forbidden fruit becomes seduction, and the seducer, the serpent - a demonic infusion between evil and sexuality' (Tseelon, 1995:11). The banishment from the Garden of Eden, therefore takes place due to the corruption of a virgin. This sexualised analogy of the 'Fall' is validated through the other most important female character in the bible; the chaste, obedient Virgin Mary. Through Mary's

faith and acquiescent nature, the Son of God and redeemer of the world is born. The Second Eve (Peltomaa, 2001), then offers women a way of redemption, through the unobtainable embodiment of 'virginity and motherhood untainted by the desires of the flesh' (Tseelon, 1995:11). Christian patriarchal beliefs, in short, advocate the virtue of motherhood and warn against the dangers of female sexuality.

It is in the context of Christian narratives such as these that De Beauvoir (1949) argues that religion has been used to control and oppress women and justify their second-class status. Daly (1979, 1990) takes this even further, suggesting that Christianity embodies women-hating, and is a patriarchal myth rooted in male 'sado-rituals' with its 'torture cross symbolism'. Feminists such as Figs (1978) and Mercer (1975) have also cited the misogynistic views of the apostle Paul in the New Testament, where he stipulates:

For man did not come from woman, but woman from man. Neither was man created for woman, but woman for man (1 Corinthians 11:8-9).

Wives, submit to your husbands as to the Lord.¹³ For the husband is the head of the wife, as Christ is head of the church, his body, of which he is the Saviour. Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit to their husbands in everything (Ephesians 5: 22-24).

Likewise, in 1 Corinthians 14, verses 34-35, Paul postulates that women should remain silent and subservient when in the house of God and man:

Women should remain silent in the churches. They are not allowed to speak, but must remain in submission, as the law says. If they want to inquire about something, they should ask their husband at home; for it is a disgraceful for a woman to speak in church.

¹³This message of submission, by wives to their husbands, is re-confirmed in the book of Peter in the Bible (1 Peter, 3:1).

In these ways, Christian theology confirms the Greek philosophical view that women's bodies and sexuality are dangerous, and must be controlled and ruled over by the divinely chosen male species. Female bodies, due to their irrational and threatening nature must therefore be restrained and brought to obedience with muted voices. To summarise in Simone De Beauvoir's (1949:128) words: 'Christian ideology has contributed no little to the oppression of women'.

Accusations of witchcraft are used to control, torture and kill thousands of women (1450-1750AD)

Weitz (2003) claims that the Christian teachings surrounding women's inferiority, irrationality and irrepressible sexuality encouraged people to believe that females were more susceptible to the Devil's temptations of witchcraft. The practical consequences of this resulted in the trial, torture and execution of tens of thousands of 'witches' in early modern Europe. To contextualise, the number of 'witch-hunts' accelerated at a time of great social and economic change and uncertainty, as institutional Catholicism began to give way to Protestantism (Turner, 1996; Gibbons 1998). Thomas (1970) postulates that whilst the Reformation asserted the dangers of the Devil and the constant 'presence of evil', it renounced the powers of the priest, the sign of the cross and holy waters. These magical and ritual procedures became regarded with suspicion - as entrapments and diversions from the one true faith. Women's perceived moral and physical weaknesses supposedly made them particularly prey to such superstitious beliefs and followings and, at a time of hyper-suspicion, panic and paranoia, mass hysteria resulted in witch-hunts and horrific gendercide (Ben-Yehuda, 1980). Linked with the theological traditions of Eve, women's embodiment was associated with all that was potentially destructive and evil. In the most influential text of the time (published in 1485-6), the Manuscript of the Maleficarum¹⁴ decreed:

¹⁴ This famous text was printed in over 20 editions (Ben-Yehuda, 1980).

All wickedness is but little to the wickedness of women...women are by nature instruments of Satan - they are carnal, a structural defect rooted in the original creation (quoted in Katz, 1994: 438-39).

Willis (1995) argues that women over the age of fifty were the main target of Witch accusations, especially widows, as they were seen as an economic burden on the community. Moreover, unattached women usually fell outside the norms of patriarchal control and were seen 'to be socially dangerous to the public order' (Turner, 1996:140). Brian Levack (1995) estimates that over the three centuries in Europe there were 110,000 witch trials. Brutal torture methods were used to extract confessions of witchcraft and half of these convictions ended in execution either by hanging or burning in the public domain to act as a deterrent and warning¹⁵. Women were thus controlled as much by the fear of being accused, as by the actual consequences of the witch-hunts themselves.

The Enlightenment: the chasm between men and women's bodies deepens

(17th and 18th Century)

In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the rapidly developing social and natural sciences began to assert the superiority of men over women via theories of biological determinism (Martin, 2001). Laquer (1987, 1990) claims that it was not until the 18th Century that women's anatomy was categorised as so clearly different from men's. Before this point, it was perceived as structurally similar, but arranged in an inferior order. As Nemesius, a bishop in the fourth century explained, 'women have the same genitals as men, except that theirs are inside the body and not outside it' (quoted in Martin, 2001:15). However, this 'one-sex/one flesh' model came under challenge during the Enlightenment period (Laquer, 1990). This era, sometimes classified as the start of Modernity, or the 'Age of Reason', was characterised as a time of social progression under the beginnings of science. Philosophies during the Age of Enlightenment fought against superstition, religion and ignorance. Women, due to their affinity with

¹⁵ Briggs (1996) points out that approximately 20-25 % of those accused of being witches were actually men and that 'most informal accusations were made by women against other women'. Adam Jones (2002) argues however, that patriarchal power was ubiquitous at all later stages of witchcraft proceedings. Men were exclusively the prosecutors, judges, jailers and executioners.

religious and supernatural practises, were deemed enemies of reason and as an obstruction to intellectual advancement. Consequently, it was 'in the interests of savants to polarize women and men' (Jordanova, 1980:163). The sex distinctions 'male' and 'female' became increasingly important; they were defined in opposition to each other based on anatomical differences. These biological differences became the foundations in which the disparity between masculine and feminine identities and lives could be understood.

It was within this context that scientists and social scientists alike became increasingly fixated with studying and dissecting women's bodies, in order to provide a biological explanation to justify women's social inequalities (Shilling, 1993:44). Physicians during this period did concede that there was variation amongst women in terms of mental and physical capacity, which derived from environmental factors (such as climate and work patterns) but that nonetheless, all women still shared undeniably similar physiological features that separated them clearly from the male species (Jordanova, 1989). These biological deviations in turn were believed to determine personalities. As Rousell postulated in 1803 (11-12):

The soft parts which are part of the female constitution....also manifest differences which enable one to catch a glimpse of the functions to which a woman is called, and of the passive state to which nature has destined her.

Likewise, Barthez, an important French physician in the eighteenth Century, explained the impact that women's 'softness' and biological vulnerability¹⁶ had on their lives:

This muscular feebleness inspires in women an instinctive disgust of strenuous exercise; it draws them towards amusements and sedentary occupations. One could add that the separation of their hips makes walking more painful for women...This habitual feeling of weakness inspires less confidence....and as a woman finds herself less able to exist on her own,

¹⁶ It is important to note that many of these 'feminine' qualities of weakness and fragility have applied to white middle class 'gentlewomen' rather than to working class women or women of colour (see Schiebinger, Gould, Sojourner Truth).

the more she needs to attract the attentions of others, to strengthen herself using those around her whom she judges most capable of protecting her (quoted in Cabanis ,1956, I:278).

Hence 'in eighteenth-century Europe, the male body remained the touchstone of the human anatomy' (Schiebinger, 1999:28) with naturalistic theories re-confirming the subordination of women and justifying their social inferiority (Gallagher and Laquer, 1987).

Throughout western thought, including early philosophy and religion, the soul/body, mind/body distinctions have been emphasised, associating men with the superior mind and women with the inferior body. The Enlightenment had further deepened these fundamental dichotomies, creating an unbridgeable gulf between male and female corporeality. Whilst Judaeo-Christianity had perceived the body as a necessary encasement for the supreme soul, the body in the post-Cartesian period was perceived as an actual hindrance to sublime rational thinking (Shildrick and Price, 1999). The body, it was believed, must be transcended, in order to pursue higher intellectuality for individual and cultural progression. Women's bodies however, due to their sexuality and fertility, were thought to be 'tied to nature'- still in the 'transition from animality to culture' (Turner, 1996:126). Thus women's reproductive systems became synonymously linked with female bodies as being, 'intrinsically unpredictable, leaky and disruptive' lacking the self-containment and order of their male counterparts (Shildrick and Price, 1999:2). The female body was hence seen as an obstruction to culture that needed to be governed and controlled. Ortner (1974) posits that the consequence of women's affiliation with nature allows men to be free from the constraints of bodily corporeality, enabling them to focus on higher intellectual matters in society, namely the development of culture. Accordingly, the dichotomies female/male, body/mind were expanded to include nature/culture, physical/mental, mothering/thinking, feeling and superstition/ abstract knowledge and thought, country/city, darkness/light and nature/science and civilization, with the devalued term always being associated with the feminine (Jordanova, 1989). De Beauvoir (1949:xxix), in her book, 'The Second Sex', points out how men profit from this 'otherness, the alterity of women'. She argues that whilst

philosophical categories of man as Self/Subject and woman as Other/Object, allow the male Self to transcend physical limitations, the female Other in contrast is 'trapped in immanence, defined and evaluated by its bodily shape, size and functions'. Therefore in a corresponding manner to the wild, dangerous and unpredictable natural elements that must be conquered and controlled in the name of progress, ideologies around the Enlightenment period also held that women's bodies must be tamed, dominated and mastered (Jordanova, 1989). De Beauvoir (1949:179) affirms this by saying that 'in woman dressed and adorned, nature is present but under restraint ...A woman is rendered more desirable to the extent that nature is more highly developed in her and more rigorously confined'.

19th Century – Science proves the inferiority of women's bodies

In the 19th Century, science continued to effect thoughts surrounding sex and gender¹⁷. Charles Darwin's famous theory of evolution in 1872 was particularly influential at this time and has continued to have an impact into the present day. In the 'Origin of the Species', Darwin argues that survival of the fittest ensures that only the strongest males copulate with females in order to reproduce. Consequently, males will continuously evolve and progress. Females, in comparison, do not have to compete against each other for the opposite sex and so will never fully evolve. At the same time, reproductive processes in women use up energy that might otherwise be used for mental or physical growth and improvement (Weitz, 2003). Thus women, according to Darwin, remain childlike, overruled by their emotions and passions with little sense of reason. Many other 'scientific methods', theories and metaphors developed in this period to reconfirm (white) men's superior position in society based on biological differences¹⁸. 'Cranometry', for example, was a scientific experiment involving the measurement of the skull capacity/brain size, using the assumption that bigger brains were associated with higher intelligence. Scientists, Morton and Broca,

¹⁷ Perhaps it should be noted that whilst 'sex' has often been considered a permanent and innate biological 'fact'. 'Gender' has been argued (at least in more recent times) to be formed through socialisation. This distinction, however, as Wood (1993:28) points out, is too simplistic as it fails to acknowledge the 'historically and culturally variable systems of belief that invest meagre anatomical differences with major social significance'.

¹⁸ Biological explanations have also been used to justify social inequalities of other members of society including slaves, children and black people.

'coincidentally' discovered that whites had bigger brains than non-whites, men had larger brains than women and law-abiding citizens had larger brains than criminals and prostitutes (Gould, 1981). Gustave Le Bon's (a famous French scientist and social psychologist) statement in 1879, illustrates the medical profession's attitude to women at the time:

In the most intelligent races, as among the Parisians, there are a large number of women whose brain sizes are closer in size to those of gorillas than to the most developed male brains. This inferiority is so obvious that no one can contest it for a moment, only its degree is worth discussion (quoted in Gould, 1981:136).

The biologist Patrick Geddes, in his theory of Anabolic-Katabolic sexual evolution, makes a similar point about women's biological differences:

It is generally true that the males are more active, energetic, eager, passionate, and variable; the females more passive, conservative, sluggish, and stable...The more active males, with a consequently wider range of experience, may have bigger brains and more intelligence; but the females, especially as mothers, have indubitably a larger and more habitual share of the altruistic motions. The males being usually stronger, have greater independence and courage; the females excel in constancy of affection and sympathy (Geddes, 1890:122).

As more middle class women accessed employment and education, scientists and social scientists caused a backlash to maintain women's subordinate status in society. Reinforcing earlier Aristotelian and Christian ideologies of women's inherent physical and mental weakness, science was used to justify women's exclusion from the public sphere including higher education, professional jobs, politics and even sport. Gustave Le Bon (1879) encapsulates the general attitude and fear of equality between the sexes thus:

A desire to give them the same education, and, as a consequence, to propose the same goals for them, is a dangerous chimera ... The day when, misunderstanding the inferior occupations which nature has given her,

women leave the home and take part in our battles; on this day a social revolution will begin, and everything that maintains the sacred ties of the family will disappear (quoted in Gould 1981:104-5)

Many academics and educators believed that not only were women incapable of learning due to the small size of their brains, but that intellectual activity would damage their reproductive systems by preventing 'their pelvises from developing fully, causing women to suffer or even die in childbirth' (Weitz, 2003:2). Higher education was therefore considered a dangerous pursuit for the female gender, depleting women of beauty, vitality, health and fertility.

Medicalisation of women's bodies

As science gained momentum in the nineteenth century, women's bodies became increasingly subject to the scrutiny of medical professionals. Male doctors colonized domains that had previously belonged to women (Treichler, 1990). Normal and natural female physical processes such as childbirth became medicalised. Women's reproductive systems therefore became the source of direct concern. In 1869, Dr. M. E. Dirix explained women's wretched position:

Women are treated for diseases of the stomach, liver, kidneys, heart, lungs, etc.; yet, in most instances, these diseases will be found on due investigation, to be, in reality, not diseases at all, but merely the sympathetic reactions or the symptoms of one disease, namely, a disease of the womb (Ehrenreich, 1978: 122).

Cures for all female bodily illnesses focused on 'treatments' of the womb. Whilst many physicians avoided the surgical removal of women's reproductive anatomy, remedies such as applying leeches or hot steel to a woman's cervix were relatively common (Ehrenreich, 1978). Arguably, the most debilitating treatment prescribed by the doctor was the request to stop all physical and mental activity that might prevent the healing and balance of energy in the womb. Disease of the ovaries and womb was also perceived to cause hysteria¹⁹. Ussher (1989:4) claims that women who did not conform to the Victorian ideal of femininity were in danger of being

¹⁹ 'Hysteria' comes from the Greek word *hysterus* meaning wandering womb.

labelled 'hysterical': 'these strong-willed women were rejecting the traditional feminine role, refusing to be passive and inactive and were thus posing a threat to the very foundations of Victorian society'. Subsequently, deviant women in this period were 'cured' via cruel operations such as clitoridectomy, which Showalter (1986:77) defines as the 'surgical enforcement of an ideology which restricts female sexuality to reproduction'. In this way care and attention over the health of women's bodies was in reality 'based on the misogynist dogma which masqueraded as medical knowledge' (Ussher, 1989:8). Whereas previously, menstruation had been perceived as a necessary and natural process, monthly periods also began to be seen as a likely cause of illness and disease amongst women (Shilling, 2003:45). Mrs Castle for example, in a famous London court case in 1896, was found 'not guilty' to the charges of theft as she was believed to have the disease 'kleptomania' caused by 'suppressed menstruation' (Shuttleworth, 1990). In a corresponding manner, the menopause was also perceived as pathological and seen as 'a crisis likely to bring on an increase of disease' (Martin, 2001:21). Thus women's physiological reproductive capacity was used to justify women's inherent weakness and inferiority as women were irrationally and unreliably controlled by their hormones and monthly cycles.

1950's onwards – Socio-biological genetic theories re-confirm male dominance

The argument that justified women's second class citizenship based upon their reproductive capacity, continued to have practical and detrimental impacts on their lives long into the second half of the twentieth century. Raging and 'erratic' hormones were believed to threaten women's ability to think and act, and thus science was yet again used to exclude women from certain careers and 'safeguard men's occupational privileges' (Shilling, 1993:48). Edgar Berman MD, for example, was quoted as declaring: 'You would not want the president of your bank making a loan under the raging hormonal influence of that particular period' (New York Times, 26 May 1970). For the same reason women were prevented in

the 1970's by airline companies in Australia from becoming commercial pilots (Kaplan and Rogers, 1990).

Although the term 'Sociobiology' was actually coined by John Paul Scott in 1946, its popularity did not take off until around the 1960's and 70's, which contextually 'coincided with the economic crisis of the early 1970's, and the rise of the women's movement' (Shilling, 1993:48). Sociobiology - arguably a revived modern day version of Darwinism - extended the recurring theme of women's inferior embodiment by focusing on essentialist explanations of gender inequalities. Advocators of sociobiology believe that human behaviour, in the same way as animal behaviour, can be understood by the process of natural selection and evolution. That is to say, human nature is genetically determined by DNA code and explains for example, male characteristics such as intelligence, dominance, aggression and territoriality. In turn, women's genetic make-up explains their passive, emotional, caring and nurturing nature. Critics such as Lieven (1981), however, claim that sociobiological theory is simply the latest 'scientific' device to reconfirm the status quo. According to Lieven, the work of the sociobiologist is based ultimately in the traditional belief that women bear children and therefore have a different role in society to men. This ideology is then supported by animal studies and behavioural ones, including visual-spatial tasks and experiments on language and aggression. The resulting evidence is then linked back to hormones and brain structures, and used to confirm contemporary hegemonic sex roles as natural and desirable. Shilling (1993:52) reinforces Lieven's analysis by arguing that: 'instead of resting on serious scientific explanations, sociobiology begins with an interpretation of current social life - which is often sexist, ethnocentric and factually wrong in other ways - and projects this back on to a mythical history of human societies'.

Despite these criticisms, sociobiology has gone on to impact upon present day thinking of gender roles - emphasising the differences between men's and women's characteristics, personalities and capabilities based upon their anatomies. For example, the popular sociobiologist, Desmond Morris (1997), in

his book, 'Human Sexes; a Natural History of Man and Woman', illustrates how biological explanations based on evolution, are used to confirm the power, strength and dominance of the male over the 'weaker' sex. Resonating with 'scientific' theories presented over one hundred years earlier, he writes:

It begins at birth. The male baby is, on average, heavier and longer than the female baby. It also exhibits a higher basal metabolism- something that it will have throughout its life – a feature that is suited to a more strenuous, active lifestyle. Newborn males show more vigorous limb movements, as if impatient to get started with their athletic pursuits...young boys are more interested in running, jumping, pushing and pulling; little girls tend to sit down and play with the objects in front of them...These differences all occur long before there can have been any adult influences or 'gender role' bias. They are clearly inborn and set tiny boys and girls off on slightly different paths, which they will follow all their lives. The power-playing of the male infants is a clear precursor of their later muscular exploits (ibid.:12).

Morris appears to prize the male anatomy above the female. In his example of superior masculine strength, he declares (in awe of the competitors of the Highland Games in Scotland) that: 'only the most powerful of men can achieve this feat, a feat that is beyond any woman' (ibid.:13). In contrast, evolution has made women's bodies defective: 'the child-bearing specialization of the human female has affected her adult body shape'. As a result of women's reproductive systems, and consequentially wider hips, women take smaller steps, have difficulty in running in a straight line (as their hips rotate outwards), and are liable to cross their legs when seated.

Of course, it is not simply the anatomy of males and females that differs according to sociobiological theory, but also the way the genders think, act and feel. According to numerous contemporary scientific and psychological studies, men and women have polarised characteristics that govern their role in society. For example, women, due to their perceived innate caring qualities (associated with their 'maternal' bond to children and affinity for child rearing), are deemed 'relationship specialists' (Wamboldt and Reiss, 1989), who are skilled in

communicating and caring (Goldner et al,1990; Tavis, 1992; Tognoli, 1980). Women are seen as having higher 'emotional intelligence' (Goldner et al, 1990) which transfers to strong interpersonal and communication skills, enabling women to form intimate 'sharing' relationships with others. Rather than talking, men (according to studies by sociobiologists) form friendships by 'doing', for example by participating in sports and interacting at work. Men are considered to be more independent and autonomous than women, preferring rules and regulations that emphasise competition and aggression (Wright, 1982; Swain, 1989; Reisman, 1981). These 'engendered interactional preferences' (Wood 1993:34), gender characteristics and personalities inevitably impact on gender roles in society and the perceived capabilities of women and men.

To summarise, second wave feminists have amassed a wealth of evidence suggesting that ideological theories of sex throughout the centuries - whether they have focused on anatomical or hormonal differences (directed and overridden by genetics) - have all had deterministic implications for the behaviour and lives of individuals. Women, due to their ability to reproduce, have been perceived as more wholly embodied, closer to 'nature' and less cultured than their male counterparts. The rationalised, enlightened sphere of the educated man has historically been prized and privileged over woman's inferior anatomy and 'inherent' behavioural patterns. Women's different and subordinate role in society has therefore been viewed as an ordained and inevitable consequence of the natural order.

In the next section, I further explore the impact that these discourses have had on women's lives, according to second wave feminists, by looking explicitly at a few historical examples of body modification and fashion clothing. As I explained in the introduction, the purpose is not to provide a chronological list of all the bodily oppressive regimes that women have been subjected to over the years, but rather to demonstrate some of the ways by which the cultural ideology of the time views women's bodies. Turner (1996:6) convincingly argues that in 'somatic' society, politics are 'expressed through the conduit of the human body': the body becomes the site through which the power relations of gender are played out. Moreover, as the following examples will demonstrate, this soma inscription

hurts: 'Gender is inscribed on women's bodies but it can only be crafted onto women's bodies through injuring, through pain, through emptying these bodies of meaning (Fournier, 2002:69).

SECTION II – 'Oppressive' Practices

How Body modification's (in the 16th and 17th Centuries) were used to punish, control sexuality and enforce hegemonic femininity.

Second wave feminists and other critical thinkers point out that although the mass killings of 'witches' could be seen as a direct attack on women, other more subtle, but perhaps equally oppressive measures were used around this historical period to control and contain the female species. The 'scolds bridle', for example, was an English invention used as a torture device primarily on women. Whilst there were several varieties of the bridle²⁰, in essence an iron cage was placed around the head, with an iron tongue piece that was often spiked to prevent the person from talking. It was used as a form of punishment for 'scolds' - women who were seen as 'gossips' or troublesome in some way - in order to silence and humiliate them. It has also been rumoured that they were used on witches to prevent them from casting spells. In addition, Kamensky (1997) suggests that the implementation of the Scolds Bridle was due to the biblical quote, 'let the women be silent in church' - the church being broadly interpreted to mean the parish community ruled over by the patriarchal hierarchy.

Another mechanism of direct control over women's bodies was the chastity belt. Despite speculation that the belt had been implemented in previous eras, authentic evidence of their use dates back to the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. Hundreds of women, according to Abbot (2001), were subjected to this humiliating, uncomfortable and even painful device used to ensure women's fidelity. The fundamental design of the chastity belt typically

²⁰ The Scolds Bridle could be used simply to subdue a 'nagging' wife, or as a painful torture device by the judicial system or as corporeal punishment on female workhouse inmates. The punitive gag could be left on for minutes or several hours.

consisted of an iron contraption that went around a woman's hips, under her legs and joined at the back and front to prevent a woman from engaging in any sexual activity. There were usually two holes in the iron piece under the woman's legs to allow for urination, menstrual blood and for faeces, although these holes would have jagged edges or 'sharp teeth' to prevent any human interference. As Abbot points out, not only would these belts ensure celibacy and prohibit any sexual contact, but they would chafe, be difficult to sleep in and would make it difficult for the woman to clean herself properly. The chastity belt was both symbolic of the importance of women's chastity and also a literal incarceration by the dominant male to prevent infidelity. Acting as a defensive weapon over the elusive sexual powers that have long been associated with the women, the chastity belt, allows the male to control and conquer women's mysterious, frightening and potentially betraying anatomy.

Other more subtle methods of bodily oppression were also taking place during the same time period, as a way of regulating the female form. Another illustration of control, focusing more on affluent women, was the power of compulsory, hegemonic notions of beauty - resulting in harmful body modification practices. On the surface these beauty body modifications may appear simply self-inflicted. Donohoe (2006:1) argues, however, many techniques of body modification are actually 'cultural practices designed to control the female sex, even when willingly accepted by women'. Furthermore, she suggests that 'most interventions have been practised by women, rather than men, who, as a result of their more privileged position in society, have been able to rely more upon their intellectual, political, and military feats to achieve respectability and to woo prospective mates'. Women, in contrast, are confronted with the need to work on their physical attractiveness as a means of 'getting on' and survival in life. As Weitz (2003:133) states, in patriarchal society, 'women's appearance dramatically affects women's lives. Attractiveness serves as an indirect form of power [albeit weak], by increasing women's odds of obtaining the protection of powerful men'. Consequently, upper-class European women were also managed and restricted via self-imposed body modification for beauty purposes.

In the course of the Elizabethan era for example, a high forehead was seen as highly desirable, as the pinnacle of femininity, and many upper-class women would pluck or shave the front of their heads to achieve this look. More dangerously, these women would also cover their faces with ceruse (lead-based) make-up resulting in side effects such as gout, anaemia, peripheral neuropathy, chronic renal failure and disfiguring facial scarring (Henig, 1996). In the 16th and 17th Century wealthy Italian women would use extracts of deadly nightshade as eye-drops in order to dilate their pupils, increase their heart rate, blur their vision and heighten arousal. Hence, the alternative term for nightshade, 'belladonna', meaning beautiful lady (Hennig, 1996). The side effects from this included retinal damage, glaucoma and blindness (Donohoe, 2006). Newman (2000) states in her article, 'The Enigma of Beauty', that 'vermillion rouge', a mixture of mercury and sulphur, was also used during the 18th Century. Apart from the side effect of the smell of sulphur, users risked loss of teeth, gingivitis, kidney and nervous system damage from the mercury.

How clothes were used as a mechanism of social control – using the example of the 19th Century Victorian Corset

Whilst the relationship between women and fashion is a complex one, it is still possible to map an historical correlation between patriarchal ideologies and women's clothing. Although some of women's attire has been more obviously restrictive, uncomfortable and painful (like the corset discussed below), some feminists argue that *all* fashion is oppressive. Eco, for example, suggests that:

Woman has been enslaved by fashion, not only because, in obliging her to be attractive, ...to be pretty and stimulating, it made her a sex object; she has been enslaved chiefly because [her] ...clothing...forced her psychologically to live for the exterior' (Eco, 1986:194).

According to this perspective, clothes have thereby been used as another technique to patrol the feminine and regulate the female body. Tseelon (1995:12-13) argues for example, that 'from early Christianity to medieval Christianity the importance of female apparel formed part of the theological discourse... for the early church fathers, modesty in dress is a moral duty born by Eve's burden of

guilt', consequently the 'discourse of modesty and chastity in dress came to encode female sexuality'. Awkward, heavy and uncomfortable dresses hence were the norm - hiding women's bodies and restricting movement.

Various feminists have argued that few other garments have acted as such a clear vehicle of control and containment over women's bodies as the Victorian corset. The corset, despite being around since the early 14th Century, became particularly popular in the 19th Century. The Victorian corset was often made out of steel and whale-bone. It was tightly laced with the aim of reducing the circumference of the waist to between 16 and 17 inches. Many physical side effects resulted from this constricting garment, including compression of the chest, ribs and abdomen, causing deformation, discomfort and even broken ribs. Other problems included difficulty in breathing and shallow breathing, which often led to dizziness, weakness and fainting. Depending on the design of the corset, further side effects involved internal damage of the liver or kidneys caused by compression or the edges of the corset digging in, as well as creating postural issues such as lower back and knee problems. The corset was used to create the ideal physique of the nineteenth century hourglass figure, emphasising women's 'reproductive' curves of hips and breasts against an unnaturally miniscule waist. This image, according to Bordo (1993:103), 'was an intelligible *symbolic* form, representing a domestic, sexualised ideal of femininity' clearly exaggerating the differences between male and female anatomy. As Bordo then elaborates: 'at the same time, to achieve the specified look, a particular feminine *praxis* was required - strait-lacing, minimal eating, reduced mobility - rendering the female body unfit to perform activities outside its designated sphere'. Summers (2001) in her book on the history of the corset 'Bound to Please' convincingly argues that the corset was used to punish, regulate and sculpt the female body from childhood to old age. She claims that corsets not only damaged bodies and inadvertently mental health, but were used to police femininity and 'were a crucial element in constructing middle class women as psychologically submissive subjects' (blurb). This fashionable iconic garment of control therefore restricted the movement and lives of women. Thus women were physically de-liberated by the corset, which in turn re-affirmed the traditional cultural notions of women as weak with little stamina and strength.

Conclusion

Second wave feminists argue that dominant western ideologies throughout history have considered woman's bodies to be inferior to their male counterparts, and that these ideologies have also portrayed gender inequalities as a straightforward consequence of the natural order. Furthermore, they have been able to draw on a mass of evidence suggesting that the 'unruly' female form has been constrained and regulated through various mechanisms of social control directed towards the retention of patriarchal power. Whilst some second wave feminists acknowledge that the relationship between woman/body/nature is not quite as linear and straightforward as this portrayal may suggest, they claim that women's bodies have been central to the gendered oppression.

It is important to point out, however, that the ideologies, philosophies and fashions which have been used to 'strait-jacket' women's bodies and potential power have not gone uncontested. Indeed, the body can be used to confirm or deny patriarchal relations and this is something that is not always recognised in generalised accounts of patriarchy (Gatens, 1996:146). As Wood underlines:

Individuals who accept cultural constructions of gender act to sustain the contemporary conventions, while those who reject prevailing prescriptions 'disturb the order' and sometimes provoke revisions in gender ideologies (Wood, 1993:28).

It was not until the 'rise of the Women's Movement' - which I turn to in chapter 4 - that individuals began to collaborate with each other and challenge biological determinist views. Before embarking on this analysis, however, it is important to place it within an appropriately critical context. While I have in the above discussion tended to take as given, the forms of oppression covered in this chapter and drawn on conventional feminist accounts of patriarchy, there is a need to qualify some of the generalisations central to such explanations. As noted in previous chapters, post-structuralist and postmodernist critics have pointed out that there is no 'universal' woman. That is to say, there is no unitary essential womanhood that shares the same feminine gender identity. Not only are understandings of 'woman' constructed within a historical narrative and rendered

temporally and culturally specific (Fraser and Nicholson, 1988), but they exist as only one relevant aspect of identity integrated with others, such as class, ethnicity, race, disability, age, sexuality and so forth. Post-structuralists therefore argue that traditional accounts of patriarchy and male domination have failed to take into account the complexities of being 'female' and the differences between women (Clarke, 1998). Correspondingly, as Clarke (1998:20) notes, 'early feminist work and the resultant metanarratives that developed tended to oversimplify the cause(s) of women's oppression'. These forms of oppression were established by privileged white, middle class, heterosexual women on issues that were supposedly representative of all females' experience - ignoring relevant differences such as class, race and culture (Barrett and Phillips, 1992).

It follows from this critique that if there is no universal 'woman' there can be no universal 'man', thus undermining the concept of 'patriarchy'; a concept that depends upon these homogeneous binary oppositions. As Elbert (1991:90) explains, the notion of patriarchy has been essentialised, being portrayed as 'a unity that is coherent, inviolable, and continuous' and yet in reality should be analysed as 'fragmented, multiple and divided'. For these reasons, it is important to be cautious of using 'patriarchy' in a monolithic and totalising manner as such deployment fails to explain the complexities of gender relations (Cocks, 1989). For example, it does not begin to answer such questions such as: What about men who are exploited? Why do some women resist oppression and why do some women oppress other women? By ignoring these issues, patriarchy becomes viewed as 'free of conflicts and contradictions, totally dominated by a unified masculinity' (Halberg, 1992:374).

In this way, whilst the concept of 'patriarchy' has been useful in this chapter as a simplifying means of mapping out and exposing male domination, such a 'transsocial and historical' term cannot explain adequately the varying forms of its presence, nor for the varying ways by which women have resisted this oppression (Messner and Sabo, 1990:7). In light of these criticisms, I do not feel we can use the terms patriarchy and oppression indiscriminately or uncritically.

Rather as Hargreaves (1982:115) suggests, these terms should be viewed as a 'fluid relationship between men and women which is complex and moves with great speed at times' and not simply about 'a fixed state of male oppression over women'.

This is the context in which my thesis now takes a turn in its theoretical direction, searching for resistance and complexity amidst ideologies and practices that can too easily be seen as monolithic. This chapter has indeed set out the argument put forth by second wave feminists that within western society there has been a history of oppression over women and severe consequences for those who go against the norms of convention. However, it could be argued that even if this feminist historical perspective is accepted, such oppression is no longer inevitable in contemporary society – as doors have now been opened up to new masculinities and femininities in an unprecedented manner. In today's climate there are more possibilities for resistance than ever before. Women are not simply passive, powerless victims, allowing social constructions of femininity to be imposed and inscribed upon them. Women may choose to 'actively collaborate in their creation and maintenance or actively resist these processes' (Weitz, 2003:x). It is in the spirit of such recognition that my next chapter turns towards an exploration of the ways in which women claim they have begun to 'reclaim' their bodies through various body modifications.

CHAPTER 4. Reclaiming Women's Bodies through Radical Body Modification

Introduction

In the previous chapter, I provided a partial survey of how women, according to second wave feminists, have historically been kept subservient by different mechanisms of patriarchal control and how they have been coerced into conforming to mainstream body regimes. However, as I pointed out in the conclusion, the forces of women's corporeal oppression have not been without counteraction. Indeed, as Foucault (1980:95) postulates; 'when there is power there is resistance'. Within this context the body can be seen as a potential 'site of opposition' (Frank, 1991). It is to these forms of 'bodily' resistance that I turn in this chapter. In the first part of the chapter, I begin by briefly focussing on the ways in which the rise of the women's movement has seemed to provide women with the resources to start to avoid some of the more destructive aspects of corporeal oppression I then look at the present day situation in relation to women and body modification, and examine the feminist argument that despite the apparent progress of women's liberation, beauty norms are actively - though subtly - still operating to retain patriarchy. Indeed, many feminists concur that women are still controlled, regulated and monitored by harmful, compulsory, hegemonic gender roles.

However, at the same time as there has been an increased pressure to conform to normative body ideals, there has also (particularly since the 1980's) been a resurgence in non-mainstream body art modifications, such as tattoos, piercings and even 'futuristic' implants, that appear to deliberately transgress contemporary beauty norms. Consequently, these alternative body projects have been advocated by some feminists, as having the potential to 'reclaim' and re-inscribe the body by resisting normalised forms of feminine appearance. In the second part of the chapter, I explore some of these radical and controversial body modifications (including body art, cyberpunk and cosmetic surgery) that some

women believe allows them to 'reclaim' their bodies and empower themselves. Whilst cosmetic surgery may seem 'dis-placed' within these categories, some radicals have argued that this practice too can be used to expose the irony of gender construction and rebel against and destabilize concepts of beauty.

Unsurprisingly, not all feminists have agreed with these dramatic and painful practices, thus I conclude the chapter by critically evaluating these different body modifications on the basis of opposing feminist perspectives.

Feminism fights back against women's corporeal oppression

Feminists were the first to point out the constraints and oppression that women suffered due to their corporeal bodies. Conventionally, feminism as an ideology has been traced back to Mary Wollstonecraft in the late 18th Century who argued that 'femininity' was a prison and a condition akin to slavery. However, it was not until the second wave feminist movement in the late 1960's and 1970's that women protested against both the subordination and objectification of the female body as *the* main site of oppression. Whilst feminists during this time period focussed on diverse issues of women's 'oppression' and exploitation, at their core lay the central aim of 'reclaiming' women's bodies and therefore women's lives. The female body thus became a political issue, as feminists struggled to gain control over their corporeal beings. Issues directly effecting women's bodies such as health, sexuality, representation and compulsive femininity, were examined, discussed, analysed and exposed. It was believed that through 'consciousness raising' and reflexivity, women would learn to think and feel differently about themselves and the social world around them. Furthermore, Bartky (1990) argued that by *sharing* their lived experiences and bodily 'complaints', women were actively resisting and challenging patriarchal control.

For example, in 1971, the Boston Women's Health Collection published its first book, *Our Bodies, Our Selves*, which pioneered feminist health care and deftly promoted the link between the personal and the political. In connection with this women's health movement, feminists campaigned for the right to control

their fertility and their right to abortion (Gordon, 1976; Dreifus, 1978). Additionally, as more feminists penetrated into male dominated academia, analyses of 'the body' in relation to gender, patriarchy and power relationships were brought more into the limelight (Davis, 1997). Feminists also had a persuasive impact upon changes in government policies and legislation (including violence against women, domestic abuse, rape and work inequality). Cultural feminists analysed and exposed the negative portrayals and representations of women in the media. At the same time, 'consciousness-raising' groups allowed women to discuss their antagonistic relationship with their bodies and the enormous pressures placed on them to conform to societal and patriarchal images of femininity (Bartky, 1990). As a consequence, many feminists responded to this oppressive focus on appearance by abandoning conventional beauty regimes, in order to free women's bodies from being constantly patrolled, inscribed and self-surveyed by the beauty doctrine that Dworkin (1974:113- 4) captures in the following quote:

Standards of beauty describe in precise terms the relationship that an individual will have with her own body...They define precisely the dimension of her physical freedom...In our culture, not one part of a woman's body is left untouched, unaltered. From the age of 11 or 12 until she dies, a woman will spend a large part of her time, money, and energy on binding, plucking, painting and deodorising herself.

Second wave feminists thus exposed the gender inequalities in society which revolved around and impacted upon women's fleshy bodies. By challenging the grounds on which patriarchy ruled, feminists sought to provide women with the tools to 'reclaim' their bodies for the first time in history. They appeared to enjoy considerable success in this respect, and feminist criticism and activism helped contribute to the significant changes that occurred during this time to women's position in society. Legislative progress and improved social attitudes to women have resulted in the belief within popular culture that men and women now have equal status. Feminists still argue however, that despite women's apparent liberation, women remain oppressed, due to the societal pressures to submit their bodies to heterosexual femininity and beauty norms.

Body modification for beauty: The present day situation

Radical feminist, Sheila Jeffreys, passionately argues that despite the recognition and rebellion against hegemonic femininity in the 1960's and 70's as the main source of power and control over women's bodies, the mutilations that have taken place in the name of 'beauty' have increased in recent years:

In the last two decades the brutality of the beauty practices that women carry out on their bodies has become much more severe. Today's practices require the breaking of skin, spilling of blood and rearrangement or amputation of body parts (Jeffreys, 2005:1).

Saul (2003:45) supports this argument, claiming that the prevailing Western body ideal of 'large breasts and slim legs', is impossible to achieve without breast enhancement or liposuction from the legs. Women, in contemporary society, are also pressured (particularly by the media and advertising) to remain wrinkle free and according to Greer (2000) must under no circumstances show their age. Indeed, numerous studies concur that in consumer culture, the obsession with 'perfect' bodies pervades in a way that it has never done before. Related to this is the guilt, lowered self-worth, self-criticism and unhappiness that particularly effects women, as a result of their 'flawed' and imperfect bodies (Grogan, 2004). The following statistics, provided by Donnellan (2006) indicate the validity of this argument:

95 % of women are unhappy with their bodies.

68% of female teenagers believe their faces to be unattractive, and their lives are preoccupied by the desire to acquire a 'perfect' celebrity body.

In the context of these statistics it should come as no surprise that there has been an increase in eating disorders. The Mental Health Charity (Mind) suggests that one in twenty women have eating habits that are a 'cause for concern'²¹. The National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH) suggests however that this figure is a lot higher and closer to 1 in 5 women. Similarly, cultural commentators have

²¹Eating disorders include the medical definitions of anorexia, bulimia, binge and compulsory overeaters.

pointed out that in current consumer society, fixated by attractive bodies, cosmetic surgery has become increasingly commonplace. Sullivan (2004) posits that 'beauty' has now become a 'medical business', as increasing numbers of people turn to the doctor to change and solve their appearance 'problems'. Accurate statistics on cosmetic surgery are notoriously difficult to come by. However, according to statistics released by the American Society for Aesthetic Plastic Surgery (ASAPS, 2007), the number of cosmetic procedures have increased 457 percent over the last ten years, with 91 percent of cosmetic procedures being done on women - totalling over 10.6 million in the U.S.

Bartky (1990:39-42) terms the contemporary discourse around these aesthetic 'improvement' practices as the 'fashion-beauty complex'. She claims, in the following quote, that this fashion-beauty complex parallels that of the military-industrial complex:

In the sense that both are major articulation[s] of capitalist patriarchy ... a vast system of corporations - some of which manufacture products, others services and still others information, images, and ideologies - of emblematic public personages and of sets of techniques and procedures.

The power of this fashion-beauty complex, according to Bartky, has replaced the authority of the family and church, in terms of regulating and defining hegemonic norms of femininity. As Crossley (2006:58) points out, in Bartky's comparison of the church to the fashion-beauty complex, there is an implicit suggestion that both mechanisms work in similar ways to maintain their dominance. Feelings of shame and inferiority in relation to the body are provoked, 'akin to original sin', followed by a path to redemption, relief and atonement. This comparison is taken even further to imply that women who do not pass the criteria of contemporary feminine appearance are 'fallen and morally reproachable'. Helen Rubinstein is quoted by Bartky as claiming 'there are no ugly women, only lazy ones' (Bartky, 1990:41). Indeed, consumerism offers the seductive solution of improving one's appearance (after of course pointing out these bodily flaws and imperfections) by 'providing the hope that even if you were not born beautiful, you too can have the tools of beauty'. Greer (2000:23) likewise claims that within Western culture,

'every woman knows that, regardless of all her other achievements, she is a failure if she is not beautiful'. The elusive acquisition of 'beauty' thereby becomes the most important goal in life and arguably one of the few potential powers that women can claim²².

Like Greer, who decrees that women are illusionists, Susan Sontag declares that 'to be [a] woman is to be an actress. Being feminine is a kind of theatre with its appropriate costumes, *décor*, lighting, and stylized gestures' (1997:22). In other words 'femininity', which is perceived to be synonymous with woman, is not an innate mysterious quality, but a performance or art created with the use of make-up and props, such as clothes, hair extensions, nail extensions and high heels and so on. If this is the case, then it might be argued that there is no excuse for women to fail, as a performance can be learnt, rehearsed and practised. Butler (1988: 522) argues that rather than this female bodily display being seen as a gender 'project', it is rather a survival strategy. She considers that 'gender is a performance with clearly punitive consequences...those who fail to do their gender right are regularly punished'. Furthermore, Butler claims that the construction of gender disguises its own creation:

The tacit collective agreement to perform, produce, and sustain discrete and polar genders as cultural fictions is obscured by the credibility of its own production. The authors of gender become entranced by their own fictions whereby the construction compels one's belief in its necessity and naturalness (Butler, 1988:52).

Compulsory femininity, as I argue throughout this thesis, does not just affect the outer textual appearance of the body, but the actual space and experience of the body. Even women's body language can be interpreted as one of subordination. Bartky's (1988:135) comments made 20 years ago, regarding the subtle constrictions over women's bodily movement, gesture and posture are still

²²It should be noted that at the same time that women are expected and coerced into looking after their appearance, they are also ridiculed for their superficiality. In relation to this, many researchers such as Wolf (1991) have felt that they have been looked down upon by fellow academics for studying beauty practices.

relevant today. She claimed that women were more likely to sit with 'arms close to the body...and legs pressed together', making 'themselves small, narrow, harmless' and taking up little space. Men, in contrast, 'expand into the available space; they sit with their legs far apart and arms flung out at some distance from the body' (issues of gendered body space are discussed further in Chapter 5 and 7). Women are expected to smile more, take shorter strides and manage their self-presentation more. In this way women are still 'seen' and are passive, whereas men are in comparison doers and are 'active'. Thus, in contemporary society women are still under enormous expectations to conform to hegemonic images of femininity. Young (2005:44), in her book 'On Female Body Experience', explains why this pressure and objectification of women is so destructive. She declares that:

In sexist society women are in fact frequently regarded by others as objects... [to] be gazed upon as shape and flesh that presents itself as the potential object of another subject's intentions and manipulations, rather than a living manifestation of action and intention. The source of this objectified bodily existence is in the attitude of others regarding her, but the woman herself often actively takes up her body as a mere thing.

However, as Young claims, a woman is not simply an object and a 'mere' body, but a thinking, reflecting self-conscious human being. Consequently a disjunction occurs between the woman and her body creating separation, discord and disharmony. The 'male gaze' becomes internalised and is not directly imposed but becomes a source of power that is everywhere yet nowhere (Foucault, 1980). Power is no longer overt (via discriminative laws and enforced punishments such as the scolds bridle for instance: see Chapter 3 for more detail) but is now a more subtle, though constant, pressure. Women thus self-police themselves; watching, criticising, chastising and constantly judging their own appearance and presentation. As Bartky, from a Feminist Foucauldian perspective, elaborates;

The woman who checks her make-up half a dozen times a day to see if her foundation has caked or her mascara has run, who worries that the wind or rain may spoil her hairdo...or, who, feeling fat, monitors everything she eats, has become, just as surely as the inmate of the Panopticon, a self-

policing subject, a self committed to relentless self-surveillance (Bartky, 1990:80).

In contemporary society, women appear to be spending an increasing amount of time, pain and energy on the management of their bodies. This intensification could be seen as both 'diversionary and subverting' (Bordo, 1989). In this pursuit of the perfect female body, Bordo (1989:166) claims that women's bodies become docile ones: 'Bodies whose forces and energies are habituated to external regulation, subjection, transformation and 'improvement''. In this way, the current obsession with women's bodies and achieving the elusive beauty ideal, can be compared to the 'slavery' of femininity spoken about over 200 years previously by Wollstonecraft. Thus, whilst the mechanisms of social control may have changed over the centuries, the unremitting pressures to conform to expectations of femininity continue, risking women's health and creating an antagonistic and alienating relationship between women and their bodies.

It is within this context, that some feminists have proposed the liberatory capacities of alternative body projects. These, they suggest, can enable women to rebel against and 'reclaim' their bodies from oppressive beauty regimes and norms of femininity. In contrast to essentialist and some cultural feminists who reject all types of body modification as harmful and destructive, post-essentialist feminists argue that some forms of body modification and performance displays can be used to challenge and contradict hegemonic styles of beauty. These post-essentialists have argued that in the same way as 'femininity' is created and socially constructed, so too can it be exposed, undermined and deconstructed. Butler, for example, believes that the body has the potential to play with traditional gender categories. She argues that gender is not a stable identity, but is;

Tenuously constituted in time, instituted in an exterior space through a stylized repetition of acts...hence must be understood as the mundane way in which bodily gestures, movements, and styles of various kinds constitute the illusion of an abiding gendered self (Butler, 1990:421).

If then, the performance of femininity is sustained by repeated embodied acts, it follows that subversive bodily performances have the potential to disrupt this formula, by challenging the notion of the 'natural' female body, creating less restricting gender identities and relinquishing patriarchal power. Modified and monstrous bodies that violate gender norms and transgress traditional understandings of femininity and sexuality have therefore been embraced by some, as practices of female rebellion. Feminists are, however, extremely divided over the issue of female body modifiers. Advocates see possibilities of resistance, whilst others such as cultural/essential/radical feminists, critical social commentators, mental health workers and journalists, view participants as self-mutilating, sick and pathological. I will now go on to explore some of the different types of non-mainstream, 'hard-core' body modifications and performance arts that radical women are using within contemporary society in attempts to 'reclaim' and 'liberate' their bodies, before analysing them more thoroughly from the two opposing feminist standpoints²³.

Female body artists (piercings, tattoos, scarring, sadomasochism)

Often pathologised and labelled deviant, obscene and disgusting by mainstream society, body art includes heavy piercings, tattoos, branding and scarification rituals, and sado-masochistic acts. Talvi (2003) defines these transgressive female body artists as women who explore their 'external edges', as those who 'pursue tattooing and body modification, those who embrace sexually "deviant" practices, and those who altogether reject mainstream concepts of beauty, behaviour, and desirable body size'. The subcultural discourse of women body modifiers, then, associates 'body art' with a rebellion against beauty norms and the feminine ideal. By re-writing themselves through changing the skin's surface during cathartic penetrating rituals, these women believe they are 'reclaiming' their bodies and sexualities from patriarchal control. Victoria Pitts' (2003) fascinating research on radical female body modifiers, offers a relevant insight into how individual women view their own extreme body art. Using in-depth interviews, female body artists articulate their own sense of embodiment as

²³For simplification, I have categorised reclaimative female body modifications under different headings. However in reality many of these radical corporeal alterations cannot be confined to just one sub-section, but overlap, leak and permeate the boundaries of other modifications.

their bodies are transformed and 're-worked'. In these biographical accounts, different explanations are given for their dramatic body modifications, including reclamation from sexual abuse and domestic violence, and reclamation from hegemonic beauty norms. Whilst not all of these women are directly rebelling against the pressures to conform to current beauty ideals, all believe that they are transgressing hegemonic norms of femininity and are taking back control of their bodies from patriarchal constraint and oppression.

Many of the women interviewed in Pitts' (2003) study, cited being a victim of sexual assault as the primary motive behind modifying their bodies. 'Karen', for example (who has various nipple piercing, tattoos and scars) states that by getting a dragon tattooed onto her breast she was reclaiming her body from victimization, sexual abuse and harassment. The dragon to her was symbolic of facing her fear and conquering the demons left behind from an abusive childhood - by physically claiming her body and breasts for herself - as Karen explains, 'having a dragon put on my breast was a way of saying, "this is mine"' (ibid.:59). This controversial body marking, according to Karen, allowed her to reassert authority over her body and being. Another woman, 'Elaine', in a similar fashion, describes her acts of scarification as a process of reconciliation with body and self, resulting in re-empowerment after sexual abuse (ibid.: 63-64). Scarification has also been used by some women to both 'reclaim' their bodies and to 'heal' themselves from domestic violence. Like sexual abuse, domestic violence has been seen by feminists as an ultimate form of patriarchal control. 'Mandy', a survivor of domestic trauma, in her narrative explains why she decided to engage in body modification:

I was afraid of knives. I [once] had a partner, my daughter's father, who became violent...and used to threaten me with knives a lot. And I had to leave and run away and hide and have my baby elsewhere. And he found me and threatened my roommates and tried to burn the place down... (ibid.:69)

As a result of her terrifying ordeal, Mandy developed an intense fear of knives. Her phobia prevented her from even being in the same room as a knife.

Consequently, she felt completely out of control and estranged from her body. Against this background, Mandy saw her participation in dramatic body art as a way of challenging her fear and conquering the memories of her painful past, in a deliberate manner and safe environment.

Several female body artists, such as Elaine, also consider their corporeal modifications as a form of communication and symbolic representation - to both their immediate social networks and to society as a whole. In Elaine's situation, her very first body modification of a nose piercing at the age of 16, was a declaration to her parents (seemingly) of individuality and independence. Disgusted by the piercing, Elaine's family forced her to leave home. Subsequently, Elaine began to signify body modifications as a form of rebellion and self-authorship - a way of making life choices about her body and her own future. The body, for Elaine, is the one thing she has true ownership over:

The only thing I have true control over in this lifetime – everything else can fall apart – the only thing I have even the semblance of control over is my body. And how it looks. So I can make it bigger, I can make it smaller. I can scar it. I can pierce it. (ibid.:62)

Control of the body becomes a reoccurring theme in the language of female body artists. In Sweetman's (1999b:182) research, one interviewee perceives her body transformations as a re-assertion of control over her life:

I suppose it gives me a feeling of control over my body – I've been through all these, you know, all the adolescent things, and I've had my children, and now my body's just mine...to do what I want with. And I think it's like a way of ...asserting control. And I'll do what I want, and I don't care if other people find it unpleasant or whatever.

In this way, female body modifiers argue that they are defiantly marking the body's space as their own: engraving and embedding their own signature in to their flesh – regardless of how others perceive their appearance.

Rosenblatt (1997:316) postulates that the actual process of self-cutting has been cited as being liberating, not only by the reclamation of an individual's body, but as a social rebellion against 'the appropriation of women's bodies as objects of other people's desire by advertising media and the fashion industry'. Indeed, 'Jane' (another of Pitts' interviewees), in contrast to the previous female body artists discussed, decided to modify her body, not as a response to sexual abuse, but to specifically 'reclaim' her body from hegemonic notions of feminine beauty. She describes her dramatic scarification of an orchid on her body, as a representation of internal beauty:

The orchid was about beauty. The orchid was about my having felt that I wasn't particularly beautiful...the orchid was about claiming my beauty and about saying, 'I'm not a spectacular looking person but I am beautiful and beauty comes from inside' (cited in Pitts, 2003:63).

Jane's narrative resonates with one of the female body modifiers - 'Angel', in the underground 1991 film *Stigmata: The Transfigured Body*. Angel claims that men find her body markings shocking and 'upsetting', as 'men impose their wills and their ideas about how women should look' and female body artists transgress normative understandings of femininity. In this way, the appearance of female body artists is a distinct rebellion against male dominance and a mechanism of female empowerment. The commercialisation of body modification (which has been argued by some to reduce its subversive potential) has led to alternative erotic-porn. Websites such as SuicideGirls.com, DeviantNation.com, EroticBPM.com, PerverseFixation.com, claim to be feminist due to the amount of control, models have over the shoots and by 'promoting models who don't fit into conventional beauty standards and by forming communities that appreciate them' (Mies, 2007:3). Delilah, 25, an alternative erotic model, confirms this, saying:

I have always had issues with my body, but amazingly, since I started modelling for alt sites, I have become more comfortable with who I am and realized that I do not have to look a certain way just because society puts an ideal on women (cited in Mies, 2007).

The actual experience and process of this type of body modification has also been expressed as a constructive and beneficial transmogrification, whereby the ritual of scarification enables the participant to be 'brought back' to her body, breaking down alienation, and making her feel more comfortable in her skin. This is clearly expressed in 'Becky's' narrative (interviewed by Pitts) who radically rewrites her body's surface via clitoris piercing, lower abdomen branding and breast scarring to 'reclaim' her body and sexuality. Her first body modification as she describes it was 'the relatively small step of having my clit-hood pierced. It was the most direct way I could think of to say to myself, this space is mine' (quoted from Pitts, 2003:64). After this practice Becky decided that:

Body modification was the path to take. In order to act out my release [of "pent-up bad feelings"], I went to Raelyn Gallina and had a brand placed right on my lower abdomen. I again had a completely euphoric experience. I was sure I had taken the right step...I decided that I would have cuttings done on my breasts. It was important to me that the cuttings scar and keloid. I felt that the physical manifestation of my experience would be a mental and spiritual release. I spent a great deal of time deciding on and revising the design I would use (ibid.:65).

The practice of scarification is carefully thought out, controlled and executed. At the same time however, Becky articulates enjoyment and ecstasy in both the process and in embodiment. The lived experience of sensation - including the flowing of blood, the increase in breast tissue and hyper nipple sensitivity - are seen as pleasurable. Like other body artists, Becky interprets the process as one of transition and liminality, allowing her to shed and re-work negative connotations of her former identity and submerge herself in new found embodiment. These findings are further supported by the participants in Atkinson's (2003) research, whereby some tattoo enthusiasts claimed that the very ritual acted as a form of cleansing and self-healing from past trauma and negative experiences, allowing a recreation of self. An example of this 'baptism' and rebirth is captured in following extract by 'Jenny':

I was out of my body for almost two years...I tried not to think about my body because I felt dirty, ashamed, and like , you know, I wanted to crawl out of myself...I thought a tattoo might help me to reclaim my body, bring it back to my control, you know. I lost my body, I was a stranger in my own skin...I cried the whole time I was being tattooed, all of the fear, and hate, and sorrow came to the surface, and every time the needle struck me I remember the pain of the rape. I don't think any amount of talk, could have forced me to get back in touch with my body like that...I consider that day my second birthday, the day I really started to move on with my life. (cited in Atkinson 2003:195-6)

Other female body modifiers have similarly cited their scarification as a spiritual ritual, as a kind of 'rite of passage', whereby the process creates a liminal transition (liminality in relation to female bodybuilding is explored in Chapter 9). Pitts (2003:60) defines liminality as 'the temporal and physical space of ambiguity, in which cultural performance or rite is enacted with initiate and audience'. Lesbian Sado-Masochistic groups are argued to provide a safe space in which 'meaningful' acts such as cutting, and branding can be explored in an erotic but also an intimate and emotionally releasing way. Klorman, for example, quoted from Talvi (2003:4):

Finds immense power in the submission and the level of trust necessary to make a 'scene' safe and mutually pleasurable. The experience is as empowering as it is for her precisely because she has the ability to bend, exaggerate, or trespass existing gender/sex role boundaries.

Researchers such as Myers (1992:299), view Queer Body Modification²⁴ as the 'celebration of sexual potency', allowing participants to push the bodily envelope to new sensual heights of masochistic pleasure. The emphasis on creating new erotic bodies and sexualities breaks down traditional understandings of pain and

²⁴Queer Body Modification as a movement developed in late 1980's and 1990's. Eroticised practices include body piercing, corsetry, flagellation and branding. For further information refer to Pitts (2003).

pleasure. In this way then, Queer Body Modification, erotic and alternative female bodies are said to challenge heterosexual norms of sexuality, gender and beauty and create new bodies of sensual pleasure. However, whilst the process, transition and transformation have been emphasized during rituals and body art and 'body-play', the permanence of these body modifications should not be overlooked. The monstrosity of her creation is etched forever on her body's sleeve: grotesque, open, contaminated and spoiled - defying the western body ideal of the pure and un-marked. Female body modifiers view their radical artwork as a way of 'reclaiming' their bodies from patriarchal society and creating a body with which they can be more content. As one anonymous female body modifier (Body Mod on line) explains:

With each modification I love myself more. I don't see that monster I thought I was anymore when I look in the mirror. I see a canvas now. A canvas that desires to be filled/covered with mods. Each one revealing a new layer of who I really am. Each one brings me closer to loving myself. (www.bmezine.com/culture/A80326/cltamaso.html, accessed 05/08/2008)

'Reclaiming' discourse thus breaks down the concept of the pure, pristine natural body and the language associated with it, and re-works it to allow a bridge of healing to occur between the mind and body, the self and identity (Hewitt, 1997). The estranged old body is carved into new flesh and blood, and made complete.

Cyborg/Techno bodies and cyberpunk

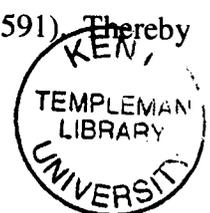
Pitts (2003) postulates that even from inside the body modification movement, the alterations that take place by cyberpunk body artists and cyber subcultures are seen as both extreme and radical. Body modifications as depicted in William Gibson's sci-fi novels, such as tooth reshaping, body/internet hook ups and sub-dermal implants (e.g. metal, bone, and plastic items being surgically inserted into the face, arms and head) are played out in reality (and literally carved into the flesh). Pitts argues that whilst all 'hardcore' body modifications rebel

against hegemonic norms of gender identity to some degree, cyberpunk stands alone in its futuristic utopian vision of escaping the material restrictions and limitations of the body altogether. New technologies, including biomedicine and cyberspace, are attractive to users as they offer the possibility of transcending their given biological body. In cyberspace, the potential of self-creation and identity transformation is seen as endless, enabling users to customise and shape their bodies to their own desires. The dream world, as envisioned by cyberpunks, is one without rules, restrictions and barriers. Some critical theorists have consequently embraced this way of thinking, sighting the potential of new technologies as a means of breaking free from constraining inherited identities, associated with race and gender.

Technology has traditionally been seen as part of the masculine domain, as a contemporary tool of control in patriarchal society. However, Stelarc (1992:47), dubbed the 'ultimate cyperpunk', declares that 'even if technology were a male construct, its implications and effects now are that technology equalises out physical potential and standardises human sexuality'. Some cyberfeminists are in league with Stelarc's ideology, arguing that cyberfeminism is not a movement as such, but a post-human philosophy with the acknowledgment that 'man's rule' is slowly coming to a natural end. Cyber-artist, Deborah Henley, who collaborates with this view, claims that through her work she has re-created herself into a complete 'super-being':

Like the heroine of the Terminator films. I needed traits in direct opposition to what has been considered feminine in the West. I needed determination, competitiveness, psychological and physical strength and power. I had to care more about how my body functioned than whether it looked attractive (Henley, 1994:3).

In a world where women's bodies are strongly judged on their appearances, cyberspace offers a tempting alternative, whereby the body becomes 'not [as] an object of desire, but as an object for designing' (Stelarc, 1991:591). Thereby



cyberpunk is argued by some proponents to transgress the boundaries between body/machine, male/female and natural/artificial.

Others, however, have criticised cyberpunk as still being male dominated. Forster (1993), for instance, claims that the majority of popular sci-fi novels and inventions have been created by men, for men, and have been active in continuing misogynistic disseminate divisions on gender. Nagle (2006) also argues that representations of female cyborgs are inherently sexist. Images are typically portrayed as hyperfeminine and erotic, with huge breasts and talon-like claws. Nagle claims that the female cyborg is ultimately a mesh between 'masculine, rational [and] mechanistic technology' and Western perceptions of the feminine as 'natural, emotional and sentimental'. Thus according to Nagel, the female cyborg becomes symbolic of the ownership and control of female bodies in patriarchal society by scientific/technological corporations and governments. In spite of these accusations or indeed as a consequence, some radical feminists have argued that women need to welcome technological advances and use it as a tool for their own purposes. As the infamous Cyberpunk Manifesto, written by Christian A. Kirtchev. (1997), declares: 'Who controls the net, controls the information....for if you do not control, you will be controlled...The information is POWER'. Advocators, such as Judith Lober and Donna Haraway, therefore believe that women need to get involved in new information technology and use its power or else they will be left behind. Thus feminist cyberpunk, according to Cadora (1995:357) 'envisions something that feminist theory badly needs; fragmented subjects who can, despite their multiple positionings, negotiate and succeed in a high-tech world'. The female cyberpunk transcends the limits and 'oppression's of the female body and transgresses gender boundaries. Consequently, the iconic figure of the female cyborg has been cited as having liberating and empowering potential for women. Haraway (1991), in her pioneering work 'A Manifesto for Cyborgs', puts forward an ironic 'political myth', celebrating its endless possibilities:

The cyborg is a creature in a post-gender world; it has no truck with bisexuality, pre-Oedipal symbiosis, unalienated labour, or other seductions

to organic wholeness through a final appropriation of all the powers of the parts into a higher unity...the cyborg is resolutely committed to partiality, irony, intimacy and perversity. It is oppositional, utopian and completely without innocence (Haraway, 1991:150).

Haraway (1991:181) depicts a life where identities are constantly shifting and fluctuating, forever in process, fluid and ambiguous. She rejects that there is an authentic woman that can be 'reclaimed' and declares 'I would rather be a cyborg than a goddess'. Cyborg imagery has become increasingly popular with feminist artists, cyberpunks and Sci-fi writers, including artist Linda Dement (e.g. Typhoid Mary and Cyberflesh Girlmonster) and subversive sci-fi/cyberpunk writers Katy Acker and Pat Cadigan.

It is important to note however, that whilst I have categorised cyber-punk and Haraway's portrayal of the cyborg under the same categorical heading for simplicity and clarity, there does exist vast differences between the approaches. Whilst the cyberpunk can be viewed as a defiant act of rebellion and resistance, the cyborg is more 'mischievous' and complex in its deviance. Nevertheless new technologies have been welcomed by these cyberfeminists as a way of liberating the body from physical constraints. CyborgTechno and cyberpunk bodies have both been proposed as new ways of transgressing restrictive gender dichotomies, so compounded in the West. Diverse body modifications, created by advances in science and technology (whether they be by hook-ups, cyberspace identities or physical implants and modifications of the corporeal body), allegedly allow users to symbolically and physically transcend their human bodies, creating a utopian post-gender world.

Cosmetic surgery

Cosmetic surgery is arguably the most powerful tool used in contemporary society to enable and enforce beauty norms (Sullivan, 2004). Consequently, many feminists have concurred that cosmetic surgery is at the very least an oppressive use of technology in consumer society that sustains the discourse of feminine

inferiority (Davis, 1997), and at the worst, a method of patriarchal mutilation reflecting a hatred of female bodies. However, some feminists have advocated cosmetic surgery as a utopian tool possessed of the potential to empower women by subverting the dominant patriarchal ideals of feminine beauty.

Performance artist Orlan²⁵, for example, uses her body as a canvas to display a radical surgical parody, making political abstract declarations about technology, patriarchy, beauty, postmodernity, identity and agency. In her work, 'The Reincarnation of Saint-Orlan' (which commenced in 1990), Orlan, through a series of plastic surgery operations, violates hegemonic norms by transforming her face to reflect an amalgamation of different iconic 'ideals of beauty', as portrayed by male artists. These procedures are conducted under local anaesthetic and are broadcasted live to institutions throughout the world. In order to demonstrate that 'bodies' and 'beauty' are never a natural thing but are always shaped within the cultural and historical context, Orlan makes a confrontational point, by fashioning her face to represent the white female beauty ideal from different periods in history. For example, she has the nose of Diana (Goddess of the Hunt), the chin of Botticelli's Venus and the eyes of Francois Pascal Simon Gerard's Psyche (see Moss, 1999; Davis, 1995; Rose, 1993, for more detail). As Orlan (1995:9) explains in the following passage, her aim is not to critique plastic surgery per se, but to expose a detrimental aesthetic system that validates the 'natural body', but at the same time reproduces fashionable and beautiful bodies:

My work is not intended to be against plastic surgery, but rather against the norms of beauty and the dictates of the dominant ideology which is becoming more and more deeply embedded in female...flesh.(ibid.:

Orlan's performances highlight that whilst bodies are constantly manipulated, in flux and in production, the force behind this process is frequently obscured from view. Furthermore, she claims that through her work, she demonstrates that bodies are always surpassing and transgressing the fixed limits of their corporeality. In this way, cosmetic surgery has been used and 're-invented' by Orlan - as an ally in

²⁵The breadth of Orlan's work as an artist is vast, and it is subsequently difficult to pigeon-hole her into any distinct category. She is well known as a performance artist and as being cyberpunk. However, her most notorious work is on her cosmetic procedures of the early to mid 1990's and it is for this reason as well as the relevance of her work, that I have classified her under this heading.

the fight over women's bodies. Even the procedure process itself has been recast. In contrast to the image of an anaesthetised, unconscious passive female patient being reconstructed under a surgeon's knife, Orlan is awake throughout the operation: full of life and in control of her own creation. In her 'happening' project, she is the creator and director, the subject and object, by re-inventing herself and deliberately inscribing an image on her body of her choosing.

Feminist philosopher, Kathryn Morgan (1991) also advocates the possibilities of cosmetic surgery as a radical backlash to the colonization of women's bodies. She considers that there are two main practices of performance-orientated forms of revolt that could be used for women's benefit. The first, she suggests, is a 'revalorizing' of the domain of the 'ugly' and everything associated with it, in order to destabilise the 'beautiful' and 'expose it's technologically and culturally constitutive origin and its political consequences' (Morgan, 1991:179). She hypothetically proposes the organisation of Ms. Ugly contests, with participants using the tools of cosmetic surgery to compete. This might, according to Morgan, encompass women 'applying wrinkle inducing creams...having one's face and breasts surgically pulled down (rather than lifted), and having wrinkles sewn and carved into one's skin' (Morgan, 1991:179). The second rebellious act that Morgan proposes could be used to uncover and ironically highlight the coercive commodification of cosmetic surgery. For instance, in parody, Morgan suggests that 'Beautiful Body Boutique' franchises could be set up, selling a;

Whole range of bodily contours; a variety of metric containers of freeze-dried fat cells for fat implantation and transplant; 'body configuration' software for computers; sewing kits of needles, knives, and painkillers; and 'skin-Velcro' that could be matched to fit and drape the consumer's body (ibid.:180)

Morgan is fully aware that her ideas might shock and repel people, but in defence she argues that this only goes to show how 'anaesthetized [people have become] to the mutilations which are routinely performed on women by surgeons everyday' (Morgan 1991:46-7). She further posits that it would be advantageous

for women to utilise plastic surgery for their own ends. She suggests four separate but interrelated purposes of action: Firstly, to challenge oppressive beauty and youth norms. Secondly, it could be used to sabotage and subvert the patriarchal institution of cosmetic surgeons. Thirdly, it has the potential to create awareness of the malleability of the 'cultural commodification of women's bodies', and finally to highlight the political role that modern technology can play in the creation of the 'feminine'.

To sum up, Cosmetic surgery is viewed by some feminists, such as Morgan (1991) and Balsamo (1996) as having the potential to liberate women, by making a radical stance and constructing their bodies in opposition to the beauty norm. These radical transformations could, at least in theory, allow women to critique destructive constructions of femininity and at the same time empower women and challenge victimization. In essence, by destabilizing binaries such as natural/unnatural, nature/culture, ugly/beautiful, cosmetic surgery can possibly be used in radical parodies to free females from oppressive gender constructs.

Essentialist/Cultural feminist responses to female body modification and the post-essentialist reply

Having discussed various different types of body modification in contemporary society (from tattooing, piercings and 'futuristic' implants to cosmetic surgery), it is important to note that feminists have diagnosed these developments in different ways. Essentialist and some cultural feminists argue that far from extreme female body modifications and performance arts containing the potential to resist oppressive beauty norms, they are yet another way to harm and mutilate the female body. They point out that throughout history up to the present day (as chronicled in Chapter 3) women's bodies have always been perceived as inadequate, inferior and deficient, as an unfinished entity that needs altering (whether this be by a surgical 'nip n tuck', branding, scarring, cutting, building or shrinking the body) and is never sufficient or 'good enough' as it is. All transmogrifications, including Chinese foot binding, plastic surgery, high heels, labiaplasty, tattoos and piercings, are perceived as masochistic trappings of

beauty and fashion and part of the patriarchal control system. Thus essentialist feminists claim that all body modifications are women-hating behaviours, that are internalized and literally etched out or carved into the flesh, shouting out 'self-hatred' and 'self-objectification'.

Shaw (2000:209) argues that whilst women who self-injure (which could be interpreted to include cutting, scarring, branding, tattooing and so on), appear to take control of their bodies and objectify them in ways that transgress western aesthetics, 'in the end', she claims, 'self-injury undermines women's freedom [and] limits their possibilities'. Jeffreys (2005:151) asserts that self-injury became commodified and fashionable by exploitative piercing entrepreneurs in the 1990's, who preyed on private self-mutilators 'born of despair and self-directed rage at abuse and oppression. She argues that body modification communities, such as 'Ezine', encourage vulnerable, low social status groups (including women and gay men) to blame themselves and specifically their bodies for their distress and unhappiness, rather than the inequalities and injustice embedded within the social structure. Furthermore, these supposed 'alternative communities', she claims, encourage oppressed people to detach themselves emotionally from their bodies and punish themselves by self-mutilation. Whilst in some ways Jeffreys' argument resonates with the medical model of mental health, which condemns hardcore body modifications and body art as psychiatric disorders characterised by depression, psychological abnormalities and personality disorders (Sullivan, 2004), Jeffreys blames patriarchal society for these violent acts and marks of 'self-hatred', rather than individual pathology. She postulates that 'body art' and other forms of mutilation, are increasingly being commercialised and normalised by the fashion, porn and art industries, helped and encouraged by destructive information available on the internet. In contrast to 'reclaiming' theory, which considers radical 'body art' to hold transgressive and resistant potential in relation to beauty norms, Jeffreys posits that all forms of body modification - whether they fit the conventions of feminine appearance or are more extreme and unusual - are attacks on the female body.

Jeffreys specifically criticises Orlan's drastic performances for being no different to the cosmetic mutilation of other women, such as the extreme breast enlargements of Lolo Ferrari (a French porn star, whose breasts were surgically enhanced 18 times to become the largest in the world). Jeffreys claims that the words 'art' and other pretentious postmodern terminologies used to justify Orlan's radical cosmetic surgery simply cover up another form of pornographic sadomasochism. Far from being subversive, Jeffreys critiques Orlan's work on two major points; First, it enacts the rules of male dominance 'that woman's body must be controlled and punished'. Secondly, it recreates the traditional separation of the mind from the body, 'so fundamental to the philosophy and practice of Western male supremacy'. Thus the body is treated as an object, as 'other', to be conquered and emotionally detached from. Greer (2000), in her book *The Whole Woman*, also interprets postmodern perspectives on body modification as encouraging the destructive mind/body dualism. In response to Donna Haraway's utopian vision of the female cyborg, she adamantly replies:

If freedom is an out-of body experience this feminist wants none of it. This female eunuch wants to be at ease in her body, unembarrassed about her body, proud and protective of her body, the body she has now. She wants be free from forever criticising it, chastising it and forcing it to submit. It is more wonderful in every way than any production of our technology; no computer can perform a millionth of what her brain can, no man-made tool is a hundredth as versatile as her hand. Women may well find that the liberation struggle becomes a struggle to defend the female body, the source of all bodies, against the cyber-surgeons who will inherit the hubris of those present-day surgeons who think they make better breasts than God...The female body is not our enemy but our strength. (Greer, 2000:418).

Radical and cultural feminists therefore argue that women's bodies should be 'spared' alteration, pain and interference of any type of body modification, and celebrated for their uniqueness, natural beauty and amazing capabilities (Dworkin, 1974).

This is not the only feminist perspective on body modification though, and the 'post-essentialist' perspective, which includes both postmodernists and post-structuralists²⁶, points out that bodies are always shaped, marked and changed through cultural practices. In so doing it challenges the romantic ideal of an organic, natural body untouched by society. Essentialist feminists such as Orbach (1988) and Chernin (1983) for example, in their analysis of eating disorders and the 'distorted body', 'rely on women's bodies having natural sizes and shapes which are disrupted by patriarchal forces' (Shilling, 1993:63). Orbach unquestioningly assumes that the pristine female body, unmolested by culture is a slim one, whilst Chenin in direct opposition, believes that women's bodies are naturally fat but pressurized by society into being slim. Thus, naturalist/essentialist perspectives are critiqued for being too simplistic, reductionist and for relying on the traditional understandings of the body as fixed and unchangeable. In contrast, post-essentialists believe that the body is already saturated and inscribed by culture, and that it is inconceivable (if even desirable), to imagine an authentic woman's body untouched by culture that can be 'reclaimed'.

Thus within the context of the constraints and patriarchal modern day society, post-essentialists advocate 'body art' and 'body-play' as providing possibilities of 'resistance', rebellion, contradiction, irony and parody. In this way, non-mainstream body modifications that destabilize and resist unified and traditional concepts of beauty, 'may have the potential, at least theoretically, to radically challenge the gendered roles and practices of embodiment' (Pitts, 2003:72). Some feminists consequently claim that in contemporary society women now have more 'choice' and agency than ever before. With the development of new technologies that have blurred the edges between 'the body as given' and 'the body as choice', women now have the opportunity to free themselves from bodily constrictions. Women can now choose to rebel against hegemonic norms and destructive unobtainable standards of female embodiment. They are not passive victims; rather they have the agency and power to 'play'

²⁶ It is important to note (as applies to all categories of feminism) that within postmodernism and post-structuralism exists an array of conflicting discourses and cannot be easily confined to distinct categories (Elbert, 1991).

with gender identities and to use body modifications for their own advantage and pleasure.

However, radical/essentialist and some cultural feminists argue that any form of women's body modification is damaging. They state that all bodily transformations are just another form of entrapment and control over female bodies. Women may make claims of empowerment and emancipation, but in reality this is an illusion of 'false consciousness' that simply re-enacts patriarchal control over women's flesh.

The problems of reclaiming

As I reflect upon the summaries I have made of the two contrasting approaches to body modifications, I feel very aware of the differences within the perspectives that I have grouped together (due to ease and word constrictions) and the complexities I have skimmed over for necessity. I have consequently decided to diverge slightly from my narrative at this point and focus on the difficulty of the concept of 'reclaiming'.

As I outlined at the beginning of this chapter, reclaimative discourse arose from the second wave feminist movement – with the idea that women's bodies could be reclaimed from patriarchal control. I then explored the radical body-projects that some women argued enabled them to take back their bodies for themselves. The idea of being able to 'reclaim' something, lies on the belief that there is something that it can be 'reclaimed from'. In the last chapter I questioned the idea that there was a singular concept of patriarchy and consequently I take on Walby's (1990) notion that there are many forms and degrees of these phenomena. Following on from this, I critiqued the idea of a monolithic women's oppression. Furthermore I moved towards the post-structuralist feminist idea that there is *no* authentic homogenous female body, but rather female bodies - historically and culturally situated and constituted of other important dimensions of identity such as class, ethnicity, age, sexuality and disability. In this way it appears doubtful that there is 'something' from which women can free themselves

– which would suggest that ‘resistance’ and ‘rebellion’ is a pointless endeavour. Those promoting ‘reclamative’ discourse, whether they be essentialist feminists arguing for a ‘return’ to a woman’s body free from cultural inscription, or those utilising extreme radical body modifications to resist patriarchy are ironically (like two sides of the same coin) united by the same feminist metanarrative. Where does this then leave the feminist postmodernists and post-structuralists, who also believe in the subversive potential of certain body modifications? According to Pitts (2003:80), these feminists recognise the ‘liminal, heterogeneous subject as subversive because it resists inventions of the unified, stable identity enforced by normative categories of gendered subjectivity’. Thus the aim of feminists from this perspective is to destabilise and dissolve the ‘foundational illusions’ of identity (Butler, 1990).

Conclusion

In conclusion, whilst women’s position (including social status and legal rights) appears to have radically improved in Western society, in part due to the impact of feminism, women (according to second wave feminists) are still pressured to conform to hegemonic standards of femininity and are consequently, though less obviously, still ‘prisoners’ in their bodies. Thus, in order to ‘free’ women from their constraints and bonds, some feminists have advocated certain types of body modification as a way of ‘reclaiming’ women’s bodies. Other feminists, in contrast, adamantly argue against any interference with the female form. Feminists are therefore in disagreement as to whether, in modern Western society, women can use some forms of body modifications to rebel against conventional norms of femininity in order to take back control of their corporeal beings and consequently their lives. In contemporary society then, new technologies and opportunities have meant that there has been a diversification in the ways by which women are able to modify their bodies. However, it is not clear as yet, as to whether these new radical non-mainstream practices resist women’s physical oppression.

Despite the growth in the corpus of work surrounding female body modification and reclaiming discourse, arguably the most gender controversial body modification of them all - female bodybuilding - has been severely neglected. Prominent academics on 'body modification', such as Pitts, have all but overlooked bodybuilding, despite it being plausibly 'the longest and most substantial pedigree of all body modification practices in the West' (Locks, 2003:240). Yet, in the same way as other body modification subcultures, bodybuilders 'share an interest in producing new modes of embodiment that push the limits of normative aesthetics and often link pain and pleasure' (Pitts, 2003:12). Additionally, for all modifiers the body is seen as the last bastion – the last place of control in an increasingly diverse but rationalised society. However, as Locks (2003:254) also convincingly argues, whilst body art, such as branding, scarring, piercing and tattooing permanently mark the outer appearance of the skin's surface, bodybuilding engrosses and takes over the whole of the body. For instance, the drug use involved in bodybuilding means that the body is totally permeated. It is generally accepted that steroids, for example, affect the brain and emotions as well as transforming the body, and growth hormones enlarge internal organs, with potentially devastating side effects on the liver and kidneys. As such, 'bodybuilding's relationship between the inner and outer body ... makes it not just far more transgressive and rebellious, but also far more problematic and resistant to narratives of recuperation' (Locks, 2003:254). Moreover, for women to pursue such a controversial body modification is viewed as doubly deviant. As Heywood (1998) elaborates, female bodybuilders are perceived as 'monstrous' in their textual appearance, pathologised as unfeminine and labelled drug takers who are 'pathetic and self-destructive'. It is to this group of body modifiers that I turn to in the next chapter.

CHAPTER 5. The History of Female Bodybuilding:

Liberation or Oppression?

Introduction

As demonstrated in Chapters 3 and 4, the body has been an important site, if not the main site, of contention for feminists in their struggles against a male dominated society. Second wave feminists in particular have argued that women often discover their lack of power and control when they seek to exert autonomy over their sexuality, health and bodies. However, as Foucault (1980) acknowledges, 'where there is power there is resistance'. In the words of Grosz:

As well as being the site of knowledge-power, the body is thus also a site of resistance, for it exerts a recalcitrance, and always entails the possibility of a counter strategic re-inscription, for it is capable of being self-marked, self-represented in alternative ways (Grosz, 1994:40).

The body has, at least for some, the potential to rebel and challenge social control, cultural reproduction and social order. In this way, bodies that oppose and transgress the hegemonic western bodily ideal, of the young, slim and 'unmarked' have the potential to create 'new bodies [and] new pleasures' (Foucault, 1981:157; see also Lloyd, 1996; Bartky, 1988). This in turn, provides the potential to release women from an antagonistic relationship with their bodies (Lloyd, 1996; Bordo, 1988).

It is within this context that female bodybuilders have been heralded by some feminists as resisting hegemonic norms, designing their bodies to their own ideals and creating their own space. Their bodies are perceived by these feminists as being sites of power - both symbolically and physically, and as sites of resistance (Tate, 1999; Hargreaves, 1986). If it is indeed the case that female bodybuilding is possessed of liberatory potential however, it is a subject that has been underinvestigated. This chapter begins the process of addressing this oversight by historically contextualising the rise of female bodybuilding and by

providing a literature review of the small corpus of research to have been conducted on this practice.

In the first section of this chapter, I trace the sparse history of female bodybuilding, starting by chronicling the past of strongwomen (women who displayed their extraordinary strength via weight-lifting challenges) and female weight-trainers. In the second section, I outline the two major contrasting feminist responses to female bodybuilding, before concluding that more empirical research needs to take place.

SECTION I – The History of Female Bodybuilding

Strong women and Amazons – the very beginning

The history of female bodybuilding and ‘strong women’ has been a relatively neglected area of research (Huxtable, 2004). Dobbins (1995) believes that it is this comparative newness, as well as the shock-value of the subject, that makes the idea of a muscular woman such a threat to society. Indeed, Gaines (1983) points out that whilst the muscular ideal of the male body dates back to the Ancient Greeks, there is no equivalent record for the athletic female physique. Despite sparse data however, the history of aggressive and strong women can be traced back to the Minoan civilizations of ancient Greece. According to Huxtable (2004:2), during this period, power and strength were esteemed in both men and women; ‘in Sparta, women exercised as wrestlers, throwers, and racers and were equally encouraged to be strong like their male counterparts’. Nevertheless, whilst strength was encouraged, the emphasis was on ability rather than muscular size and physicality. Greek mythology, at least ostensibly, supports this argument. Although Mythological goddesses, such as Diana the goddess of the moon and hunting, were believed to be fierce and powerful, they were nonetheless associated with their supernatural skills rather than physical muscularity. In a

similar manner Amazon warrior women (who mercilessly fought Greek Gods), despite popular misconceptions, are rarely depicted as being muscular. It is perhaps interesting to note, that despite their strength and legendary ability all Amazon myths end with these women being defeated²⁷. The years following the Roman era witnessed a proliferation of the soft 'feminine' appearance of women, whereby full and curvaceous feminine figures became the norm, combined with little upper body strength (Huxtable, 2004). This female bodily ideal continued to dominate throughout the centuries and even at the end of the 19th and early 20th Century women were still generally portrayed as weak, fragile and sickly (refer to Chapter 3)²⁸. The idea that a woman could be as strong as a man was dismissed. Individual women who went against this 'common sense' understanding were disregarded as simply freaks of nature.

Strong women and amazing circus feats: wrestlers, boxers and weightlifters

Academics such as Todd (2000:50) and Bouissaic (1976) have noted that both the circus and other variety theatre acts that flourished in Europe and throughout US in the late 19th Century exposed audiences to alternative images and ideals. Bouissaic (1976:8) goes as far to claim that circus acts and feats provided 'a set of rules for cultural transformations'. Thus the 'showcasing' of strong women that occurred during many of these events has been argued to play a fulcrum role in the concept of a new archetype of woman. Historians have traced the incipency of strong women back to the 16th Century where these extraordinary women performed amazing acts of strength at fairs, markets and circuses²⁹. Stunts such as 'women cannons' (whereby a cannon was fired whilst attached to the strongwoman), lifting people in the air, throwing heavy iron balls and breaking iron bars took place which entertained and fascinated the crowds.

²⁷ Robert Graves (1992) claims, 'the victories over the Amazons secured by Heracles, Theseus, Dionysus, Mopsus, and others, record, in fact, setbacks to the matriarchal system in Greece, Asia Minor, Thrace, and Syria'.

²⁸ It is important to note that the 'conventional wisdom', of the fragile, weak female' (Hargreaves, 1994:51) applied to middle class women and not working class women who conducted long, hard labour in their employment.

²⁹ Refer to Todd (2000) for more details on individual strongwomen.

Displays by strongwomen have been documented at spectacle events such as the 1724 'Female Italian Samson' and the 1754 Paris Exhibition of 'Les Femmes Fortes'. However, it was not until 1890 that strong women first began to appear in the sports section of magazines such as 'The National Police Gazette'. On January 25th of that year, 'Mademoiselle Victorine', became the first strong woman to have her own article published in the Gazette (Roark, 1991). Shortly thereafter, the prominence given to such women increased when in 1895 'Minerva' (Josephine Blatt) was proclaimed the strongest woman in the world, after allegedly lifting the weight of twenty-three men (Roark, 1991). An Austrian woman, 'Katie Sandwina'³⁰, became renowned in the 1930's for holding a 600lb cannon on her back and 300 pounds above her head. In 1938, Abbye ('Pudgy') Stockton became celebrated as one of the first 'female bodybuilders' - entertaining crowds by demonstrating her strength at Muscle Beach (Santa Monica). Despite this 'bodybuilding' claim, it was the strength of these women rather than their appearance which dominated their performances. Indeed the power of these amazing women was held in awe as an incredible, unique, 'freaky' circus feat that had no direct relation to societies' gender norms. Moreover, whilst some of these women were larger than the average man, their bodies still retained the traditional, feminine qualities of being soft and voluptuous: their muscularity was covered by fat and was not evident visually in the manner associated with contemporary women bodybuilders. However, circus 'strong women' appear to have paved the way for the emergence of the muscular woman. So too, implies Hargreaves (1994), did the development of 'low-life' underground sports (such as women's wrestling, boxing and weightlifting) during the early and mid 20th Century. Although these events were often seen as circus gimmicks, Hargreaves (1994:143) believes that the working class women who participated, celebrated 'muscularity, physical power and aggression - normally considered to be essentially male sporting attributes'.

³⁰ Kate Brumbach was renamed 'Sandwina' after defeating the famous Eugene Sandow in a power lifting contest.

The start of women's weight-training; health, beauty and sport

It was as early as 1862 when Dio Lewis published 'The New gymnastics for Men, Women and Children', advocating the use of lightweight dumbbells for health improvements in both sexes (Todd, 1992). Consequentially, thousands of American women began to use dumbbells as part of a 'gymnastics' programme. Another influential advocate of weight training for women at the time was Bernarr MacFadden, who produced 'Physical Culture' and, briefly, 'Women's Physical Development' magazines. Whilst McFadden's contribution to women's bodybuilding has gone practically unrecognised, it was he who initially sponsored the very first female physique contests (judged to begin with purely on the muscular development and symmetry of the female form) at 'Physical Culture Extravanzas'. However by 1910, McFadden's Physical Culture magazine no longer advocated dumbbell exercises or weight-training for women. Indeed, only the National Police Gazette continued to promote female weightlifting, in the guise of professional strongwomen and not sports women (Todd, 1992). In the midst of the post World War I drive for the fitness of the American nation, magazines such as 'Strength' in the 1920's began again to promote women's strength and health. For example, in a 1923 edition Carl Williams beseeched:

Our first requirement, if we are to raise the level of our national vigor, is to idealise and glorify strength...We want to see the lives of all our boys and girls, all our young men and young women, coloured with this point of view. We want them to be saturated with this notion of strength as being the basis of a scheme of living (Williams, 1923).

Against this political backdrop, sports articles began to challenge social conventions on two related but distinguishable aspects. Firstly the notion that femininity corresponded with weakness and masculinity equated strength, and secondly the idea that female athletes were automatically masculine³¹. In addition, the women's rights movement also acted as a catalyst for a new bodily appearance in shape of a slender silhouette. The right to vote coincided with the fashion of the

³¹ It should perhaps be pointed out here, that despite the aim of erasing these gender myths, the issues are still a hotly debated contention today - almost a century later.

'Flapper' - with straight waists, bounded breasts and 'boyish' slim figures. Active lifestyles were encouraged, with the desire to decrease body-fat (seen as self-indulgent and inefficient) and increase energy and vitality. Scientific research further supported this endeavour by focusing and promoting the ideal weight and calorific intake.

In the 1930's, as society's ideal female physique of 'slim' and 'fit' (Todd, 1992) became increasingly popular, one woman - Ivy Russell (England), took this athletic look to a new dimension. Unlike other strongwomen, Ivy had very low body fat, which meant that in her posing routines and heavy weightlifting performances she displayed an unprecedented muscular appearance - creating a new archetype for women weightlifters (Todd, 2000). In contrast, the fitness industry at the time was still trying to advocate the strong, but small and curvy woman, claiming that weight-training would make the average woman, 'happier, healthier, and better mothers' (Good, 1934). The emphasis on motherhood and being the perfect housewife intensified during the 1950's post World War II 'baby boom'. This coincided with a new curvaceous look for women, emphasising the breasts and the hips – attributes associated with the reproductive system. The voluptuous cinema heroine 'Marilyn Monroe' became the new icon, setting a new bodily standard for women.

The fitness phenomenon – 1960's onwards

According to Penney (1980), whilst the 1950's advocated womanly curves ('big bosomed and round hipped') a new bodily ideal came into play in the 1960's. The thin, androgynous physique became the desired dominant look, with role models like 'Twiggy' leading the way. As both men and women tried to assume this slender body shape, this paved the way for the fitness explosion in the 70's. Slim 'healthy' bodies soon became the required hegemonic norm, achieved by exercise classes, swimming and jogging. It should be noted here that despite individual athletes using weights to improve their performances, the majority of

western physical educators, doctors and coaches still believed weight-training to be detrimental to athletic performance until the 1960's.

It was not, however, until the early 1980's that the fashionably thin body began to carry slightly more muscle mass. The female ideal of beauty during this period was dubbed as 'taut, toned and coming on strong' (Corliss, 1982:72). This valued body type continued into the 1990's led by Hollywood role models such as Linda Hamilton (in Terminator II), Demi Moore (G.I Jane / Disclosure), Angela Bassett (What's Love Got to Do with It) and Holly Hunter (The Piano) (Dobbins, 1994; Heywood,1998).

The birth of female bodybuilding

This is the first era in all of human history in which women have developed hyper-muscularity for primarily aesthetic purposes. This concept is so totally revolutionary and culturally dangerous that even the physique federations themselves have grave reservations about the idea. Sure, the sport faces its challenges, but you can't have a revolution if everyone agrees with you in the beginning (Dobbins cited in Kaye 2005:155).

In contrast to men's bodybuilding competitions which increased in popularity in the 1950's, 60's and early 70's, women's bodybuilding 'per se' was still a dream. The only way in which women could participate at these events was in a supplementary beauty contest or bikini show (Lowe, 1998). Wennerstrom (1984:76) suggests though, that these side-line beauty pageants laid the foundations for women's bodybuilding competitions in the future. Nevertheless, it was not until the late 1970's, against the backdrop of the second-wave feminist movement, the rise in fitness consumerism and the relative success of female power-lifting, that female bodybuilding competitions were finally born.

Despite 'female body building arising at a time of great political and social gains for women' (Scott-Dixon, 2006:4), the first widely acknowledged bodybuilding contests still resembled beauty pageants. Female competitors wore high heels with their bikinis and were forbidden from clenching their fists and using other masculine poses such as the 'crab', 'double biceps' or 'lateral spread'. Henry McGhee, in 1977, under the United States Women's Physique Association (USWPA) founded the first notorious female bodybuilding competition³² (with the intention of using the same judging criteria used in male bodybuilding competitions; assessing muscle size, symmetry and presentation poses (Wennerstrom, 1984)). McGhee claimed that the purpose of the USWPA was to overcome 'the limited, beauty queen stereotype of what the American women should look like'. However, critics argue that despite the assertion that it was a 'bodybuilding' competition the first prize was given to a relatively slender woman with small, stringy muscles. A similar tale of events occurred in 1979, when another association was created for female bodybuilders. George Synder established the 'Best in the World' contests, under the International Federation for Bodybuilding (IFBB) with the aim of creating a fitness role model for the average American female. However, not only were the women handpicked by Synder himself, but were chosen and awarded on 'attractiveness and sex appeal over fitness and muscles' (Huxtable, 2004:2).

Doris Barrilleaux, who had previously competed at one of Henry McGhee's events, established the Superior Physique Association (SPA) in 1978: 'the first women's bodybuilding organization run for women and by women' (Lowe, 1998:59). However, SPA, like the USWPA before it, disintegrated and was terminated in 1980 due to its inability to compete against the Weider Brothers who had established the IFBB organisation³³. It was not until later in the year of

³² Whilst Bernarr MacFadden held the first female bodybuilding contests at the turn of the 20th Century for a brief period, it has actually been Henry McGhee who has been widely credited as being the official founder.

³³ The Weider brothers: Ben and Joe co-founded the IFBB in 1946. Whilst there were other amateur bodybuilding associations around the same period, such as the Amateur Athletic Union (AAU), and the Natural Amateur British Bodybuilding Association (NABBA), the IFBB became the main bodybuilding body in 1965, when it offered prize money to male bodybuilders at the 'Mr Olympia'. For more detail on the history of male bodybuilding please refer to Wayne, R (1985).

1979, when Lisa Lyon's more athletic physique (and charismatic personality) won the first IFBB Women's World Body Building Championship, that women's built bodies began to challenge hegemonic notions of femininity and cause a stir in society (Huxtable, 2004; Wennerstrom, 2000). Lyon's concept of the developed female body was comparable to the dominant strand of feminism at the time. Female bodybuilding, she declared was about 'redefining the whole idea of femininity. You don't have to be soft; you don't have to be weak. You can be strong, you can be muscular...you can make that visual statement and at the same time be feminine' (cited in Huxtable, 2004:4).

The 1980's – the golden era of female bodybuilding

This decade has often been regarded as the golden years and height of female bodybuilding. In 1980, the most prestigious event for female bodybuilder – the 'Ms Olympia' sanctioned by the IFBB took place (Dobbins, 1994). As bodybuilding was so new, the guidelines for contestants were ambiguous and no one really knew what was expected (Lowe, 1998). The line up composed of a mixture of abilities and female body types, ranging from the lightly 'toned' physique to ground-breaking muscular physiques; 'Cammie [Lusko] and Auby [Paulick] showed for one of the first times in history real female muscle - not curvy humps of hard flesh, but rippled, vein-splayed muscle' (Gaines and Butler, 1983:66). Rachel McLish's thin, 'toned' physique won the competition and consequently she became known as the most famous competitor in the early 1980's. As bodybuilding progressed, the level of training increased and in turn the sport began to slowly favour more muscular physiques. However, the public and indeed the bodybuilding community itself were not yet ready for an overtly muscular appearance which would transgress traditional beliefs of what men and women should look like. This is demonstrated by the famous movie released in 1985 called 'Pumping Iron II: The Women'.³⁴ This film documentary followed the lives of several female competitors leading up to and including the 1983 Caesars Palace World Cup Championship Competition. The film pits the

³⁴ *Pumping Iron II: The Women* was heralded by some as the Feminist Film of the Year (Kuhn, 1988).

incredibly muscular Bev Francis (a world champion power lifter turned bodybuilder) against, the slim, hyper feminine reigning champion, Rachel McLish (Moore, 1997).

Holmlund (1989) claims that the film was ultimately a marketing strategy to promote female bodybuilding by its director George Butler, albeit in a limited heterosexual and eroticized manner. 'Pumping Iron II: The Women', does however bring home the controversial judging of female bodybuilding and highlights questions over 'femininity', 'muscularity' and 'what makes a woman'. Ben Weider (Chairman of the IFBB) states for example, that female bodybuilders must be judged differently to their male counterparts as 'Women are women, men are men, there's a difference and thank God for that difference'. He directs the judges before the contest, '[we are looking for] a woman who has a certain amount of aesthetic femininity, but yet has that muscle tone to show that she is an athlete'. In response, a male judge said, 'that's like being told there is a certain point beyond which women can't go in this sport...It's as though the U.S. Ski Federation told women they can only ski so fast'. The competition resulted in the articulate, graceful Carla Dunlap winning the trophy. Whilst her body was more muscular than McLish's, in no way was it comparable to Bev Francis who was placed 8th. Francis was told 'to get feminine or get out of bodybuilding' (Pearl, 1989:51, cited in Mansfield and McGinn, 1994:61).

In 1984, Cory Everson (dubbed the 'Female Arnold Schwarzenegger') weighing 150 pounds, set the new muscular standard. She went on to win the Ms. Olympia's for 6 consecutive years before retiring undefeated as a professional. The results of the show during her reign were even proclaimed on the National Broadcasting Company (NBC). Other competitors were pictured in magazines and participated in television advertisements. Whilst women's bodybuilding became increasingly publicised, it was still not regarded as a 'true sport', but rather

fascinating spectacle (Huxtable, 2004). Ms. International competitions, second in importance only to Ms. Olympia, were founded in 1986³⁵.

Contentious issues in the 1990's: inconsistencies and contradictions in placing

The start of the 1990's was still troubled by contentious and conflicting judging. The Ms. Olympia 1991, which was the first to be televised live, saw the 'hard-core' physiques of Bev Francis and Lenda Murray battling it out to win first place³⁶. As a consequence of the increased muscle mass and fears that the women were becoming too 'masculine', the IFBB (initiated by Ben Weider) in the 1992 Ms. International contest, enforced a series of 'femininity' rules³⁷. This included the rule that the 'competitors should not be too big' and presented guide lines that women should look 'feminine' and not emaciated. Directions to the judge stated, that they 'must bear in mind that he or she is judging a women's bodybuilding competition and is looking for the ideal feminine physique...the most important aspect is shape, a feminine shape, and controlling the development of muscle – it must not be carried to excess, where it resembles the massive muscularity of the male physique' (Huxtable, 2004; Lowe, 1998). The winner of the competition was a marketable blue-eyed and blonde haired, Anja Schreiner, weighing just 130 pounds at 5ft 7. The judge's decision was met with an outcry from the audience, whose favourite competitor - Paula Bircumshaw, weighing 162 pounds at 5ft 7, with similar symmetry and definition to Schreiner - was placed in 8th position. Bircumshaw furious with her placing, gave the judges the finger and was consequently banned from competing for the next year.

Following the unpopularity of the judges 1992 decision, the rules were yet again re-written to allow competitors to be judged as physique contestants and not just on aesthetics. Lenda Murray was alleged to have both the combination of

³⁵ The first Ms. International contest was won by Erika Geisen.

³⁶ Murray retained her Ms. Olympia title and won by a controversial one point.

³⁷ Guidelines can be found on the IFBB website - <http://www.ifbb.com>

femininity and muscularity and went on to win the Ms. Olympia five times in a row. Her main challenger during this time was deemed to be Laura Creavalle, who came second in the Ms. Olympia on two occasions and won the Ms. International crown three times consecutively. During the early and mid 1990's other professional bodybuilding shows were established including the Canada Pro Cup and the Grand Prix events in both Prague and Slovakia. In 1996 Kim Chizevsky won the Ms. Olympia title from Lenda Murray, coming in with a more 'shredded' and harder look than had previously existed. She retained the crown for another 3 years before losing her title in 2000 (Olympia weekend, 2006).

More controversy and changes in 2000

In the year 2000, the IFBB decided to amalgamate the men's and women's Olympia contests into the 'Olympia Weekend', which from then onwards would be held in Las Vegas. The Judging guidelines were also updated, stating that female bodybuilders would be scored on their appearance including face, make-up and skin tone alongside 'symmetry, presentation, separations, and muscularity

BUT NOT TO THE EXTREME'³⁸. Furthermore, female competitors would also be assessed on 'whether or not they carry themselves in a graceful manner while walking to and from their position on stage'. The year 2000 was the only time that weight divisions were incorporated into the Ms. Olympia, allowing Andrulla Blanchette (British) to win the lightweight category and Valentina Chepiga to win the heavyweight medal. Juliette Bergmann won the Ms. Olympia in the following year, before Lenda Murray returned to win in 2002 and 2003. In the year 2004, Iris Kyle's extremely muscular physique allowed her to become the new reigning champion. However, in 2005 a new controversial ruling was passed by the IFBB named the '20% Solution'. The IFBB announced that due to health reasons and aesthetics female bodybuilders should decrease their muscularity by 20%³⁹. Due to this new ruling, Yaxeni Oriquen won the 2005 Ms. Olympia title, though Iris

³⁸ The quote is taken from a letter addressed to the competitors from Jim Manion (Chairman of the Professional Judges Committee). Capitals in original.

³⁹ This took place following a memo dated December 6, 2004, directed by Jim Manion.

Kyle returned to the top in 2006 and has continued to maintain her reign up until the present day (2009/2010).

The British scene

Amongst the top 100 female professional bodybuilders in the world, only 5 of them are British, with only one of them being placed in the top 50 (IFBB, RAS rankings, 2009). Grogan (2004) estimates that there are only 30 amateur Women's Physique Bodybuilders who compete during a year in Britain. Exact statistics are difficult to gather however, as there are several associations in Britain under which female competitors can compete, including the British Natural Bodybuilding Foundation (BNBF), the Natural Physique Association (NPA)⁴⁰, the World Amateur Bodybuilding Association (WABBA), the National Amateur Bodybuilding Association (NABBA) and the United Kingdom Bodybuilding and Fitness Federation (UKBFF - formally known as the EFBB). For bodybuilders who want to get the 'Pro' card (professional status) and compete in major competitions such as the Mr/Ms. Olympia or the Arnold Classic and to get mainstream magazine coverage and sponsorships, however, the key organisation is the UKBFF – which is the British version of the IFBB.

Flex, a bodybuilding magazine run by Weider, declares that 'Britain doesn't produce many professional female bodybuilders but what it lacks in quantity it makes up for in quality...the guys may make the noise yet it's the girls who deliver the medals' (2007, Oct issue :196). Indeed, the last two Brits to win the most prestigious professional shows were both female – Andrulla Blanchette (Ms. Olympia 2000) and Joanna Thomas (Jan Tana Pro Classic, 2001). Despite this success, since 2005 the UKBFF body has withdrawn the 'Pro' card for female winners at the British finals (they must now compete at the 'Worlds' to get their Pro status), though has retained it for the men's overall champion (Plummer,

⁴⁰ The BNBF and the NPA are the only bodybuilding federations to express explicitly that they are drugs tested and 'natural' competitions.

2005).⁴¹ Even within the British bodybuilding sub-culture there seems to be very little support for female physique contestants. This is clearly illustrated by a 'question and answer session' in a recent influential bodybuilding magazine – Beef: British Muscle in Action (2007, issue 32:39). Jeannie Ellam (a competitive bodybuilder) writes:

I would like to express my feelings regarding the disappointing lack of exposure for women's bodybuilding in the BEEF: I would like to know why the only reference to the UKBFF BB championships in the BEEF magazine is to the winner of the men's category... Doesn't women's bodybuilding count?

In response, professional Bodybuilder John Hodgson replies:

The sad fact is that it's a male dominated sport...if a bodybuilding show just had male competitors would it survive? The answer is a resounding YES, but the same could not be said if the roles were reversed. Like it or not the overall trend towards the female bodybuilder has been negative and even more in the current times...Some women enter the stage looking too much on the masculine side – it does detract massively from the feminine image. I do feel that more coverage should be given but at the same time I feel women need to focus on getting the balance right of combining femininity and muscle.

In summary, few British women have recognition both on the stage and in magazine articles. Furthermore very few have sponsorships to help support their career and advocate the sport to others.

⁴¹ Female bodybuilders now have to qualify in Europe or World competitions to become a professional.

The decline of female bodybuilding?

Ever since it first appeared, commentators have claimed that female bodybuilding, 'is dying of a hereditary and untreatable confusion of purposes' (Gaines and Butler, 1983:69). Questions surrounding the aims of women's bodybuilding have continued to dominate the sport from its conception to the present day;

Are they about the showing-off onstage of healthy, marketable women to no particular end than that? Or are they about the unhindered development and competition of female muscle? (Gaines and Butler, 1983:69)

The latest 'crisis' faced by female bodybuilders is deemed to be the appearance of female Fitness competitors and the newer Figure contests. According to the New York Times: 'when the history of women's bodybuilding is written, 1998 will emerge as the year that the weights tipped in favour of the sports old nemesis, femininity...Fitness competition, a slenderized version of women's bodybuilding, has eclipsed some of the bulked-up muscle shows in participation and popularity' (Roach, 1998).

Since the beginning of female bodybuilding there has been a conflict between those wishing to develop a toned, athletic appearance and competitors who wish to push their bodies to the extreme and develop huge, hard and defined muscles (Scott-Dixon). Many women felt (according to Dobbins 1994) they had neither the genetics nor the desire to achieve the look of comparatively muscular Carla Dunlap, who won the Caesars Palace competition in 1983. Therefore to resolve this difficulty and meet this demand the Ms. National Fitness contest was founded in 1984 by the Fitness Trade Association. Wally Boyko who launched 'Fitness' purports:

I had become pretty disillusioned with the whole hard-core bodybuilding scene, especially women's bodybuilding. The steroid abuse was becoming rampant and obviously not a healthy approach to life. I knew there was a demand in the fitness industry for role-models - a healthier, more feminine

image for women in particular. I created Fitness to fill that void (Oxygen Mag, Nov. 2005:116).

Fitness competitions are judged on aesthetics in a similar manner to bodybuilding, but are expected to have a lot less muscle with higher body fat and are also judged on a dance routine incorporating aerobics and gymnastics. As Oxygen, a monthly American magazine dedicated to Fitness and Figure states, in comparison to female bodybuilding competitions: 'Fitness contests became more main-stream and competitions showcased more sex appeal' (ibid.). In 1995 the IFBB picked up on this marketable arena and created the Ms. Fitness Olympia. Since then, Fitness has experienced phenomenal growth, creating celebrities and new role models like Monica Brant-Peckham, Susie Currie and Kelly Ryan.

However, the rise of Fitness over the last five years has itself come under increasing challenge by Figure contests (see figure 2, p129). Fitness competitors such as Monica Brant-Peckham and Jenny Lynn have successfully switched from Fitness to Figure. Figure is a bikini-type contest, where women display their 'toned' physiques using 'feminine' poses and wearing high heels. To the unknowing eye, these women would still appear quite muscular, but in comparison to Fitness and to female bodybuilders⁴², figure women have little muscle mass and maintain much higher body fat - consequently their bodies are much more marketable and competitors are far more likely to gain modelling and sponsorship contracts. In 2003, Figure became a 'Pro' sport created by Louis Zwick, the founder of Ms. Bikini America, Ms. Bikini Universe and Ms. Bikini Canada (Kennedy, 2005). Zwick claims that 'Figure', meets the demands of female athletes who want to compete without having the pressures of choreographing a challenging dance routine. He claims that the judges 'look for the woman who has that quintessential naturally beautiful look from head to toe'. Critics however claim that Figure shows are 'almost a throw-back to women's bodybuilding contests of the seventies' (Huxtable, 2004:5) and shouldn't be included as a real event⁴³. It is interesting as Hans Klein⁴⁴ (female bodybuilding journalist) has noted however, that even Figure girls have recently been accused

⁴² Female bodybuilding contestants are often referred to as Physique Competitors.

⁴³ Bodybuilding promoter Terry Shipman, cited in Huxtable (2004:5).

⁴⁴ Taken from his blog 'Hard Talk', GeneX website and personal e-mails.

of getting 'too big'. Chairman Manion sent out a memo to all Figure pros warning them that their delts (shoulders) are becoming too big and they had too much definition in their thighs and would subsequently mark them down on these 'defects' in future competitions.

Despite the rise of figure contests and the desire to return to the 'golden days' of the 1980's, female bodybuilding is still increasing. Indeed, there are more women building their bodies in gyms than ever before. Whilst muscular female celebrities such as Madonna, and more recently Jodie Marsh, are still considered deviant by mainstream society, it does spark public interest and spurs female bodybuilding back into the spotlight.

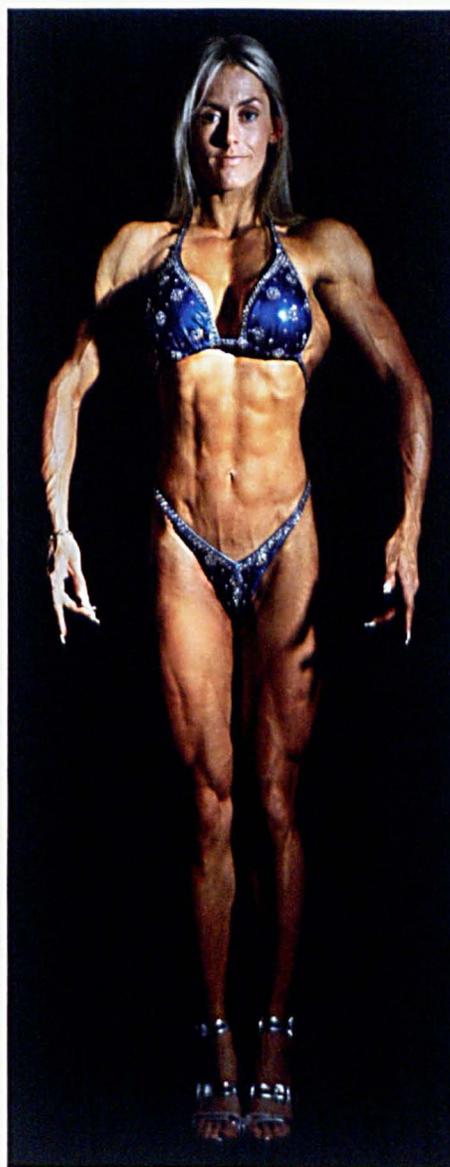


Figure 1. Lynn Grey - Female bodybuilder Figure 2. Louise Rogers Body-fitness

Photos by Rebecca Andrews

SECTION II - Feminist reactions to Female Bodybuilding

It is perhaps hardly surprising given the controversial nature of the sport that feminists have had divided reactions to this relatively new but growing phenomena. Whilst proponents claim that female bodybuilding is a way of empowering and liberating women, others see it as another form of entrapment in the guise of choice and agency (Bordo, 1988). Thus, as St Martin and Gavey (1996:47) assert, 'muscles on women clearly have meaning, but exactly what they mean and how they are valued is not agreed upon even amongst feminists'. This important debate is summarised by Grosz:

On [the] one hand, it [female bodybuilding] may, depending on the woman's goals, be part of an attempt to conform to stereotyped images of femininity, a form of narcissistic investment in maintaining her attractiveness to others and herself. On the other hand, it can be seen as an attempt on the part of the woman to take on for herself many of the attributes usually granted to men (Grosz, 1994:224).

In this second section of the chapter, I provide a synopsis of the two key opposing feminist reactions towards female bodybuilding, starting with those who herald female bodybuilders as resisting hegemonic norms by creating 'new styles of the flesh' (Bartky, 1988). Next, I turn to the antagonistic argument, put forward by feminists who declare that female bodybuilding is simply another form of oppressive control over women. In my conclusion I propose that not only is more empirical research needed to adjudicate between these contrasting arguments, but that we should perhaps think of moving beyond this particular binary opposition by being more sensitive to the complexities and contradictions of female bodybuilding.

Feminist reactions: Female bodybuilders as a feminist icon

Women's bodybuilding is one of the strongest expressions to come out of the feminist movement (Weider, July issue, 1990:6).

Bodybuilding is a form of empowerment for women and as such a metaphor for the other aspects of her life (Fierstein cited in Kaye 2005:155)

Space: invading the male domain and transgressing the 'slender' feminine body

Cashmore purports that historically, sports have 'validated masculinity' and 'made possible a strong and assertive proclamation of men's strength, valour and, above all, superiority over women' (Cashmore, 1998:84). On the reverse side, sports also then offer women 'the potential for reducing physical power imbalances on which patriarchy is founded and verified' (Castelnuovo and Guthrie, 1998:13). Bodybuilding has conventionally been perceived as the ultimate masculine activity, as a celebration of man's strength and muscle power. However by struggle, perseverance and determination, female bodybuilders have accessed this 'ovary-free' male domain (Klein, 1985; Mansfield and McGinn, 1993; St Martin and Gavey, 1996). Advocates claim that by doing this female bodybuilders have permeated into this homosocial area and challenged and undermined divisions and traditional understandings of men's/women's space (Hanson and Pratt, 1995; Blunt and Rose, 1994; Massey, 1994).

Fierstein (2000:32) claims that the 'muscular woman is not just a look; it's a social rebellion'. Tate (1999:36) also posits that women with hard, muscular bodies transgress the contemporary feminine ideal of the 'slender' body. Indeed as Bartky articulates, in modern western society;

Women are forbidden to become large or massive; they must take up as little space as possible...a body lacking flesh or substance, a body in whose very contours the image of immaturity has been inscribed (Bartky, 1990:73).

The sparse, insubstantial female body symbolizes both invisibility and weakness. The female bodybuilder, in direct contrast, has constructed a body that takes up space and demands attention. Muscles have always been associated with men, as symbols of masculinity, strength and power. In this context, female bodybuilders are 'antithetical to the discourse that defines women as soft, wet, and formless' (Fierstein, 2000:32). Similarly in a society where females are presumed to be physically weak (Choi, 2000), and where physical weakness is readily associated with mental weakness (Orbach, 1988), strong women both physically and symbolically embody power. This counter-hegemonic body has caused feminists such as Fierstein to declare that female bodybuilding 'is the liberation of the flesh – it's very threatening but also very exciting' (Helmore, 2000:32). These spatial issues are explored in more detail in Chapter 7.

Body projects for themselves

Fierstein believes that through bodybuilding women are finally achieving the right to manipulate their bodies however they choose and are creating new discourses of femininity (Bartky, 1988). Likewise Tate (1999:33) claims that when these muscular women design their bodies to their own ideals, gaze, self image and desire 'their bodies become sites of empowerment'. Indeed, she states that female weight-trainers:

Construct themselves almost as art forms, from the inside out. Their inscriptions on their bodies then come to represent them. Their identities are not ruled by the symbolic violence of the gendered habitus and the tyranny of slenderness...she seizes power by operating outside the system which would judge her on the femininity of her appearance (Tate, 1999:47).

In this way 'body projects' (Shilling, 1993) created by female bodybuilders are argued to disrupt gender hegemonic norms and generate new bodies that challenge the oppression of conventional beauty (this is explored further in Chapter 6). Hewitt (1997) believes that women who customise their bodies in extreme ways, are not only rebelling against society, but are taking back control over their bodies and identity. In addition she argues that the actual experiences/process of modifying the body can potentially be cathartic. Similar to other female body modifications discussed in the previous chapter, Hewitt (1997) suggests that pain inducing body customs can be used as a 'self-help' psychological healing process. Likewise, Heywood (1998) postulates that bodybuilding enables women to reclaim control over their bodies and to heal the wounds left from sexual abuse and harassment (see Chapter 4). Moreover, MacKinnon adamantly argues that strong, muscular women actually challenge the very foundations on which patriarchy is verified and maintained:

It's threatening to one's takeability, one's rapeability, one's femininity, to be strong and physically self-possessed. To be able to resist rape, not to communicate rapeability with one's body, to hold one's body for uses and meanings other than that can transform what *being a woman means*. (MacKinnon, 1987:122).

Power over nature

Tate (1999) argues that dedicated female weight-trainers enter into the ultimate male realm of having power over nature. As discussed in Chapter 3, historically women's bodies have been perceived as more 'out of control, beyond, and set against, the force of reason' and less self-contained and manageable than their male counterparts (Price and Shildrick, 1999:3). Self-management, discipline, control and power have thus been typically associated with notions of masculinity, whilst 'leaky', 'unruly', and uncontrollable bodies have been equated with the subordinate feminine body. However, female body builders challenge this traditional belief by exerting extreme control over themselves - creating muscled, 'fat-free' bodies. More importantly, perhaps, as female bodybuilders

strive for 'hard', low body fat, 'vascular' and 'shredded'⁴⁵ bodies, they challenge the binary oppositions of the identities dictated to by the 'gendered habitus' (Tate, 1999:41).

Deconstructing the feminine and breaking down dichotomies

Proponents argue that female bodybuilders not only break down the feminine/masculine dichotomy, but also contest other traditional western binaries (as discussed in Chapter 3), such as nature/culture, body/mind and sex/gender; This deconstruction of gender results in both a questioning of the 'natural' and an undermining of the 'natural gender order' (Kuhn, 1988:17). The female bodybuilder then, 'threatens not only the current socially constructed definitions of femininity and masculinity, but the system of sexual difference itself' (Schulze, 1990:59).

Aoki (1996), from a slightly different perspective, also believes that female bodybuilders disrupt gender categories, by appearing to create a hybrid human being - consisting of a woman's head on a man's body. Aoki (1996) argues that due to the radical gender destabilising potential of this practice, female bodybuilders negotiate their bodies by becoming hyperfeminine by emphasising supposed feminine attributes such as posing, hair, make-up, breasts and dance routines. Indeed, Mansfield and McGinn (1993:64) claim that 'the female body is so dangerous that the proclamation of gender must be made very loudly indeed'. However, Aoki (1996) points out that far from making female bodybuilders bodies more acceptable, these feminising activities actually raise more questions over the natural body and the social construction of femininity, in a similar fashion to the 'man/woman in drag' and/or 'female impersonator'. Butler (1990) asserts that as 'drag' discloses the artificialness and unauthenticity of 'gender', it has the power to undermine traditional notions of a natural gender/natural sex

⁴⁵ "Shredded" and "hard" refer to extreme fat and water depletion which vivifies musculature. A bodybuilder in 'vascular' condition is so 'shredded' that her blood vessels gain anatomy-text-like definition' (Aoki, 1996:60).

binary. Championing both Aoki's and Butler's argument, Coles (1994:452) explains the confusion caused by the female bodybuilder:

[She] enact[s] a double impersonation, her 'female' body fills out a masculine body drag, laced with super-feminine embellishments. The spectator cannot resolve what she 'ought' to be – a woman - and what she appears to be: the impossible juxtaposition of feminine/masculine, female/male, femme/butch.

The 'uncodability' of the female bodybuilder then, not only challenges the essentialism of gender, but the very foundations of reality itself. As Aoki (1996:65) notes, her contradictory appearance 'is the disturbing intrusion of the real'. The potentially subversive appearance of the hyperfeminine bodybuilder is further elaborated upon in this comment from the Art historian Maria-Elena Buszek (cited in Frueh, 2001:104):

I, myself, read it as holding a very sneaky potential for the feminist 'bait-and-switch' that I love in pin-ups. I mean, if these women wore no make-up, cut their hair very short, dressed extremely butch and were all fairly young, they'd be living up to the stereotype of the female bodybuilder (much like the lesbian) is supposed to be – a male wanna-be. In this respect the bodybuilding pin-up is much like the femme, 'lipstick lesbian' (or the flamboyantly 'chic' butch, for that matter), manipulating conventional signifiers of 'feminine allure' to inscribe normality 'perverse' body/desire with an unusual popular attraction.

Furthermore, Frueh (2001:104) declares that bodybuilding defies an ageist society: 'the older bodybuilder/pinup/fatal woman is a killer; she destroys erotically outworn strictures of female beauty'. Thus even the aesthetic erotic presentation of the female bodybuilder could be seen as holding possibilities for liberation and empowerment. Unlike any other professional sport many competitors reach their peak in their thirties and forties, with many athletes still competing at the Ms. Olympia in their fifties. Frueh consequently argues that

Bodybuilding has the potential to give women confidence in their bodies, appearances and sexuality regardless of their age.

Third-wave gender activism

Heywood (1997:57) believes that female bodybuilding can be seen as a form of third-wave gender activism. Not only, she claims, does it empower and liberate the individual, but can also 'work to facilitate change [in society] particularly on the levels of perception and consciousness'. Thus third-wave feminism, according to Heywood's perspective, can impact on not just the individual's self-development but can be used to improve women's role in life. This occurs, she claims; 'on an individual level, one woman at a time, women change how they see themselves and their positions in relation to the larger world, and how they are seen by others' (Heywood, 1997:57). For example, as a woman increases her strength in the gym and bench presses more than she previously believed possible, the suggestion here is that this in turn trickles into all areas of her life and empowers and enriches her to strive for more. She starts to believe that she can achieve greater things and begins to shrug off the internal socialised cultural beliefs 'that women can't do that'. Heywood consequently argues that female bodybuilding has the potential to transform a person, to make them more confident, more in control, more assertive and more positive in their work and home lives. Against the criticisms of female bodybuilding (which will be explored in the next section of the chapter) Heywood declares:

I have to believe that consciously or unconsciously, intentionally or not, any babe who sports a muscle symbolically strikes a blow against traditional ideas about male supremacy and such practices of male domination as domestic violence.... that any woman with muscles makes a statement in support of women's equality, self-realization, and women's rights (Heywood, 1998:192).

In a related argument, Nelson (1994:31) claims that 'feminism is about freedom; women's individual and collective liberty to make their own decisions. For women, sports embody freedom...women find it, use it, and insist on retaining it'. Bodybuilding allows women time for themselves, for their own project and for their own needs. As Nelson (1994:58) asserts;

They become the person, the project, who needs care. They take care of themselves. For a group of people who have historically been defined by their ability to nurture others, the commitment to nurture themselves is radical.

If Heywood's and Nelson's arguments are to be believed, then sports time - such as bench pressing in the gym - could be seen as 'committing feminist acts'. I now turn to the opposing feminist perspective, which declares that far from empowering, female bodybuilding is a destructive and detrimental practice.

Feminist reactions: Female bodybuilding as another form of control over women

The searching, the waiting, the hoping....Using bodybuilding as a way of filling the void in people's lives, giving purpose and meaning. The absurdity of it all. Ghosts play in masquerades of femininity and masculinity. Hollowness. Void. ...deluded souls trying to make a stand, make a mark against backdrops that reveal every moment their absurdity, their puny selves, their delusions, their heartrending, pointless futility (Heywood, 1998:124).

The myth of the empowered female bodybuilder – the similarities between anorexia and bodybuilding

Bordo (1988) questions the 'so-called empowerment' of female bodybuilders. She claims, from a Foucauldian perspective, that while the phenomenologist centres on the malleability of the body (as evident in the notion of 'body projects'), power over the body in terms of regulation and discipline is often overlooked. She believes that activities such as bodybuilding and jogging lay on the same 'axis of continuity' as anorexia. According to Bordo, there are at least three interconnected yet distinguishable axes: First, the 'dualist axis' (dualism of separated mind and body), second, the control axis (over the 'unruly' body), and third, the gender/power axis (fear of women 'as too much'). Bordo refers to the 'dualist axis' as the Western Philosophical binary that privileges the rational, intellectual and spiritual mind against the 'unruly passions and appetites [of the body] that might disrupt the pursuit of truth and knowledge' (Price and Shildrick, 1999:2). Thus the body here becomes 'alien', as 'confinement and limitation', as 'the enemy' and all that 'threatens our attempts at control' (Bordo, 1988:92).

In the second axis - 'the control axis', Bordo asserts that modern society is even more obsessed with mastering the 'unruly' body. She claims that anorexia is primarily a result of a sufferer becoming 'hooked on the intoxicating feeling of accomplishment and control' (Bordo, 1988:96). Likewise, sporting activities (such as jogging and bodybuilding) are purely about control and appear to be self-destructive and self-loathing practices that 'have no other purpose than to allow people to find out how far they can push their bodies before collapsing' (Bordo, 1988:97). In her thesis, she goes on to claim that whilst 'on the surface' the woman who builds her body appears to be the direct opposite of the diminishing and frail anorexic, in actuality they are very similar: in both cases the women feel alienated from their bodies, there is an emphasis on control and invulnerability, with little attention directed to matters of health. Furthermore, both the anorexic body and the muscled body are united against 'a common

platoon of enemies: the soft, the loose; unsolid, excess flesh' (Bordo, 1990:90). In accordance with this perspective, bodybuilding then, is yet another way to control and create docile bodies (Foucault, 1981).

In the final 'gender/power axis', Bordo (1988:108) points out the 'female body appears...as the unknowing medium of the historical ebbs and flows of the fear of the woman as-too-much'. In the sense that woman's anxieties spill out over their uncontrollable hungers: of wanting too much, needing too much, being too emotional, too loud, too passionate and so on. Dieting and exercise are consequently implemented as a contemporary form of control, in order to discipline, chastise and contain the disobedient body. Bordo therefore argues that the anorexic, compulsive jogger and the female bodybuilder are all trapped in their relentless and compulsive battle with their bodies. Forever engaged in a life of self-destructive obsession, self monitoring and surveillance - damaging both their health and their imagination.

In her later book, 'Twilight Zones', Bordo claims that the modern heroine as presented in the media and advocated by 'power' and 'muscle' (Agency⁴⁶ and Third-wave) feminists, must have 'as much guts, willpower, and balls as men, that they can put their bodies through as much wear and tear, endure as much pain, and remain undaunted' (Bordo,1997:28). In capitalist consumer society, she further posits, the catch phrase, 'Go for it! Know no boundaries! Take control!' mentality has taken off. This has resulted in the celebration that plastic surgery, jogging, bodybuilding and other practices are personal and individual decisions, which people do purely for their own gratification. However, Foucault (1981) and Bordo challenge this 'self-belief' and point out that in reality, many of these products are actually 'normalization' agents - conning people into believing it is *their own choice*. Bordo critiques 'agency' feminists (such as Davis, 1995) who view this as a way of women taking back control over their lives. Similar to the essentialist feminist argument laid out in the previous chapter, she poses a

⁴⁶ A term referring to feminists who focus on the variable of human agency within the structural constraints of society.

rhetorical question: what makes us see ourselves in need of improvement, remedy and our bodies as lacking, defective and unacceptable? She claims the words 'freedom, choice, autonomy, control, self agency' are a delusion that cover up the 'pain, self doubt, compulsions and disorders' which result from trying to live up to societal ideals. Thus Bordo argues that the image of the female bodybuilder as confident, proud and accepting of her body is an illusion. Instead she is driven by self-imposed cultural enslavement, strict self-discipline and body dysmorphia, resulting in dangerous⁴⁷ and oppressive measures.

The influence of Bordo's work is such that I have purposefully explained her perspective in some depth, but it is worth taking a detour from my narrative for a moment in order to point out some of the flaws in her approach. Bordo's cultural analysis tends to make sweeping generalisations and sanctimonious judgements. She groups all women together in one category, and claims to speak on behalf of them – her metanarrative implying an essentialist approach to women. At the same time, her ideas suggest a superiority over other women in the sense that she is a 'knower of truth' and that other women are under a 'false consciousness'. Bordo focuses on the disciplinary aspects of the body and fails to see alternative perspectives, ones that may reveal and acknowledge the pleasures, processes and eroticisms of the body. She lumps all practices surrounding beauty, exercise and diet together, failing to differentiate between them. Furthermore she conflates 'toned' bodies with the extreme muscularity of the female bodybuilder – naively claiming that after one summer of weight-training that she can understand the 'false' pleasures of being able to conquer the body and control pain. Nevertheless her perspective has some resonance with other critical thinkers on the subject, which I shall now return to.

⁴⁷ Anabolic steroids and human growth hormones for example, have possible side effects such as premature baldness, diarrhoea, increased body hair, acne, dizziness, chronic rectal bleeding, lower sperm count, thyroid, kidney and liver malfunction, hepatitis, gallstones and cancer. The effects of steroids on women have been particularly documented (see Mansfield and McGinn, 1993) including 'enlarged clitoris, increased or decreased libido, decreased breast size, diminished menstruation, increased aggressiveness, acne, male pattern baldness and increased appetite' (Ferguson, 1990:57). Alongside increased body and facial hair and lowered voice and possible squaring of the jaw.

Sam Fussell's (1991) autobiography of an elite male bodybuilder is an insightful view into the trials, tribulations and irony of the world of bodybuilding. Although seen exclusively through the eyes of a male, some of his descriptions resonate beautifully with Bordo's work, pointing out the pain and despair, of an engaged life forever doomed to self-surveillance and discipline. Fussell claims that bodybuilding is about a 'masculine cosmology', where the need to rule, control and conquer dominates their everyday lives including sleep, food, sexuality and training. When he steps on stage to collect his trophy at the San Gabriel Valley bodybuilding contest he is struck with the irony and discrepancy between how he appears and how he feels (this contradiction is explored in more detail in Chapter 7). He claims that the façade of the 'joyful and spontaneous' image of composed strength and power is faultless, and yet:

Thanks to the rigors of my training, my hands were more ragged, callused and cut than any longshoreman's. Thanks to the drugs and my diet, I couldn't run for 20 yards without pulling up and gasping for air. My ass cheeks ached from innumerable steroid injections, my stomach whined for substance, my whole body throbbed from gym activities and enforced weight loss. Thanks to my competitive tan, my skin was breaking out everywhere. Vinnie and Nimrod explained that all this was perfectly normal... 'Big Man, this is about *looking* good, not feeling good' (Fussell, 1991:193).

He also depicts bodybuilding as a self-defence and armour against the world:

The gym was the one place I had control. I didn't have to speak, I didn't have to listen. I just had to push or pull. It was so much simpler, so much more satisfying than life outside. I regulated everything...It beat the street. It beat my girlfriend. It beat my family. I didn't have to think. I didn't have to care. I didn't have to feel. I simply had to lift (Fussell, 1991:62).

For critics of bodybuilding, this extreme practice is simply another form of control and masochism. Academics from various disciplines have concurred with this perspective and pointed out the low self-esteem and insecurity of the elite

amateur and professional bodybuilder (Fisher, 1997; Klein, 1993; Pope et al 2000; Roussel and Griffet, 2000; White and Gillett, 1994).

Hyperfemininity and the compulsory heterosexuality of the female bodybuilder

Feminists, who argue against the possibility that women can be liberated through bodybuilding highlight the destructive criteria of hyperfemininity and compulsory heterosexuality that is prominent within the bodybuilding subculture. Schulze (1990), whilst acknowledging that the physically strong and muscular woman's body is potentially dangerous, asserts that it is pulled back in to the hegemonic system using 'the markers of the patriarchal feminine'. These 'markers' as mentioned earlier in the chapter, often consist of dyeing hair blonde (suggesting innocence and vulnerability), elaborate hairstyles, hair and nail extensions, breast implants (emphasizing a fetishized part of female bodies)⁴⁸, wearing high heels, corsets and often bondage outfits for photo shoots. Subsequently, Frueh (2001:108) argues that they become 'pin-ups in order to court stereotypical sexual fantasy'. Lisa Bavington, a professional female bodybuilder herself, explains this occurrence by arguing that patriarchal society over-sexualises 'women's bodies in a concerted effort to diminish them from achieving any real power', thus it is 'much easier to accept a muscular woman if she is portrayed as overtly sexual'. Pornographic representations thereby minimise female strength and act as a containment strategy.

Photography, for example, shown in muscle magazines, pictures and on the internet, is the main outlet for the representation of bodybuilders (and often provides a source of income - Heywood, 1997). Yet the female bodybuilder, in contrast to her male counterpart, is often portrayed as pornographic or 'erotic' for the 'male gaze' (Coles, 1994; Heywood, 1997; Mansfield and McGinn, 1993; St. Martin and Gavey, 1996; Holmlund, 1989). Due to the lack of sponsorship money for female bodybuilders, another way in which they can make their living is

⁴⁸ As female bodybuilders strive for low body-fat levels and manipulate their hormones, they inevitably lose their breast tissue. Consequently, the majority of contenders get silicone breast implants, in 'order to balance muscle and sex appeal' (MacNeill, 1988:209).

through 'schmoes', who pay for private 'muscle worship' sessions, which may include posing, wrestling or more erotic acts (Ian, 2001). Thus, in direct contrast to Tate's body project argument, the woman who builds her body becomes 'a being-for-others rather than a being-for-self' (Heywood, 1997:105).

Rich (1980) and Hargreaves (1994) in their research both expose the compulsory nature of heterosexuality in sport as a form of social control, particularly in reference to women and sexuality. As female bodybuilding pushes the boundaries of gender more than any other sport, the woman who builds her body must be 'anchored to heterosexuality; if she is not, she may slip through the cracks in the hegemonic system into an oppositional sexuality that would be irrecoverable' (Shulze, 1990:11). Shulze claims that due to a complex combination of homophobia and patriarchy in society, the female bodybuilder is labelled as a lesbian and a 'male-wannabe'. Consequently, Hargreaves (1994) believes that muscular women counteract this negative stigma by embodying images of hegemonic femininity based upon conventional heterosexual assumptions. Thus Heywood (1997:182) argues that female bodybuilders self determination is undercut by their desire to be (hetero) sexually appealing, indeed she writes ironically, 'femininity, it seems, is synonymous with sexuality'. Against this background, Heywood (1998:113) believes that the sexual representation of female bodybuilders 'effectively subverts any disruptive potential of this new version of the feminine form'.

Competitions as controlling the female bodybuilder

Many sociologists have focused on Physique Women's Contests as a detrimental force for the liberation and empowerment of women (Aoki, 1996; Mansfield and McGinn, 1993; St Martin and Gavey, 1996). As it was demonstrated in the first section of the chapter, in contrast to men's competitions, female contests have been judged more by symmetry and 'feminine presentation' (including appearance, posture, posing, mannerisms, display, make-up and skin

tone) than muscularity. This 'femininity' factor has continuously changed over the years, depending on what is deemed to be the ideal feminine muscular physique of the time. As Lisa Bavington (Mesomorphosis.com) points out 'femininity' is not a 'natural', inherent condition but a social construction that cannot be defined objectively; 'rather, it is open to a wide degree of interpretation and subjective criticism'. According to Lowe (1998) confusions over the ambiguous 'feminine' quality cause conflict and disparity between female contestants, who are never sure exactly what the judges are looking for and what will be considered 'feminine'. One conclusion to be drawn from this is that the competitive female bodybuilder is argued to be controlled by hegemonic markers of femininity, which undermine the potential to create a liberated female form.

Klein (1993) claims that bodybuilding is ultimately a subculture almost entirely run by men for men, as a predominately capitalist enterprise. Maria Lowe expands upon this irony:

Bodybuilding with its almost monopolistic power hierarchy, creates an opportunity for a new physically strong look for women, yet at the same time is run by a handful of men [officials, judges, promoters and sponsors] who have the power to determine the 'appropriate' images of women's bodies (Lowe, 1998: 73).

These 'appropriate' images, according to Lowe, change periodically to include a wider commercial audience. She concludes in her American study of elite female bodybuilders:

That although, at first glance, female bodybuilders appear to embody an empowering image of women – one that exudes physical strength and emphasizes impressive musculature – when placed in the patriarchal and capitalist context of ...bodybuilding organizations; their strength and power are tempered significantly (Lowe, 1998: 159).

If Lowe's study is to be believed then, despite changes over time, female bodybuilding is still dominated by men who ultimately dictate how far the sport - and women's bodies - should be allowed to evolve.

Conclusion

As it presently stands, there appears to be two viable and strong critically opposing arguments concerning the potential liberation of women through bodybuilding. On the one hand, women who pump iron are claimed to resist physical restrictions of imposed femininity. On the other, critics argue that female bodybuilders are engaged in an ultimately oppressive quest for perfect bodies of another kind. So far, no suitable empirical work exists that would allow us to properly adjudicate between these views. I argue that without further investigation into the daily lives and experiences of the female bodybuilder, it is impossible to assess whether female bodybuilding can empower and emancipate women by disrupting 'habitual practices of femininity' (Bordo, 1992:167). However, before I embark on such a study there is another critical point to make here. Despite the fact that these perspectives are diametrically opposed, both claim to have a monopoly on the truth. Moreover, both present their arguments in a simplistic fashion – either claiming that female bodybuilding is empowering/ or disempowering - and suggest that there can be no room for manoeuvre between the two perspectives. Without more attention being devoted to the potential complexities and contradictions that may characterise the life world of the female bodybuilder, this seems a premature conclusion. Rather than simply joining one or other side of this argument about female bodybuilding, then, I want to allow for the possibilities of a more nuanced understanding of this activity by recognising that power is never a simple possession but is constituted through multiple and shifting practices and discourses (Foucault, 1980; Rich, 2002). Such an approach can help us embark upon a more 'open' method of enquiry, allowing us insight into the nexus of subjectivities open to the female bodybuilder in relation to fluctuating relations of power – which renders 'them at one moment powerful and at another powerless' (Walkerdine, 1981:14).

Despite a small but increasing corpus of academic work centred on this research area, the majority of studies have frequently neglected the actual practices and daily experiences of the female bodybuilder - focusing instead on the textual meanings and symbolic representations of these women's bodies. There has however, been some, albeit limited, empirical research carried out. For instance, Fisher (1997) utilised semi-structured interviews in her research with 10 professional female bodybuilders. However, in a similar manner to Bordo's work, her research lacks depth and empathetic understanding. Fisher analyses the complicated world of female bodybuilding from an outsider's perspective and focuses on the mastery and control over the body, ignoring any pleasures in embodiment. In contrast to this superficiality, Schulze (1990) acknowledges, that in order to appreciate and thoroughly examine the life of the female bodybuilder, we must engage and submerge ourselves within the subculture itself, instead of trying to analyse it and explain it from the outside. Subcultures of *male* bodybuilders have been documented in some detail by the likes of Klein (1993) in America, and Monaghan (2001) in the UK, but ethnographic studies of female bodybuilders are at a premium and there exists no comprehensive study in the UK of how they construct their identities. In particular, there is a dearth of investigation into those phenomenological issues involving either the lived experience of how the female bodybuilder's physique is constructed, or how their 'assault' on conventional norms of feminine appearance is received both inside and outside of the gym.

Against this background, there is a strong argument for suggesting that it is only through detailed ethnographic work and researching the subculture from the 'inside out', that can we begin to answer and assess whether female bodybuilding can be empowering for women. The purpose of the following chapters is subsequently (as explained in the introduction and aims of this thesis) to try and rectify this absence of adequate empirical work by providing an insight into the lives of these extraordinary women. My ambition in my empirical research using ethnographic methods was to investigate the following mysteries: what precisely do these women do, how do they construct their identities, what social relations do they enter into, how do they experience and feel the reciprocal

jostling that exists between their bodies and machines/weights and what does it mean and feel like to compete? It is only after examining issues such as these, I suggest, that we can construct more adequate answers to questions regarding the liberatory or oppressive character of female bodybuilding. In the next chapter I begin my exploration and presentation of findings by focusing on the identity and daily lives of female bodybuilders outside the gym environment.

CHAPTER 6. Outside the Gym :

The Identity, Lifestyle and Embodiment of the Female Bodybuilder

It is the drive, it is the passion, it is the desire, it is the goal of perfecting your body as much as you can with the genetic limitations and blessings that you were born with. It is the life of dedication, stress, pain, pain, and more pain, and then the joy of reaching even your smallest goal...[Female bodybuilders compete] against themselves and against society. Bodybuilding is a sport and an art and the driving force that propels so many of us to sacrifice ourselves and punish our bodies and minds for goals that, to most others, seem unreasonable or even ridiculous. THAT is a bodybuilder. THAT is the female bodybuilder (Sharon, bodybuilder of 12 years, in response to the question: 'who is the female bodybuilder?').

Introduction

The costs and sacrifices of being a female bodybuilder are high. Her identity is under assault from many quarters. However, she also has various strategies to try to keep her sense of self, unspoilt and sustainable. In this chapter I explore the identity, experiences and daily lifestyle of the female bodybuilder. I begin by outlining sociologically how identities are forged and shaped by the social interactions we have with others, and explore the consequences of not conforming to social norms. Next, I look specifically at female bodybuilders and how both the pursuit and appearance of muscle makes them deviant in society's eyes. After looking at the stereotypes, stigma and marginalisation of the female bodybuilder, I examine the motivations and strategies that these women employ to create and preserve their identity against all this adversity. In the final section I look at the limitations and further difficulties associated with maintaining an identity as a female bodybuilder, specifically the detrimental consequences of investing too much in the body's appearance.

The interaction order

People's identities are shaped significantly by the interactions they have with others. Theorists, such as Cooley (1922 [1902]) and Mead (1962[1934]) argue that a sense of selfhood can only develop through our participation in social relationships. Cooley used the concept of the 'looking glass self', for example, to illustrate how the identities of individuals are formed via the 'gaze of the other'. These perspectives suggest that humans can only understand themselves in relation to other people, by 'comparing themselves with others, or seeing themselves through the eyes of others, that is, by taking a statistical and objective view of themselves' (Merleau-Ponty, 1962:434). As Brace-Govan (2002:404) argues:

The symbolic meanings conveyed by bodies are very important because people cannot be in the world without bodies. The demeanour, the presentation, the look, the size, and the physicality of bodies is ... read like a text at an automatic and deep level of perception.

This 'feedback loop' on bodily appearance and self presentation is a continuous process involving a reciprocal dialogue that spans the entirety of a person's life. According to the likes of Mead (1962), furthermore, this dialogue between others and ourselves involves more than a simple exchange of information as we need positive approval from others in order for our lives and actions to have meaning and purpose. For example, as Crossley (2006:97) points out, 'it is difficult to find yourself beautiful if others do not'. These processes may affect all social actors, but feminists have been quick to point out that women in particular have historically experienced such dialogue as an objectifying, estranging and alienating experience (See Chapters 3 and 4; Simone De Beauvoir, 1949; Bartky, 1988; Young, 2005:44). Men have been 'freer' in the interaction sphere to be more communicative, whilst women have been judged more on their physical appearance as visual objects (Crossley, 2006:85). Erving Goffman's work becomes of particular relevance here. Influenced by Mead's theory of self identity formation through social interaction, Goffman (1989) looks at how we present our bodies in public and the impact that this presentation has on our capacity to sustain a specific self identity. Goffman (1971:185) argued that the self is created through the 'tenuous encounters' and precarious nature of the 'social interaction

order': 'the individual does not go about merely going about his business. He goes about constrained to sustain a viable image of himself'. Interactions are complex and risky affairs that entail that the 'actor' is always vigilant and self-monitoring in order to allow the encounter to go as smoothly as possible. For Goffman (1979, 1987), 'impression management', including the crucial first impression, is paramount in preserving both social and personal identities. Within the interaction order, social expectations, norms, values and roles are constantly being maintained, and nowhere is this more evident than in the case of culturally acceptable notions of gender.

Kessler and McKenna (1978) argue that individuals automatically make a 'gender attribution' every time they see a human being, consigning others to the sex of male or female based upon western assumptions of masculine and feminine. As children, our gender is one of the first things that we learn and is central to developing our sense of self (Oakley, 1972). According to Convey et al (1984:31), furthermore, 'masculinity and femininity have been and are constructed in relation to one another to create and perpetuate male supremacy'. This is reinforced by the pressure on women to be inherently sexual in *appearance*, compared to expectations for men to be sexual in *behaviour* in terms of dominance and power. Fitting gender norms, therefore, becomes vital if a person's bodily presentation is likely to facilitate social interaction and to be accepted generally by society. These norms of 'gender interaction' are not imposed by any brute force or physical control, but are conveyed in a more subtle manner. For instance, Goffman argues that 'men often treat women as faulted actors with respect to "normal" capacity for various forms of physical exertion' (1974: 196-7). Bartky (1988:68) extends this analogy by arguing that 'a man may literally steer a woman everywhere she goes'. The man's movement 'is not necessarily heavy or pushy or physical in an ugly way; it is light and gentle but firm in the way of the most confident equestrians with the best trained horses'. In this way Goffman (1979:9) believes that gender inequality within the ritual order of everyday encounters is 'carried via the positioning of the body even into the gentlest, most loving moments without apparently causing strain'.

Against this background, it is not surprising to learn that there are high costs for those who transgress and do not fit the norms, appearances, behaviours and actions deemed appropriate for their sex. These 'costs' can involve violence. More usually, however, they relate back to the need for validation of self through the social approval of others. If an actor's body betrays him or herself during the public ritual then that individual risks 'losing face' and subsequent ostracisation and stigmatisation. In his landmark book *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity* (1963), Goffman describes stigma as 'an attribute that is deeply discrediting within a particular social interaction' (ibid.:3). The person with the attribute becomes 'reduced in our minds from a whole and usual person to a tainted, discounted one'. They are judged and found morally culpable. Exclusion from the interaction order makes it incredibly hard for deviant individuals to develop and maintain a positive identity. Actors are not however passive entities and do have some agency: they can, albeit with difficulty, disregard negative feedback by focusing on only the views of the people they deem to be important and even within this feedback circuit, carefully select and interpret the information that they decide to take on board (Cooley, 1902; Franks and Gecas, 1992). Stigmatised people can also try to protect their identities by surrounding themselves with other similar marginalised people, and 'sympathetic others' away from the 'normals'. Subcultures can therefore provide marginalised groups with at least some positive reinforcement, although ultimately, as Crossley (2006:95-96) points out: it 'is difficult not to be affected or bothered by the views of significant others'.

Female bodybuilders, like other stigmatised groups are marginalised and condemned by their 'deviant aesthetic' and because they are subverting 'the stylistic certainty and aesthetic precision' related to the smooth functioning associated with social control (Ferrell and Sanders, 1995: 5,11,15). However, the fact that the appearances, actions and desires of female body builders may threaten not only institutional norms, but the *gendered foundations of social interaction* itself, separates them from many other deviant groups within society (Downes and Rock, 2007). In a culture where the 'appearance and (re) presentations of women's bodies are key determinants of feminine identity and cultural acceptability' (Brace-Govan, 2002:404), and 'muscles are *the* sign of

masculinity' (Glassner, 1989:311), female bodybuilders deviate forcefully from gendered interaction norms. As discussed in the introductory chapter, 'toned' female bodies (slim bodies with some definition, for example celebrities such as Cameron Diaz, Jessica Alba and models on the cover of popular health and fitness magazines such as; Women's Fitness, Health and Fitness, Diet and Fitness and Ultra-Fit) are encouraged in contemporary society, but I argue that 'muscles' 'per se' are not. By this I mean muscles which are noticeably visible – for example considered 'bulky', large or displayed with very low body fat. The transgressive nature of female bodybuilders lies not just in the shape and size of their muscular bodies, moreover, but in their *choice* to pursue this transgression. This choice poses a considerable challenge in relation to the task of sustaining a viable sense of self-identity. It also raises questions about what identity affirming resources, or vocabularies of motive (Mills, 1940), are made available to these women during their time as female bodybuilders.

The stereotypes, stigma and marginalisation of the female bodybuilder

The troublesome and disturbing body of the hypermuscular woman is deemed so outrageously deviant by society, that it provokes and evokes harsh attributions and acts of discursive violence (Reid-Bowen, 2008) as typified and encapsulated in the following quote:

It is disgusting! These are NOT WOMEN anymore. They are beyond the point of no return. Whoever would do that is SICK! YOU HAVE TO BE SICK TO DO THIS TO YOURSELF! THERE IS NO NEED TO LOOK LIKE THAT! IT IS DISGUSTING! MALE BODYBUILDERS WHO OVERDO IT LOOK HORRIBLE TOO BUT SEEING A WOMAN MUTILATE THEIR BODY IN THIS WAY IS SICK! UGLY UGLY UGLY! (emphasis in original)⁴⁹

⁴⁹ This comment was posted on the website http://www.buzzhumor.com/videos/3052/Women_Bodybuilders (accessed 17/11/2008) and is not an unusual reaction to the bodies of female bodybuilders.

Furthermore, Fierstein (2000:15) argues that these labelled monsters are considered to be 'grotesque, manlike, androgynous, virile, freakish, dumb, narcissistic, obsessive, excessive, unhealthy, pornographic, offensive, and scary; she is a steroid user, a bulldyke, a dominatrix and an exhibitionist', amongst other derogatory terms. Perhaps less aggressive stereotypes, albeit still negative, were found in Forbes et al's (2004:487) research, which discovered that female bodybuilders are perceived as being less likely to be good mothers, less intelligent and less socially popular and attractive than average women. Literature by Lowe (1998), Shea (2001) and Steinem (1994) argues that men find muscular women who challenge traditional notions of male supremacy threatening and repulsive. As Forbes et al (2004) point out, ordinary women also see female bodybuilders as violating gender norms and rebelling against 'nature'. The female bodybuilder's body not only 'presents a clear and present danger... to what a woman is and ought to be, but also to the constitution of maleness' (Fierstein, 2000:17, also refer to Chapter 3).

In the context of these highly negative cultural views, it has been suggested that the hypermuscular woman's body must be 'constantly policed, a nightmarish fantasy-body that is forever under the sign of prohibition' (Aoki 1996:66). In this regard the media acts as a powerful enforcement, portraying these women as 'scary monsters' who are 'at war' with society and with their own bodies, looking and sounding like men, and rejecting what is culturally normal, acceptable and even tolerable (Theroux, 2000; The Independent, 2008; Thomas, 2005).

The pursuit of female muscle as deviant

The witch-hunt begins right at the very beginning of the female bodybuilder's pursuit of muscle, even before there are any visible markings of deviance. The decision and *choice* of these women to embark on a quest for muscular size and definition immediately ostracises them and renders them abnormal in relation to gender norms. Friends, families and work colleagues noticing this initial interest in bodybuilding and progression from light weight-training to training for muscle mass, often felt compelled to articulate their

concerns, acting as a form of social control. In Lucie's case (a bodybuilder of 8 years), she recalls her mother getting quite angry at her, asking, '*Why are you doing this? What are you trying to prove?*' Similarly Sascha's (a bodybuilder of 3 months) father said to her: '*I'm concerned about you; I'm worried about your health. I don't understand why you're doing this to yourself.*' These comments illustrate the social unacceptability of a woman wishing to build muscle. She is thought to be psychologically deviant, pathological or even considered to be deliberately trying to upset other people. The idea that a woman wants to build muscle and yet still retain her identity as a female, is incomprehensible when seen in terms of the hegemonic gender norms of society. Indeed, most female bodybuilders at some point in their lives have been asked: '*Why do you want to look like a man?*'

The perceived deviance of female bodybuilders stems from cultural assumptions about masculinity and femininity which have historically influenced how women's and men's bodies have been perceived. According to these norms, men and women are opposite, and should consequently be, *and* desire to be, ascetically disparate. Differentiation between the sexes is commonly considered to be exaggerated during puberty when hormones trigger the visual display of secondary sex characteristics. Whilst there are several physical markers which signify the transition towards male adulthood (for example, enlargement of the testes, development of facial and pubic hair, and changes to the voice), it is the growth of size and strength which are the principal symbolic badges associated with 'manliness'. Muscularity is not only a visual marker of masculinity, interpreted ordinarily as a manifestation of naturally higher levels of testosterone, but informs the kinesthetic expectation that men dominate social and cultural spaces (Goffman, 1974; Young, 2005). The male body then is not just a physical entity but a way of orienting the world through embodiment. As Connell (1987) explains:

The physical sense of maleness is not simply a thing. It involves the size and shape, habits of posture and movement, particular skills and lack of others, the image of one's own body, the way it is presented to others and

the ways they respond to it, the way it operates at work and in sexual relations (Connell, 1987:297).

In this context, strength and muscles belong to the man's domain; representing power, authority, force and capability.

Against this background, women who participate in male dominated sports and activities emphasising their strength and increasing their muscularity are perceived as a threat to this social order and risk having both their femininity and sexuality scrutinized and questioned (Nelson, 1994: 45; Rich, 1980; Hargreaves, 1994, and see also Chapter 3). Females learn from a young age the importance of looking attractive to men (McRobbie, 1991), which has never in western society included feminine strength, size and muscle (Gorely et al, 2007). If a woman desires these masculine traits then, she is perceived as rejecting both her sex and heterosexual relationships. For instance, one of my interviewees, Pat, a bodybuilder of 7 months, recollects her mother saying to her '*What's wrong with you? Don't you want a boyfriend?*' Similarly Deborah's (a bodybuilder of 6 months) brother said to her;

Female bodybuilders look sick and repulsive. They are transsexuals... Why does anyone want to look like that? Who finds female bodybuilders attractive? Gay men? Lesbians? Who?

Thus when a woman displays (or even desires) the aesthetics of muscularity, it impinges on most people's sense of propriety and normality in relation to gender and sexuality. Not only do female bodybuilders lose out in terms of physical capital (Bourdieu, 1978), placing themselves beyond the borders of conventional notions of beauty, but also risk 'censure for so deliberately transgressing the normative ideal for the female body' (St Martin and Gavey 1996:55). This censure comes from not only the media, but the general public, work colleagues, friends, family and lovers.

Paying the price of defying the gendered social interaction order

Similar to many other research studies (Lowe, 1998; Brace-Govan, 2004; Dobbins, 1994:8; Ian, 1995; Fisher, 1997; Heywood, 1998; Schulze, 1997; Frueh et al, 2000:8), the women in this study, regularly had to deal with unsolicited derogatory remarks. Their bodies, exuding stereotypical notions of masculinity in terms of size and shape, were no longer allowed to be their own but became objects of public property. However, it was not just stares and muttered comments that these women had to contend with from strangers, but with confrontational remarks and challenges regarding their physique, femininity and sexuality. Whilst none of my interviewees spoke of the violence that other research into this area has highlighted (Ian, 1995), many female bodybuilders spoke about the discursive animosity they received for crossing the boundaries of acceptable femininity. Caroline, (a female body builder of 17 years) reflects upon some of her negative experiences:

People can be so cruel...I've had people shout out their car window at me , 'are you a geezer?', or stop me in the street or when I'm out shopping and ask me ' are you a man or a woman?'. People can be so extremely rude, harassing and hurtful...when I was younger some of the comments would upset me so much that I'd cry and Daniel [her husband] would say that if it upset me so much I should stop...

Alice (a bodybuilder of 18 months) recalls an incident in a pub, where a stranger walked straight up to her and wanted to arm wrestle her. On another occasion, at a local night club, a man came up to her and grabbed her bicep, declaring in abject fascination that she had the biggest arms he had ever seen on a woman. In the public sphere, the female bodybuilder is then under constant interrogation by the 'gaze' (and actions) of others. There are however, other gender interactions that are unintentionally damaging to the identity of the muscular woman (Devor 1989:47-49). For instance, Sharon (a bodybuilder of 12 years) spoke with anger and exasperation of being refused money in a bank because the cashier did not believe she was a woman (her Christian name appeared on the debit card). Similarly, Christine (a bodybuilder of 5 years) told me:

People look at the size of me - they look at my height, my build ...especially my back...and just assume that I'm a man. I get called 'Sir' all the time. It really frustrates me...that's one of the reasons I've decided to grow my hair long.

The assumption that a muscular body must be synonymous with manhood also effected Katie (bodybuilder of 6 years), who has had to deal with the embarrassment on several occasions of being asked to get out of the women's toilets.

Whilst some of the families became more accustomed and accepting to the female bodybuilders lifestyle, showing either resignation or signs of support, for the majority this quest for muscularity continued to cause conflict and emotional distress. Amy (bodybuilder of 4 years) mentioned how her sister became belligerent whenever the topic of bodybuilding was brought up. For example, she said to Amy *'your back is disgusting, really lumpy - you'll look like a freak.'* This was by no means an unusual reaction as most family members felt they had a licence to censure and recriminate. As the following observation illustrates, the lifestyle choice of the female bodybuilder causes friction and strain on immediate relations:

Family meals and get-togethers have become a nightmare. I avoid them whenever I can... They expect me to eat the fatty foods that they prepare and feel rejected if I bring my own and yet I never lecture them to eat more healthily because they are overweight... they won't accept my lifestyle choice at all – they seem to think I'd be happier if I got married, settled down and had children (Katie, bodybuilder of 6 years).

Against this background, further misunderstandings and fear are generated, as not only does bodybuilding appear to be 'gratuitous, dysfunctional and purposeless' (Frueh, 2004:81) but transgresses against gender roles and norms concerning how women are expected to spend their time. Traditionally, participation in sport has been seen as a form of escapism for men, a place where they can focus on

activities purely for their own pleasure (Messner and Sabo, 1990). In contrast, women have been expected to be selfless, caring and nurturing; focusing their attention on close relationships and starting a family of their own (Heywood, 1998). Even in families where parents have participated in the bodybuilding subculture themselves, and have been actively encouraging of their daughter's endeavour, there are still limits and borders that should not to be crossed. In Michelle's (a bodybuilder of 5 years) account, she explained how her father used to be supportive of her training until, after much contemplation, she decided to take steroids:

Since I turned to the 'dark side' [steroids], I've hardly been in contact with my dad...he doesn't like what I'm doing now...there's now this gulf between us.

Some of the female bodybuilders spoke of the challenges and difficulties of not only trying to maintain intimate relationships with others, but of finding and dating heterosexual men that did not feel threatened or repulsed by their bodies. In 1994 a magazine called 'FIT BODY' (which was generally an advocate for women weight trainers at the time) stated that 'over developed arms on a lady are unattractive to almost 90% of the population' (FIT BODY, Issue 2, 1994:50⁵⁰). Fourteen years later, it appears that attitudes have not changed at all. Alice, illustrates this in a recent conversation that she had when a man said to her: '*you are an attractive woman, but your arms are just too big... They intimidate men*'. Indeed, several of my single interviewees similarly spoke of the problems with trying to date 'normal' men who treated them as 'abnormal' and unappealing on the assessment of their physique. Whilst being overlooked as suitable 'dating material', rejected as unattractive and even found disgusting by mainstream society can be potentially detrimental to the identity of the female bodybuilder, female muscle challenges the gender order so much that it can actually break down serious long-term relationships. Monica's (a bodybuilder of 2 years) decision to break up with her cohabitant boyfriend exemplifies this: After trying to persuade her not to train and to lose weight for many months, the situation

⁵⁰ Cited from a paper presented to the 1998 BSA Conference, entitled 'Muscling In: Gender and Space in Weight Training Culture' by Jenny Ryan.

came to a head when he told her: *'I don't want you to train anymore...Having sex with you from...[behind] is like having sex with a man'*.

These previous examples show just how truly deviant female muscle is considered to be by society, and demonstrate the high price that is paid, both in the public and private sphere, by the women who decide to become female bodybuilders.

The quest for muscularity: Motivations, embodied pleasures and identity

In light of the stigma and reactions by 'normals' to the transgressions of female bodybuilders many questions are raised: Why would a woman choose to take up bodybuilding in the first place? What motivates these women and spurs them to subvert societal gender norms? How do female body builders seek to maintain a positive sense of identity in such a hostile world? As Webber (2007:139) posits, it is only by exploring *'the lived reality of transgression'*, including the desires, motivations and pleasures of these extraordinary women, can we begin to understand their devotion to an interactional order based upon the pursuit of muscle rather than the cultivation and reflection of gendered ideals.

In the same way that these individual women come from very diverse backgrounds, the motivations that propelled these women into bodybuilding were equally as heterogeneous. For some women the slide into the 'ministry of muscle' came about simply as an extension to their training, a sport they realised that they both enjoyed and excelled at. Others, such as Amy (bodybuilder of 4 years) 'got hooked' after using weight training as a prescribed form of rehabilitation from other sports related injuries. In some cases, my interviewees spoke of the lure towards intense weight- training as a consequence of a particular event in their lives. Lucie (bodybuilder of 8 years), for instance, spoke of her desire to regain control of her body after giving birth to her son:

I remember standing in front of the mirror and being horrified by what I saw in front of me...I saw what I had become and wanted to do something

about it...I'd always been active in the past but somehow I'd let myself get out of shape. I didn't want this to be 'it', if you see what I mean? I didn't want to be defined for the rest of my life as just a mother. I guess I wanted to take control of my body and my life again and say 'this is me!'

Other women, resonating with Pitts' body modifiers (see chapter 4), spoke of their involvement in bodybuilding as a form of healing. Katie (bodybuilder of 6 years) believes that her immersion into the bodybuilding lifestyle literally saved her from a reliance on alcohol:

Instead of drinking every night, and let's face it, most of the day too! I put all my time and energy into the gym. I started to look after myself more and have more respect for my body ...it wasn't easy...and I relapsed a few times – but you can't drink and build muscle, it was one or the other ...

Rachel (bodybuilder of 2 years) and Mary (bodybuilder of 12 years) also spoke of the cathartic and therapeutic power of extreme weight-training, but this time as a route of recovery from Anorexia. In a society where women are preoccupied with slimming and losing weight, female bodybuilders defy convention by eating a high calorie, high protein diet in order to increase their body mass. Rachel explains how her negative and destructive relationship with food changed as a direct result of becoming more involved in bodybuilding:

I used to see food as the enemy and would use loads of different avoidance strategies...[such as] drinking loads of coffee and diet coke, eating foods with as few calories as possible, eating fibre tablets and so on...I'd exercise for hours if I'd over eaten and even force myself to be sick at times...I tried to eat only one meal a day....but now I'm no longer afraid of food as I know I need it to build a bigger and healthier body. I no longer avoid fats for example and I make sure I eat protein every couple of hours...I exercise less and rest more. I feel so much better for it, both mentally and physically.

Similarly Mary spoke of the remedial properties of embracing the bodybuilding world:

I took up bodybuilding because I didn't want to be weak anymore... I wanted to be in control of my life but in a powerful and positive way...I used to hate my body, but now because of bodybuilding I have learnt to really appreciate it.

Echoing the narratives of other female bodymodifiers discussed in Chapter 4, female bodybuilders emphasise the importance of taking back 'control' over their bodies in a beneficial manner. As Barbara (bodybuilder of 7 years) articulates:

Control is central to it all, control of my body means control of my life... If things are getting out of control in your life, the one thing you can control is yourself; when you train, how you train, when you eat etc.

This emphasis on control over the body can be read as a way of 'anchoring the self' (Sweetman, 1999c) in the context of an increasingly unstable and uncertain society – a time where individuals experience a sense of loss and disorientation in the whirl and confusion of postmodern life (see Introduction, Chapter 1). As Polhemus and Randall (1998:38) explain: 'In an age which increasingly shows signs of being out of control, the most fundamental sphere of control is re-employed: mastery over one's own body'.

Despite the diversity of motivations to become female bodybuilders, all these woman realised that they were different, or at least desired to be different, from hegemonic norms of femininity. For some, this incompatibility with dominant gender norms became apparent at a young age:

I've always felt I was different from other females. Even as a girl...I was a real tomboy... and since I was little I've always gone 'feel my arms' (Corina, bodybuilder of 4 years).

For other female bodybuilders it was more of an epiphanic moment:

I was reading through my boyfriend's Muscle and Fitness magazine when I saw a picture of a fitness girl, and I thought I want to look like that... She looked amazing, strong, independent and beautiful, like she could do anything (Danielle, bodybuilder of 5 years).

I became interested in bodybuilding when I was seventeen. I was exceptionally tall for a woman and very thin, weighing under nine stone. People used to tease me...One day I saw a picture of a female bodybuilder... and decided that I wanted my body to look like that. I wanted to be big and strong (Emma, bodybuilder of 19 years).

Such reflections illustrate how these women not only felt distanced from *at least* one element of the gendered norms associated with the interaction order, but became committed to identities and actions placing them outside of the respectable boundaries of interaction. This is evidenced further in their reactions to the changes wrought in their *own* bodies. While the significance placed on visual display (especially in competitions; see Chapter 9) has obvious affinities with the feminine concern with appearance, it is accompanied here by an emphasis on physical empowerment focused on the *dominance* of space and *enjoyment* of self rather than with passivity (Young, 2005). This is illustrated by the delight expressed by both Christine and Amy:

I love looking like I do when I'm cut [defined] and at my peak. I feel so strong, like I could do anything and nothing could stand in my way. (Christine, bodybuilder of 5 years)

It's really exciting when ... you suddenly notice the definition and striations in the muscle group...I love it. I think it looks really beautiful. (Amy, bodybuilder of 4 years)

These findings coincide with other interviews with female bodybuilders:

Thanks to bodybuilding...I feel powerful, emotionally and physically. I feel strong and in tune with my body. And I feel more alive and sexy than ever before (Skye Ryland, cited in Dobbins, 1995:125).

When I look in the mirror I see someone who's finding herself, who has said once and for all it doesn't really matter what role society said I should

play. I can do anything I want to and feel proud about doing it (Irma Martinez, cited in Rosen, 1983:72).

The focus on muscular ascetics for these women, thus becomes a somatic representation; symbolic of strength, power, control, mastery, and independence. The women derive a sense of achievement through activity shaping their bodies for themselves. Furthermore, as Monaghan (2001:351) points out in his article; 'Looking good, feeling good: the embodied pleasures of vibrant physicality', there is an intimate connection between bodybuilders' physical appearance and their sense 'of physical and emotional well being'. Within this context, Williams (1998:451) notion that 'transgression is pleasurable' becomes especially applicable to female bodybuilders whose transmogrification becomes not just a visual display, but an embodied union of empowerment and pleasure. The desired textual appearance of muscularity at its most positive becomes intricately woven with the motivations and pleasures of the female bodybuilder, resulting in an amalgamation of the mind and sensuous embodiment.

Body projects and feminine identity

Female bodybuilders get intense pleasure out of constructing a body to their own design. They become the architects of their own body projects (Shilling, 1993). As Charlie (bodybuilder of 4 years) explains; *'Isn't the beauty of the human body, the opportunity to mould it into whatever we want it to be?...We are doing this so that we can feel good about ourselves'*. Female bodybuilders are well aware that their corporeal self-expressions are not perceived as beautiful or even acceptable by mainstream society. Despite the animosity received by 'normals', many of these women declared that they didn't care about other's people's views of their appearance. This is illustrated by Danielle's (bodybuilder of 5 years) response:

It doesn't bother me at all....because I'm proud, I do it for myself, you know, I do it because of how I want to look...to me that appeals...I prefer that; a fit body, to me that looks like she's working at it, meaning she takes care of herself, not that she's just done it naturally.

Similarly Corina (bodybuilder of 4 years) acknowledged that whilst perhaps some men found her body unattractive (and even repulsive) she contends: *'It's not the male view that counts is it? ...It's your own personal view of your body'*. This attitude contrasts strikingly with the attitudes of exotic dancers in Wesely's (2003) study. Whilst there are affiliations between female bodybuilders and exotic dancers in terms of the central focus on the outward appearance, body technologies are utilised by the latter purely to look more sexually attractive and enticing to men. This is summed up by one exotic dancer who reflects: *'What can I change about myself, to make me more appealing to these guys?'* (ibid.:649). In this way female bodybuilders confront and challenge conventional notions of women as docile, erotic spectacles for the enjoyment of men (Bartky, 1988). Instead, they reclaim power from the objectification of women in patriarchal society, by carving out a territory for themselves in which they can revel in their own definitions of beauty and pleasure. Their bodies become signatures and self-authorships of their own desires (Tate, 1999:50).

Fierstein (2004:17) declares *'that the hypermuscular woman is a woman - who wants and has big muscles and who identifies herself as female and squarely within the parameters of feminine identity'*. How then, in the context of subverting all societal understandings of femininity, do female bodybuilders not only see themselves as possessed of their *'feminine identity'*, but manage to sustain it? Comparable to Lowe (1998) and Tate's (1999) studies, each female bodybuilder in my study has her own interpretation of *'femininity'* and her own ascetic boundaries that shouldn't be crossed in order to maintain it. One professional competitor (and UK female judge), for example, expressed this view when commenting on the issues involved in balancing femininity and muscularity:

I think I look like a woman – though I know other people don't always perceive me in this way. Femininity is very important – your skin tone, the way you look, walk, your posture, the way you act. Make-up, hair, nails (even the way you pose on stage needs to be feminine). Femininity can be destroyed if people abuse drugs rather than use them – go overboard and develop masculine characteristics.

In contrast, for Michelle (bodybuilder of 5 years), femininity takes on a different meaning (though both women emphasised the problematic issue of steroids in relation to sustaining a feminine appearance⁵¹):

I think many female bodybuilders' misinterpret femininity and they do this – over the top femininity thing, you know, which I don't necessarily think means femininity. I think men and women can be feminine in other ways, without it having to be the whole hair, make-up and big-boobs, if you see what I mean...I think there is a line where you look at some women's faces and stuff, and you think, OK, that's not looking good, in respect to what the drugs have done to them...like the hardness...they can look really masculine...the jaw and the heavy brow etc.

Other female bodybuilders also actively interpret their definition of 'femininity'. Corina illustrates this in the following: '*Femininity is whatever I decide it to be. I would love to be huge*'. Debbie (bodybuilder of 7.5 years), when reflecting on this issue, recognised the constricting oppression of contemporary gender norms:

Girls can be feminine with or without muscles. Do people ever criticise men for being unmasculine because they don't work out and have no... muscle definition or size...a girl can come across masculine because of attitude and you don't need muscles for that...on the other hand people confuse the confidence that being strong and in good shape gives you for masculinity because women are 'supposed to be weak and incapable'....I am a girl, I like being a girl, and yes I would love to get a lot bigger and more muscular...and I am very feminine.

Female bodybuilders are therefore reflexive, self-conscious agents who live out their own definitions and understandings of femininity. Like Tate's (1999:35)

⁵¹ For reasons cited in the Methodology section (Chapter 2), I have not discussed the issues of steroids in depth. However, the effects of steroids on these women are very real and are a concern for many female bodybuilders who wished to retain some elements of dominant ideals of femininity. Hair extensions for example were sometimes used to cover up the loss of hair and receding hairline that can accompany steroid use. Other procedures such as laser treatment were used to counteract the growth of facial hair and medications used for conditions such as acne.

serious weight-trainers, these women, firm in their identity, do 'shape their body to their own liking', perceiving their quest for muscle as 'a personal challenge' that does not seek 'the approval of men, women, or society'.

However, as noted at the start of the chapter, our identity is in constant negotiation through the interactions with others. Female bodybuilders therefore employ several other strategies in order to maintain a positive identity. Similar to other deviant and stigmatised people who are excluded from mainstream society, these muscular women pursued social relationships among like-minded and like-bodied individuals (Hall and Jefferson, 2006). Social comparison theorists claim that in order for deviant individuals to retain a positive sense of self, cognitive and physical boundaries are erected between themselves and vilified others (Rosenburg and Kaplan, 1982; Widdicombe and Wooffitt, 1990). Female bodybuilders consequently cultivate an attitude of superiority to 'normals', valuing themselves as unique, special and different to other women (Fisher, 1997). In comparison, outsiders are frequently perceived as lazy, unmotivated and unattractive. Negative and cruel comments made by these unimportant 'ignorants' (Christine, bodybuilder of 5 years) are thereby dismissed and ignored. Instead, these extraordinary women surround themselves with partners and friends who are accepting, encouraging and complimentary of their appearance and endeavour. For instance as Lucie (bodybuilder of 8 years) stated defiantly:

My husband thinks I'm sensuous and hot...among other flattering descriptions. Just because some people might not comprehend a certain aesthetic look, doesn't mean that other people don't appreciate and love it.

These crucial interactions with 'kindred souls' create an alternative frame of reference, enabling female bodybuilders to deflect the wider stigmatisation that they face in their daily lives (Cohen, 1955). Furthermore, the identity of the female bodybuilder is reaffirmed by engaging in activities that support their lifestyle and goals. For example, reading and buying bodybuilding magazines, books, DVD's, posters and pictures, normalises the image of the female

bodybuilder (Tate, 1999), whilst interacting on bodybuilding forums and attending competitions allows them to be part of a collective identity. Indeed, the internet has provided an increasingly important source of information and interaction for female bodybuilders. Cyberspace has created a place where geographically scattered female bodybuilders can not only feel valued, but come together as a kind of 'sisterhood' (a group of similar women whose shared struggle gives them a unique emotional connection) supporting each other by offering friendship and practical advice. Although not all of my interviewees believed that the bodybuilding subculture provided a supportive network for females (See Fisher, 1997; Klein, 1993; Lowe, 1998; and Chapters 5, 7, 8 and 9, for pessimistic claims of 'hypermasculinity' and 'devaluation of women' within the culture), some of the women found great comfort mixing with their 'own'. Alice (bodybuilder of 18 months) for example claimed: *'bodybuilders are...unique...I have found more compassion, thoughtfulness, encouragement and sense of community in my short time being a bodybuilder than anywhere else.'* This sense of camaraderie is reinforced by the fact that these women occupy the same 'social field' and recognize, and pursue, the same form of physical capital (Bourdieu, 1978).

Body dissatisfaction: the price paid for investing too much in the body's appearance

Even though the defiant, positive narratives of desire, motivations and pleasures in embodiment articulated by these women are real, to leave their story there would only give a partial analysis of what it is to be a female bodybuilder. Like other human beings, muscular women are complicated, complex individuals who can hold apparently opposing beliefs simultaneously. This section then, explores the more negative aspects of embodiment experienced in the daily lives of these women. Despite the various strategies employed to sustain their identity, the female bodybuilder still has to contend with arguably the most powerful critic of them all - herself. Tate (1999:42) argues that female bodybuilders become slaves to the 'tyranny of the[ir] latent image':

The image rules women's lives – how they perceive themselves, their diets, training routines, leisure time, relationships...fear of what they would become if they didn't train.

The 'male gaze' is rejected, but is arguably replaced by yet another voyeur. The women become driven, obsessed and self-disciplined by their ideal of perfection – spurred on by their own concept of beauty and the perfect female form. Thus far from creating a body that they can be content with, many of my participants concurred that '*bodybuilding makes you even more critical of your body*' (Lucie, bodybuilder of 8 years). As Danielle (bodybuilder of 5 years) contends :

I think bodybuilders are all hypercritical of themselves. It's an art form where precision is everything and there is always something that can be improved.

Bodybuilders have commonly been diagnosed and pathologised by psychiatrists as suffering from 'reverse anorexia' (Bigorexia), or what has been more popularly classified as 'Muscle Dysmorphia'. Symptoms include the preoccupation with 'excessive' muscularity (to the extent that it impairs and impacts upon daily lifestyle) and are accompanied by feelings of poor body image (Connan, 1998) and low self esteem (Oliveradia et al. 2000). Despite continual reassurance by the tape measure, fat callipers, weight scales and other people, the 'Bigorexic' still perceive themselves as too small and 'not muscular enough'.⁵² The condition is believed to be under-diagnosed due to the acceptability in society for men to be or to desire to be big (Pope, et al, 2000). Until relatively recently, only men were attributed as suffering from this disorder. However studies such as Philips et al (1997) are quick to point out that women can also develop characteristics of muscle dysmorphia. Fisher (1997) claims that similar to the anorexic, female bodybuilders see themselves through a distorted lens and fail to see themselves equitably. Michelle (bodybuilder of 5 years) illustrates this point in the following quote:

⁵² Whilst I do not want to pathologise bodybuilding or suggest this is by far the only reading, during my research I came across both male and female bodybuilders who felt insecure about their bodies and claimed to look small and 'weak', when this was clearly not the case.

I still don't see it (the muscularity). Though... I caught a glimpse of myself in the mirror and it was one of those moments where I could see myself more objectively and I thought fucking-hell I'm actually quite big. But most of the time I just don't know – I always think that I'm small and not good enough and that this body part needs bringing up.

The pleasures in the body then, can become secondary to the discontent and dissatisfaction these women felt from their perceived physical flaws and inadequacies. Similar to many female bodybuilders in this study, Emma (bodybuilder of 19 years) explains: *'You can't ever be 'happy' with your body – you are always trying to improve it'*. The continual struggle to achieve their 'latent' image (Tate, 1999) can generate discord between their mind and body, potentially allowing the body to become an object of hate, resentment, loathing and fear. This is demonstrated by the words of Amy (bodybuilder of 4 years) and Sharon (bodybuilder of 12 years):

Every time you look in the mirror you just feel like you're a million miles away from the ideal that your striving for...I just think what more do I have to do?! Amy (bodybuilder of 4 years)

I keep striving for the light at the end of the tunnel and hope that eventually I'll get where I want to be. But the thing about bodybuilding is that I'm never satisfied....nothing ever seems good enough...I hate the summer, I don't like wearing shorts and tops, or being on the beach, I prefer covering up - maybe one day I'll feel differently. Sharon (bodybuilder of 12 years).

Female bodybuilders do not therefore escape the relentless need for self-improvement and associated bodily dissatisfaction that other women in society experience (Bordo, 1988: see Chapter 5 for more details). Like Smith's (1990:19) research into the effects of fashion magazines on female body image: 'The body, for the feminine subject, is the object of the subject-at-work', the body is always inadequate; 'there is always work to be done'.

Food

Feminists such as Steiner-Adair (1990), Bordo (1997, 2004) and Frost (2001) claim that in western society women are expected to be preoccupied with their weight and dieting, and indeed to be “at war” in an antagonistic relationship with their bodies (see Chapters 4 and 5 for more details). However, female bodybuilders have a particularly complex relationship with food.

Although they need surplus ‘quality’ calories and a regular high protein intake throughout the day in order to create the optimum conditions for muscle growth, for the muscles to actually show (to mark them out from being simply ‘big’ women, or even worse considered ‘overweight’ women) they need to have low body fat (this is discussed further in Chapter 9). The women in my study dealt with this dilemma in two different ways. The first group felt that the desire for muscle and strength far outweighed any additional increase in body fat that might be inadvertently acquired on their quest. Within this category, the women were divided between those who embraced the opportunity to eat on a regular basis, declaring that they spent so much time *‘dieting for competitions that they wanted to enjoy their food as much as possible’* (Michelle, bodybuilder of 5 years), and those who were committed to this muscle building philosophy but developed an alienating and negative relationship with their bodies as a result. This is illustrated by Amy’s (bodybuilder of 5 years) comment:

I know that in order to grow [muscle] I have to put on this extra layer of fat. But I hate it when I can’t see the definition in my abs. I just feel flabby and uncomfortable in myself...I end up wearing baggy training tops and clothes so that it doesn’t show.

The second group of women in my study however, spend a lot of time and energy trying to ‘balance’ their food intake and exercise output, in order to retain a body of low fat percentage with defined muscularity. This is supported by Mary’s (bodybuilder of 12 years) admittance:

I need to eat more [in order to put on size and muscle], which goes against the grain of everything...But I have a big appetite...I have had to cut down

on CV[cardiovascular exercise] a lot, it's a bit of a mental thing...It was my birthday last week and I ate out so many times, I needed to do boxercise and I really worked hard ...Otherwise I would become so fat.

The negative and detrimental attitude to food cited by many of my participants has been confirmed by other studies. In Tate's (1999) work, for instance, the desired image becomes so powerful that the women feel compelled to perform excessive amounts of cardiovascular work in order to 'burn' off any 'bad', fat laden food to which they have 'given in' and eaten. Confirming Bordo's (1993, 2004) claims that there is a direct link between bodybuilding and anorexia (see Chapter 5), one judge told me that *'eating disorders are rife within the industry'*. Both bodybuilding and anorexia invest everything on their outward appearance and are joined by the anti-fat theme which permeates our society and particularly effects women (Lloyd, 1996). Furthermore, whilst male bodybuilders also struggle to eat the 'right' foods, it is female bodybuilders who have the most difficult relationship to dieting. Not only is it harder for them to lose fat due to natural hormones and genetics, but there is still more pressure for women to retain a 'slimmer' appearance throughout the year in terms of photo shoots and promotional endorsements and opportunities within the subculture (Lowe, 1998; Heywood, 1998).

Female bodybuilders, like their male counterparts, accumulate a vast knowledge about nutrition. Their diet becomes regulated with extreme precision and it is not unusual for strict diet plans to be adhered to on a daily basis, determining the exact number of grams of protein, carbohydrates and fat that are allowed. As Tate (1999:43) explains the 'relationship with food becomes one in which food does not necessarily need to be enjoyable', but is used scientifically and calculatingly as a fuel for the formation of muscle. These diets become extremely monotonous and structured requiring immense self-imposed discipline in order for them to stick to 'plan'. The body then, especially in relation to food, becomes 'a territory that must be cherished, yet overcome, as a best friend and worst enemy' (Yates, 1991: 168).

The regime

In order to achieve their 'ideal' body and to lay the foundations for optimum muscle growth, female bodybuilders construct a very rigid, structured lifestyle. As Jennifer (bodybuilder of 2 years) put it, time is ordered on a basis in which body builders 'wake up, eat, medicate, work out, eat, work out, eat, medicate, sleep'. The lives of female bodybuilders therefore revolve around their muscular endeavour. As Michelle (bodybuilder of 5 years) articulates:

Bodybuilding is all consuming. I think about bodybuilding from the moment I wake up to the moment I go to sleep. Sleep, eat, drink, think of bodybuilding...all the time you are either thinking about training, or supplements, or you've got the next feed to sort out etc.

The pursuit of muscle takes over every aspect of their world, including relationships and work commitments⁵³:

My partner knew what I was like when she took me on, she knew first and foremost that I was a bodybuilder and that that would take first place above everything else including her (Emma, bodybuilder of 12 years).

Lucie (bodybuilder of 8 years) captures some of the ongoing sacrifices and strains on relationships that are a consequences of the regimented lifestyle, in the following quote:

It's the early nights, eating at certain times, not going out to BBQ's in the summer...it takes a lot of time management and a lot of stress...it's ok for me but I can feel the stress on my friends and family because they don't understand it and they really don't like it.

The highly structured and regulated day to day world of the female bodybuilder makes life much simpler and more straightforward, in a comparable

⁵³ Employment is frequently chosen on its flexibility, in order to support the bodybuilding lifestyle (refer to Methods Chapter (2) for more detail).

manner to the highly organised life of the army or monastery. By immersing themselves in routines and rituals, female bodybuilders help to retain their self-identity by giving themselves focus, meaning and purpose, as 'habits lie at the very base of our sense of self' (Shilling, 2008:13). However, habits can also function to 'restrict our relationship with the world' and become a negative, self imposed doctrine (ibid.). Barbara (bodybuilder of 7 years) encapsulates the pressures of this constraining lifestyle and consequential problems in striving for perfection:

If I've had a bad day and I haven't trained or trained hard enough, or my diets gone to pot then I feel a failure. Bodybuilding makes you monitor every aspect of your life from how and when you train, to diet and sleep. It makes me irritable if my routine gets disturbed and it has to come above everything thing else in my life...

In this context, far from being a liberating experience, the daily lifestyle of the bodybuilder could be seen as a good way of controlling women who break away from societal norms. The obsession and inward focus on the body prevents them from causing any real challenge to society (Bordo, 1988). The regime, like Foucault's Panopticon, becomes a mechanism of self-regulation and self-surveillance which results in self-monitored docile bodies (Mansfield and McGinn, 1993:53).

These findings of body dissatisfaction amongst female bodybuilders appear, at least ostensibly, to provide evidence supporting those academic and other critics of female bodybuilding. The relentless compulsion by these women, to 'work on the body', spurred on by an internalised judging self – who is never satisfied by the mirror image – arguably eliminates any subversive potential the activity may have possessed. In Fussell's (1991; also see Chapters 5 and 8) biography, bodybuilding is depicted as a form of armour against the world. The immersion in a life dedicated to muscle is understood as escapism from personal insecurities, and protection from getting hurt through relationships of love and intimacy. He declared 'as long as I hated myself, I still believed that it mattered

(bodybuilding). My deepest fear was that it didn't matter' (ibid.: 248-249). To Fussell, Bordo and other critics, all bodybuilders are living under the illusion of control and empowerment, but subconsciously, they just want to be accepted for who 'they really are', and are in fact 'craving recognition and self-assurance' (Fisher, 1997:15). In this way bodybuilders are yet another victim of exploitative consumer capitalism, whose mantra decrees that 'we are never good enough as we are'.

In the context of these criticisms of female bodybuilding, it is interesting to note Lloyd's (1996) suggestion that in order to liberate and empower women, physical activities need to transcend the 'tyranny of slenderness' and be 'totally free from patriarchal pressures'. Hence motivations to participate and sustain fitness practices must be, and remain, 'pure'. This criteria could easily be used to reinforce the above criticisms of female bodybuilding. However, in agreement with Grimshaw (1999) I believe that Lloyd's (1996) proposal is somewhat naive. Bodies are always constructed within a cultural context and can never be disentangled from the discourse in which the body operates. In this way I argue that there can never be a body that can simply 'transcend' society and 'free' women from 'patriarchy'. Furthermore, I support Grimshaw's related argument that 'the body can never be a wholly unproblematic something, which one can be 'happy' with, in a simple, stable or permanent way' (ibid.:115). She argues that when Bordo and Lloyd talk about 'being happy with oneself', they slip into an almost essentialist feminist perspective that believes an authentic, real 'relationship with one's body' is possible and 'free of cultural norms and pressures' (ibid.). A more 'fluid' understanding then, becomes useful in interpreting the body dissatisfaction expressed by the female bodybuilders. 'Doing looks' (Frost, 1999) might be better viewed as an ongoing conversation, which can sometimes be the cause of despair and other times pleasure (as demonstrated by the apparently contradictory comments made by the women in relation to their body image within this chapter).

On the basis of complexities and contradictions revealed in my ethnography thus far, I find myself becoming increasingly sceptical of second

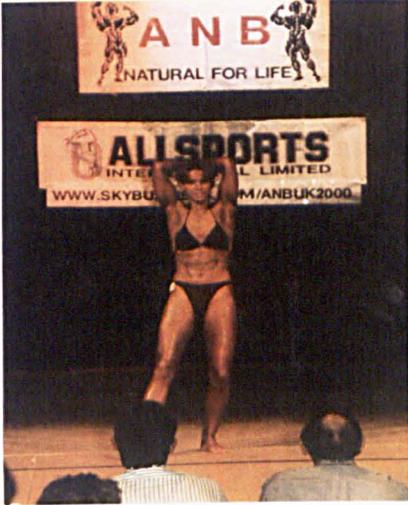
wave feminist claims that there is 'a female body' which can be 'reclaimed' from 'patriarchal' society. Rather I prefer to take forward my study by adopting Grimshaw's (1999:99) perspective that there can never be a resistant 'female body' outside of discourse, or a resistant body that can stand as a simple exception to forces of normalisation or domination'. For this reason I am doubtful that female bodybuilding can provide any form of 'pure' empowerment, but I also think that it is equally simplistic to reduce this activity to an act of patriarchal domination. Subsequently I am drawn to the following position cited by Grimshaw:

There can be no guarantees that any practice is free of normalising pressures; no assumption of ideological 'purity' in any motivation; no clear dividing line between what is internally or externally imposed. And no body practice, in all its manifestations, can be understood wholly in terms of subjection or capitulation to normalizing pressures. (Grimshaw, 1999:100)

Conclusion

This chapter has explored the daily lifestyle and interactions of the female bodybuilder. A 'gender outlaw', who is heavily penalised for transgressing normative gender roles and consequently battles against stigmatisation in both her private and public life. However, her identity is not just under constant attack by 'normals' but by her own internalised self-policing gaze. It is this inner critic (creating negative body image, obsession and insecurities) which has caused opponents such as Bordo (1990) to argue that women's bodybuilding, far from empowering them, merely produces differently feminised bodies imprinted with the gendered meanings of culture. However, there are two related problems with this argument. Firstly, it would be wrong to treat bodybuilding merely as a site of 'femininity's recuperation' (St. Martin and Gavey, 1996:54). If this recuperation actually occurred, how do we explain the continued hostility female bodybuilders experience in the interaction order? Instead, the choices, appearances and behaviours of these women place them firmly outside the bounds of respectable interaction. Secondly, critics have failed to engage with the 'biographical agency'

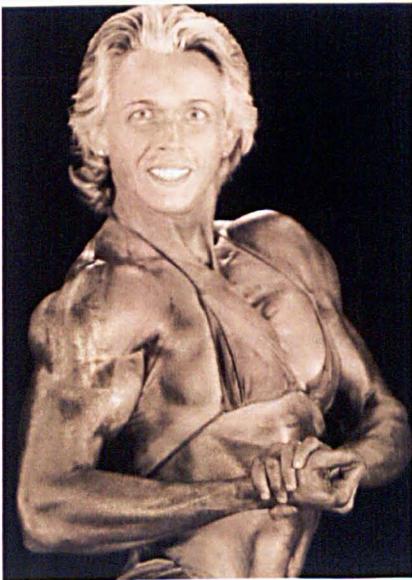
(Davis, 1995) of these women, by ignoring the complex motivations and vitalistic satisfactions they gain from this activity. Indeed, there is a tendency to disembodiment the phenomena by presenting a picture 'devoid of women's experiences, feelings, and practical activities with regard to their bodies' (Davis, 1995:169). Yet without exploration into these processes, physical pleasures and practices, it is difficult to fully comprehend the lives of these women which appear hard and difficult, despite periodic moments of pride and enjoyment. As Grosz argues: 'understanding the body means examining what things it performs; what transformations and becomings it undergoes; the connections that it forms; and the capacities that it can proliferate' (Grosz, 1994:165). It is for this reason that the next two chapters focus on the place where these women feel most at home and experience the 'work-out' as the peak phenomenological heightened pleasure in their daily lives. It is this exploration of female bodybuilders in the gym that I turn to in the next chapter.



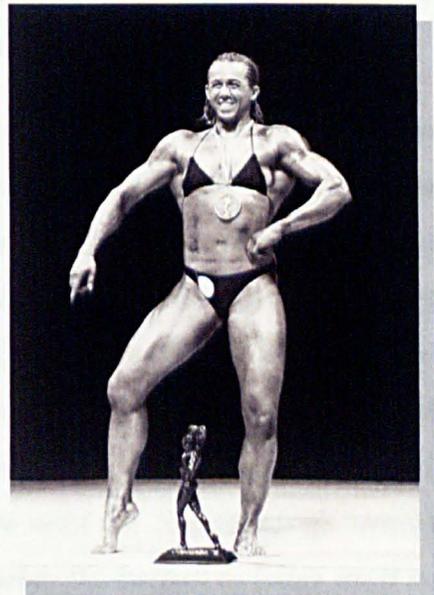
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Aged 28



Aged 29

CHAPTER 7. Inside the Gym I:

Exploring the 'Empowerment' of Female Bodybuilders through Concepts of Space

I become acutely sensitive of my surroundings: Sounds, smells and sensations that I am normally so accustomed to that I barely notice. Loud music is blaring out, echoing and booming against the warehouse walls. The machinery hum of treadmills and other cardiovascular equipment can be heard in the background. Within the weights area, male grunts, groans of exertion, and shouts of encouragement can be heard, occasionally interrupted by a fleeting eruption of laughter. The thuds of heavy weights as they are dropped or thrown to the floor vibrate through my trainers. Smashing sounds are heard as iron hits iron. Audible twangs and clicks. There's a sense of anticipation, tension and excitement in the atmosphere. Scent glands emit bodily uriniferous and musky smells, which vaporize into the air and mingle with other sweat odours, characteristics of food eaten the night before such as garlic, onions, and curry.

My training partner prepares to squat 160kg. She moves in to the squat rack and mentally prepares to psych herself up. She looks directly in front of her, straight into the eyes of her reflection. She wears no make-up, her hair is free and loose. She does not smile. Her clothes consist of a baggy T-shirt and track suit bottoms, allowing her to move freely. She wears a weights belt around her waist to support her lower back, signifying the seriousness of her weight training endeavour. I stand behind her silently, ready to act as her 'spotter', should she need me. She stands up straight, taking the full brunt of the weight, allowing the barbell to lodge itself into her traps. She starts. Sounds of 'Shhh', 'ghrurr' 'Arhh' and gasps for air issue from her lips as she pushes the weight up through her heels. Grimaces cause lines to become etched out upon her face. She has the look of determination. Another female weight-trainer encourages her: 'that's it drive it', 'drive em out', 'come on', 'nice depth', 'light weight'. ...She

completes the set and leans on the squat rack for support. Her face is flushed, she breathes heavily and appears exhausted...a minute later, she looks me in the eye and gives a little nod and a smile of satisfaction – ‘your turn’ she says.

[extracts from field notes 15/03/2008]

Introduction

The last chapter explored how the identity of the female bodybuilder is constantly under attack, making it difficult for her to sustain a positive sense of self. In this chapter, it is argued that although not without impediments, female bodybuilders perceive the gym as ‘home’, as a hospitable sanctuary that, at least in part, shelters them from the negative interactions of wider society. By navigating substantial obstacles in the male domain of the gym, female bodybuilders carve out a space of physical and mental liberation for themselves, which in turn provides a key source of motivation and identity affirmation. In this chapter, using ethnographic data, I explore ‘what actually happens in the gym’ by focusing methodologically on the under-explored area of ‘space’ (including ‘sound’ as a subcomponent of this analysis). The first part of the chapter describes how the environment of the gym is organised into highly distinctive gendered spaces, moving beyond a focus on ‘place’ onto an investigation into how identity is constructed and expressed, as well as how social relations are produced, negotiated and contested in this area. In the second part of the chapter I employ a more phenomenological understanding of space in order to explore how female bodybuilders, despite stigmatisation, use their spatial transgressions and deviance to their own advantage.

Sexed space: Building gendered bodies

The Health and Fitness gym environment is organized through conditions of time and space⁵⁴. Peak training hours occur at lunch time and between 5-7.30pm, when the majority of gym members finish work. Sassatelli (1999:4)

⁵⁴ As opposed to the ‘hard-core’ gym.

points out that whilst 'gym crowds can rarely be reduced to one socio-demographic at any time', there is a tendency for different groups of people (e.g. students, professionals and the elderly) to attend at different times of the day. Bodybuilders as a rule, depending on their work commitments, prefer to train at the extreme ends of the day, when the gym is at its quietest and is not 'polluted' by the presence of casual users (Douglas, 1966). However, although 'time' is a relevant aspect of the gym culture, providing a 'time out from life' as well as being a central component of training programmes and used to monitor progression (for example 10 minutes on the treadmill), it is the analysis of space that provides us with a more useful insight into exploring the empowerment of female bodybuilders. Feminist geographers insist on the importance of researching the interconnections between gender relationships and space studies. According to Hanson and Pratt (1995), feminist geographers were the first to point out that women live spatially restricted lives, believing space to be central to male power and to feminist resistance (Hanson and Pratt, 1995; Frye, 1983; Blunt and Rose, 1994). The importance of space to power is emphasised more generally in Massey's (1994:81), argument that: 'Space is a complex web of relations of domination and subordination, of solidarity and co-operation....a metaphor as well as a set of material relations.' As such, it is a vital variable in my analysis.

Spatial inquiry has therefore been incorporated into the following exploration in several ways. Firstly, I look at how the gym is mapped out in terms of spatial organization, looking at not only how this comes to represent gendered bodies, but how it actively constructs and shapes them. In addition I look at the 'soundscape' (Bailey, 1996) of the gym. Whilst spatial noise issues have been a sorely neglected area in sociological investigations, they add another layer of understanding to 'power' and how it is manipulated to maintain gender inequalities. After exploring the other methods employed to police male/female space in the gym environment, I turn to the defiant voices of the women themselves. Through a more phenomenological exploration of 'space', advocated by the likes of Young (2005), I depict how these women transgress gender boundaries and, despite stigmatisation, use their deviance for their own benefit. Thus, through investigating the relationships between embodiment and space,

including the 'body in space' and the 'body's use of space' (e.g. postures) I explore crucial dimensions of women's potential empowerment. This chapter draws upon my 2 year ethnographic research which included three health and fitness gyms and three of a more 'hard-core' nature (see the methods Chapter 2 for details). I begin by providing a description of the functional organisation of my main research site in order to provide a detailed example of how space within the gym environment is gendered.

The doors of the large (1,100sq m) gym open directly into the reception area. Just inside the doors, there are seats and tables centred around a 32inch television. Hot and cold drinks are provided along with a free newspaper and free videos and DVDs for hire – all of which emphasise the 'leisure' experience of the vicinity and provide a friendly atmosphere. At the reception desk, an attractive young person (usually female) greets the customers, swipes their membership cards and welcomes them through the electronic gates which mark the entry into the main gym. In front, and to the right is the cardiovascular section (C.V). The purpose of the C.V. equipment is to improve general fitness (stamina, heart and lung capacity etc.) and most commonly to 'lose weight' and 'burn calories'. Machines such as treadmills (Picture 2, p183), rowers and cross trainers (Picture 3, p183) are laid out in neat rows, reminiscent of a factory line. Most equipment has its own TV and choice of channels - to help prevent the likelihood of boredom and monotony. The scales are also located here. Whilst this space is utilised by diverse clientele, the predominate sex of the users tend to be female.

On the left hand side of the gym are the hairdressers, beauty rooms and offices. The ladies changing rooms are located adjacent to them (the men's changing facilities are situated at the far end of the gym, opposite the weights area). The changing room plays an important part in the preparation and transition of the participant. As Sassatelli explains:

The changing room helps clients to enter the spirit of training, sustaining its specificity and suspending other relevances, stripping individuals of

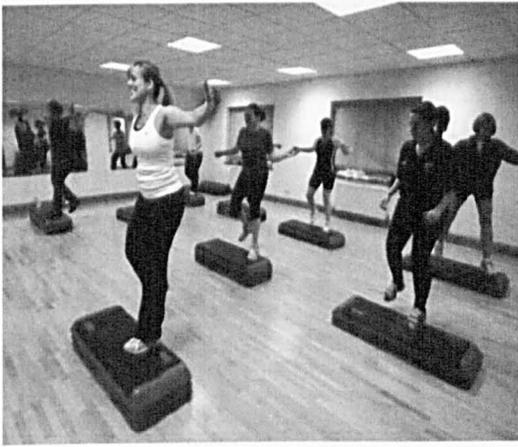
their external identities, equalising their bodies in the moulding object of a serial and yet personalising training (Sassatelli, 1999:3.2).

As it is also a place where people dress/undress, bodily exposure is carefully managed and negotiated through the social interaction order, to prevent embarrassment and retain privacy and modesty⁵⁵. Furthermore, the changing rooms act as a meeting place where gossip and verbal exchange can take place, either before or after the work-out (see Crossley, 2006). Attached to the basic, but adequately equipped changing rooms, toilets and shower facilities, is the luxurious joint/uni-sex 'spa relaxation area', consisting of a sauna, steam room and Jacuzzi. A place frequented after a 'hard' workout, where gym-goers can relax and reward themselves for their endeavours. It perhaps should be noted from my research observations that compared to ordinary gym members, female bodybuilders spent very little time in the changing rooms, preferring to get changed at home. Likewise, during the study I never saw a female bodybuilder in the spa relaxation areas.

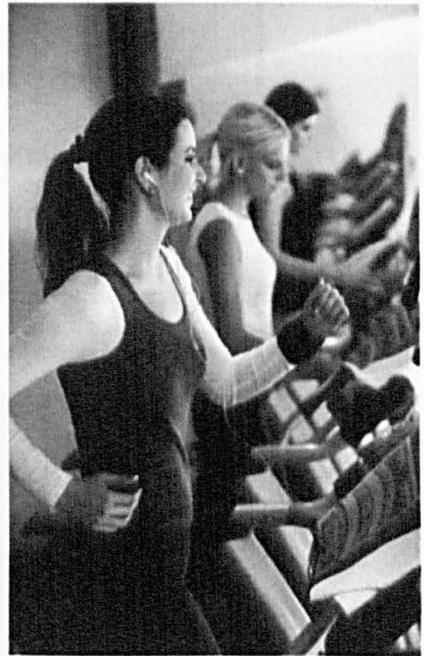
Outside the ladies changing room, in the main gym, there are stairs that lead up to the aerobics hall (Picture 1, p183), spinning room, stretching area and resistance machines. This stairway 'allows' women to altogether avoid the heavy weights area which is located on the ground floor at the back of the gym, beyond the cardiovascular machines. Upstairs, resistance machines make up the next exercise space, a place frequently used to 'tone' specific muscle groups. Inspirational posters of fit men (muscular) and women (slender) are placed along the walls, next to advertisements of motivating personal trainers and weight loss supplements. Mirrors are also strategically placed around the gym (particularly in the resistance machines weights area, free-weights area and aerobics hall), inviting participants to scrutinize their training bodies, in order to check and rectify technique. This self-surveillance can be a daunting and distressing task for some, especially for the new and uninitiated gym goer (Sassatelli, 1999).

⁵⁵ This is of course dependent to some degree on the individual's interpretation of 'modesty' and 'privacy'. Some women are far more uncomfortable than others about revealing their bodies in public (depending on their circumstances, e.g. religion, body image, pregnancy etc.). Nevertheless, there are still unwritten rules and norms within the changing rooms, such as not staring.

Back on the ground floor, situated at the back of the gym, is an extensive free weights section designated to the ‘building of muscle’ (Pictures 4, p184). Apart from the rare exception, the Gym users in this area are male. The space consists of free weights, including dumbbells, barbells, benches, squat racks, various bars and more ‘heavy duty’ old style machines such as the hack-squat. Despite notices requesting that users put their weights away, the ‘heavy weights area’, is usually comparatively untidy. For example, plates are left on equipment, chalk and liquid stains (from knocked over drinks) are embedded into the floor and dumbbells are left out of numerical order.



Picture 1 - Aerobics hall (step class)

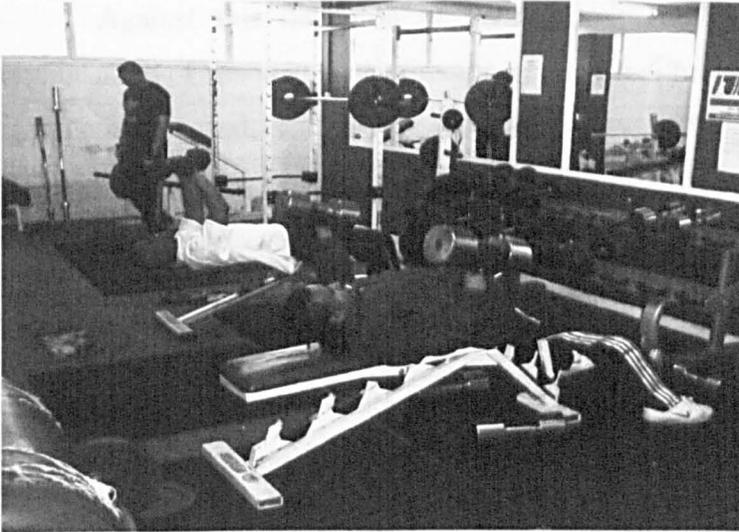


Picture 2 – Treadmills



Picture 3 – Cross-trainers

WOMEN’S SPACE IN THE GYM



Member Notice

One of our nice members has taken it upon themselves to steal from you and from your lockers.

They (he) are picking up your locker keys that you leave on the floor and/or round your bottles, and removing your belongings, e.g. phones, keys etc...

Please be careful with your belongings.

Also do not leave your wife, girlfriend alone otherwise, he will fucking take them as well!!



Pictures (4) - MEN'S SPACE IN THE GYM – THE WEIGHTS SECTION

Against this depiction of the gym, it can be seen that the specific organisation of space impacts directly on corporeal bodies. Put simply, bodies are slimmed, stretched, sculpted or built in the gym. Thus as Johnson (1996:328) points out 'bodies become constructed and inscribed by the environment' in which they move and work. Furthermore, as areas of the gym are highly gendered, providing 'socio-political spaces which confirm feminine and masculine stereotypes', these also help to contribute to the construction of masculine and feminine bodies (ibid.). Women are expected and inducted to use the cardiovascular machines and encouraged to use light 'toning' exercisers that are deemed appropriate for their sex⁵⁶. This point is illustrated by Samantha (bodybuilder of 3 years), who recalls the first time that she entered a gym and requested the male gym instructor to set her an exercise programme to build up strength and muscle. After being told '*muscle doesn't look right on a female*', she was given a meagre, high repetition, light resistance weight programme, concentrating on women's 'problem' areas of '*leg's, tums and bums*'.

Whilst there are no longer rules forbidding women from entering the free weights section and 'hard-core' gyms, there still remains a clear gender division of space within the gym⁵⁷. There are two main reasons for this divide. Firstly, many women fear that by training with weights, they will put on muscle too easily and appear bulky and unattractive to heterosexual men. This is illustrated by one potential customer (Female, Gym 4:1) who commented to a member of the sales team as she was shown around the gym, in response to seeing a female bodybuilder train: '*I wouldn't want to look like her...I don't want to train with weights and get all muscley*'. The second reason why women avoid the weights area is due to the intimidation that they often feel. As one female gym member (Female, Gym 1:1) explained: '*I don't want to train over there [men's weight area]...There's testosterone flying all around the place...*' The weight's section is

⁵⁶Women are particularly encouraged to participate in aerobics, yoga and other fitness classes. This has been investigated in some detail by the likes of Bordo (1988), Lloyd (1996) and Grimshaw (1999).

⁵⁷Sports sociologists have documented the difficulties women faced when trying to access the gym in the past - refer to Klein (1985) and Cheshire and Lewis (1985) for more detail. Interestingly there are only a small number of 'men only' gyms in the UK today, compared to the increasing numbers of 'women only gyms'.

still deemed as a hypermasculine space that is unfriendly and uninviting for women. The ways in which this male domain is protected through noise space, body space and interactions shall now be examined.

The dearth of research into the sociology of sound

Social commentators have criticised western knowledge for its soundlessness, yet sounds can be an important medium of investigation when conducting social research (Attali, 1985; Bailey, 1996; Kasson, 1990; Classen, 1993; Bauer and Gaskell, 2000). More recently, work by anthropologists, historians and social psychologists has begun to address this neglect. Prochnik (2010) for example, explores the prerequisites of silence and the reality of noise from a neural and psychological perspective, whilst Keizer (2010) focuses more on the social, economic and political aspects. According to Keizer (2010) noise is not just a part of the background fabric in daily living, but is both poignant and political. It permeates into our lives from the height of authority figures delivering calculated 'power talks', to the depth of urban street noise, expressing not only resentment, anger, indifference and rage, but also community spirit and celebration. Ling (2004) also addresses noise pollution and sound in his pioneering work on mobile phone usage in public spaces. Despite these important recent contributions, there is still a distinct absence of 'sound' research in sociology and other social sciences. Indeed orality and linguistic sounds have been privileged within Western theory over 'aural, paralinguistic, and nonverbal sounds – the sounds of the mundane and everyday originating outside the mouth' (Smith, 2007:4). In addition Smith (2007) claims that from the small corpus of aural history that is available, much of it has focused its attention on music (e.g. Attali, 1985).

In the field of sports sociology, Hockey and Allen Collinson (2007:118) and Sparkes (2009) call for more research into the phenomenology of the sporting body, as far from finely tuned machines, participants' are embodied

human beings who 'move, see, *hear*, feel, touch, and smell in the sporting milieu' (my emphasis). Little work so far, has engaged in capturing these senses, particularly those of a non visual orientation. In a similar manner, whilst sports psychologists have long advocated the positive effect that music can have on athletic performance (e.g. Dorney and Goh, 1992; Karageorghis and Terry, 1997; and Krumhansl, 2002), Sorenson et al (2008) point out that research into the phenomenological experiences of athletes and music has been overlooked - despite music often playing a pivotal role in athlete's mental preparation. Within the gym, music acts as a powerful tool. It is the first sound that greets gym members as they approach the entrance. *Boom, boom, boom, boom*: fast, pumping, gyrating, booming. The upbeat sounds, often with a thumping base line, encourage participants' hearts to beat in tandem thus increasing their experience of vitality. Furthermore, these strong beats, associated with confidence and energy, act as a mood enhancer and stimulate motivation (Gfeller, 1988). In the main hall and weights area these repetitive sounds blast out, enhancing moods of aggression, energy/vigour, happiness and anger, depending on the music and lyrical context. Like all sound, music acts as a memory trigger, not only of other past events, but of previous workouts and of other (hopefully) productive euphoric training sessions. These are the sentiments of belonging - the body knows it is time to work-out.

Different music genres are used within the health and fitness centre environment for different purposes. In yoga classes, 'body balance' and stretching classes for instance, calming, meditative music of a slow tempo is used to control participants emotions by regulating arousal (Nilsson, Unosson, and Rawal, 2005) reducing anxiety, and decreasing stress and tension (Seaward, 2002). Other aerobics classes such as high impact, spinning, step classes and boxercise, use fast and furious music to stimulate and galvanize class members. Some individuals in the gym use their own headphones to 'zone out' from the distractions of the club environment. By listening to their preferred music, these individuals seek out a time, space and sound of their own, allowing them to distance themselves, disassociate and disengage from their surroundings. However, whilst music plays an important role, the focus of my attention now is

on the other sounds of the gym. These include the ebbs and flows of sound and the noises that constitute 'a broad yet impressive category' registering variously as 'excessive, incoherent, confused, inarticulate or degenerate' (Bailey, 1996:50).

Aural geography of the gym

The gym is a particularly rich 'soundscape' which deserves further attention. Sound ambiance is created not only through the music but through the collective effect of different sounds emanating from humans, from machines, and from the jostling of the two as they interact, merge and separate. These sound movements include chatter in the changing rooms, the cascade of water in the showers, the clicking of locker doors opening and closing, and the flushing of the toilets, to the main activities that characterise distinctive zones of the gym floor i.e. the aerobics hall/spinning room, cardiovascular section and weights section. Applying Sparkes' (2009) use of vignettes, I will now briefly sketch out the soundscapes evident in the cardiovascular and weights area.

Cardiovascular area

At first glance the cardio area resembles a human factory line - symbolic of modernity and all of its promises of productivity and progress conducive of the work ethic. The persistent sounds of hissing, whizzing and squeaking are regularly punctuated by beeps brought about by the machine program settings.

Each type of cardiovascular equipment has its own individual sound: the rowers, treadmills, cross-trainers and bikes - creating an orchestra of machinery noise. The rhythmic sounds are almost mesmeric. *Chingi, chingi ching, chingi, chingi ching....*(the cross trainer) *whooshh, whoosh* (the rowers), *Hwwhrrll* (the bikes). The constant sound of treadmills can also be heard - changing from a throaty humming to a whizzing and almost high pitched screeching noise as it accelerates away.

The rhythmic thudding and the pounding sounds of runner's feet are muffled due to the cushioning of the conveyer belt. The machines appear to be an extension of the humans who are using them – wheels on legs, long armed levers. Huffing, panting, gasping and heavy breathing can be heard by those training hard. Despite the isolated concentration displayed by most, talking, laughing and cajoling can also be heard from those taking a break from their exertions.

Noises intersect, and sounds echo and bounce around the health and fitness centre. If the hum and grind of the cardiovascular machines supply the base and background noise to the gym, the weights area adds a more erratic and disturbing clamour. The sounds are stronger and more powerful – harsher, jarring and louder

The weights room

Metallic and bodily sounds emanate from the weights area. Clips, chimes, clanks and twangs are audible as iron plates are moved on and off equipment (barbells, dumbbell racks, machines, squat racks etc.) – like the clink of metallic crockery. *Clang-* a weight is heaved with some force back on to the rack. The whirl of the smith machine – *ZssZZZ...ZssZZZ* - up and down, up and down – can be heard. *BANG.* Loud bangs and thuds reverberate around the room as heavy weights are dropped and thrown to the floor. The crashes, twangs and clonks remain in the eardrum long after the initial noise occurrence.

The sounds of the machinery orchestra are occasionally punctuated by a discordant *Clonk. Clatter.* The noise doesn't sound 'quite right', everyone turns around to stare at the 'out-of-place' sound and the person who hasn't been using their equipment properly.

Human sounds of talking, laughing, coaxing, sniffing, sighing and heavy breathing come secondary to the guttural sounds of exertion. For the uninitiated, the intense visceral noises of grunts and groans can be

shocking. *Errrrrhaaaaarh!* The strain of lifting heavy weights resembles a volcanic eruption emanating from deep within the person. *Aaaaaarrhh!* The pain escapes through the gasp of the participant. Other sounds of exertion can be equally as violent/expressive: *Arhhhh! Aweeeeeeee! Urghh! Grhh; Ooeffff*

Gendered noise/sound

[Noise] is an expressive and communicative resource that registers collective and individual identities...it is a form of social energy with the power to appropriate, reconfigure or transgress boundaries; it converts space into territory (Bailey, 1996:64).

Goffman's (1971:33-34,46,51) work, in his book 'Relations is Public', explores how sound is a variable in people's command of public space, and can be usefully applied to the analysis of the gym. Goffman argues that one of the 'modalities of violation' when discussing 'personal space' is that of 'sound interference'. He argues that 'noisy people violate other people's territory of the self by appropriating 'sound space''. The noises of the weights area can intimidate women from entering the male domain thus protecting male supremacy. The dropping of heavy weights, the clanking and crashing of iron, the grunts and groans of the participant, and the shouts from training partners, all contribute to a cacophony of masculine patriarchal sound⁵⁸. Saltman (2003) draws parallels between the masculine realm of the military and the noises made by male bodybuilders' in the gym:

The militarized body of the bodybuilder makes the sounds of war. Under the yoke of heavy iron there are screams, rebel yells, grunts, wails, karate-like Keoghs designed to focus the power of the body into the muscles

⁵⁸One of the peripheral gyms that I had observed during my research was trying to upgrade and refurbish into more of a health and leisure facility. Consequently the 'hard core' bodybuilders were asked to leave and a new set of gym rules were displayed. These included; keeping tops on whilst training, not dropping weights and making sure they were returned to the rack - but far more unusual was the rule 'no loud grunting or groaning'.

being taxed. As in boot camp, in the gym taunts are hurled between lifting partners, inspirational clichés slung, boasts belted out, slogans, slogans, slogans: ‘no guts, no glory’, ‘no pain, no gain’, ‘bigger’s better’ (Saltman, 2003:52).

Men often train in pairs or groups of three, encouraging each other to ‘work to the max’, frequently by bullying comments and assertions of masculinity. For example, I overheard the following on the gym floor: ‘*Come on, come on big boy, you can do it – you’re the man...do you want to get big? Do you want to get muscles? Then work at it fat boy!*’ (Male Gym, 5:1). Noise in this context can be seen as a sign of masculinity, virility, aggression, animalism, domination and territory. Such loudness draws similarities with Ackerman’s (1990:186-7) depiction of erotically excited ‘sophomore boys’, who ‘are all decibels and testosterone’. At the same time these sounds could be interpreted as representing freedom, release, expression, lack of inhibition and tribalism. One female gym user articulates her frustrations in the following comment:

Men always make so much noise. I don’t mean just chatting like some of the women do. But grunts and groans. To me, it sounds so overdone and unnecessary as if they are trying to show off or something. Maybe they just want to get attention, like in the wild - calling attention to the fittest and strongest (Female, Gym 1:2).

Regardless of the interpretation, many women feel threatened by the sounds emanating from the weights area. This is illustrated by another female gym user’s comment:

It’s intimidating enough just trying to work out how to use the machines, let alone all the noise the guys make. It just doesn’t help your confidence at all (Female, Gym 6:1).

As one aerobics instructor commented to me, even within mixed gendered classes such as ‘Body-Pump’ sessions (a high rep choreographed workout using light barbells), women are most likely to keep quiet during their exertions, compared to their male counterparts.

Against this backdrop, it might be thought that women's space is violated by the noises made by men within the gym environment. However, before we can reach this conclusion it is important to recognise the complexities of listening and comprehending noise, particularly in the analysis of gendered sounds. I will now go on to briefly outline these. First of all, there are of course serious methodological difficulties with measuring and describing sounds. Due to the lack of literature on this area, there is no good, universal practice on carrying out analytical research on sound (Bauer and Gaskell, 2000; refer to Sparkes 2009, for more in-depth discussion on the problems of representing sound). Knowles (2000) also points out that it is difficult to translate sounds, smells and feelings into words, as all interpretation gives free rein to the author. Furthermore, sounds are almost elusive to contain, they are multilayered and interlocking, constantly shifting and changing. Secondly, as I have implicitly suggested above, noise is not always loud, a nuisance, or excessive (Bailey, 1996:62). Music can act as a motivating, mood regulatory force, for example, while the sound of weights clicking against weights can focus the trainer on technique and prevent injuries. Finally, there is the added complication of analysing the gendering of noise. Far from it being simply a patriarchal tool, its use is complex and contextual. Kasson (1990:65) for example points out that men in daily life must often work hard to regulate their sound/noise and emotion as there exist 'tighter disciplines on public behaviour and norms of manly restraint prescribed by respectability'. Gurney's (2000) study on embarrassment, noise and coital sex also offers some support to this argument. In this context, perhaps the weights area, as part of the sports domain, is one of the few places that men are allowed to aurally express themselves in an increasingly rationalised world. Noise, must therefore be viewed as something situated in time and space. Despite these considerations, and indeed the actual intentions of different men, the majority of women do feel intimidated by the noises emanating from the weights area and this contributes to their avoidance of this space.

In the next section I turn to the ways by which 'male space' is policed through the physical domination of men's bodies and via the negative labelling of 'deviant' women. I then look at how some female bodybuilders negotiate their

transgressions by conforming to certain heterosexual norms of gender interaction and appearance.

The penalties paid for crossing into male territory

The minority of women who remain undeterred from entering the weight's area still have to contend with men dominating the physical space of the gym. Thus, most female body builders who use public gyms train during times when the presence of 'ordinary' male gym members (those outside of the subculture of bodybuilding who are less committed and appreciative of the commitment to the development and display of muscularity as a goal in itself) is least evident. In Barbara's (bodybuilder of 7 years) words:

I don't want to train when its busy and there is some clown touching the barbell or something – ruins my focus...some people comment on my physique and there's people that don't really work out but just stand there and stare and it really winds me up – I'm in the zone of lifting weights – so any interruptions get me annoyed.

Many male bodybuilders also seek out training times and spaces in which they will be unhindered by 'clowns' but female bodybuilders may be more vulnerable to such interference, especially from men who '*feel they have a right to look and get in our way just because we are women*' (Pauline, bodybuilder of 6 months). As Monica (bodybuilder of 2 years) confirmed '*men definitely dominate the space...a lot of their mentality is that girls are just playing at it, but they are serious.*' This domination of space translates as not only the 'hogging' of the weights, benches, machines and other equipment, but the physical inhabitation of the space around them – using their size and strength to their full/maximum capacity.

Interestingly, not all females who accessed the male domain claimed to

have negative responses from male gym users. Several more 'feminine' female weight-trainers (who were not as muscular as some of the other female bodybuilders and made more effort to maintain a heterosexual appearance) claimed that '*men rarely dominate[d] the equipment*' (Rachel, bodybuilder of 2 years). Indeed Danielle (bodybuilder of 5 years) stated that '*men always act chivalrously, and never hog the equipment, in fact quite the opposite, most jump off and spot*'. In these cases, men would also automatically take the weight plates off the machines or bars in order to 'help' and frequently gave training tips and advice to these women. Goffman (1979:9) would interpret this chivalry as maintaining gender differences, where even the most straight forward acts of civility are not only symbolic but actually constitutive of gender inequalities. Glick and Fiske (2000) expand this perspective further, arguing that even if the male benevolence is sincere, and in some cases is accepted (or even expected) by the female, chivalry still 'remains patronizing towards woman and provides a powerful ideological justification for traditional gender roles and patriarchy' (ibid.:367). According to this view, then, chivalrous acts in the gym encourage intimate dyadic dependences between the genders which informs compulsory heterosexuality and retains the sex segregation of labour by reinforcing the belief that 'women are less competent and are indeed the weaker sex' (ibid.:390).

Another method, often employed to protect the male space of the gym, is the use of negative labelling to enforce compulsory heterosexuality. Sharp (1997:45-46) argues in her book chapter, 'Gendering Everyday Spaces', that the stigma of lesbianism is used to control patriarchal gender identities. She claims that problems arise when women do not conform to the appearance and behaviour expected of them in 'ordinary' public space and that women must avoid 'specific male-dominated environments'. She continues; 'women who dress, behave, do jobs, or go to places associated with men run the risk of being labelled 'butch' and hence 'male hating lesbians'' (ibid.). As female bodybuilders disrupt hegemonic norms by not only training in the male sphere, but by wearing the muscular body, they are particularly vulnerable to these accusations. This is demonstrated by the case of Laura (bodybuilder of 10 months), when several friends at the gym commented on how big her biceps had got: '*show him your bicep*', '*you big*

lesbian you'. Indeed, female bodybuilders sometimes judge *each other* on the basis of heterosexual femininity. For example, Alice (bodybuilder of 18 months) referred to another female bodybuilder as '*butch*' and suggested that '*she doesn't help herself, she wears vests to train in. It's like she's trying to compete with the men.*' More generally, despite the determination of these women to 'be different' and 'look different', it is common for female bodybuilders to feminise their appearance in various ways. While only one of those in this study worked out in an ostentatiously feminine combination of hot pants and crop top lycra set, half of these women involved themselves in such activities as dyeing their hair blonde, acquiring hair extensions, and undergoing breast augmentation (see Chapters 5 and 9). Thus, these women frequently navigate the masculine space of the gym by conforming to the gender interaction order of either 'chivalry' or the 'feminine apologetic' (Felshin, 1974). To disobey these rules is to risk the stigma of being labelled a 'lesbian'. Other consequences and penalties for their spatial transgressions shall now be addressed.

Bodies on display: looks and comments act as censorship for spatial transgressions

In addition to the stigma of lesbianism, there are also other ways in which the gendered foundations of the wider interaction order appears to impinge on these women's actions and identities. It is possible for the flow of the workout to be interrupted by looks and comments that ask these women to reflect back on themselves, and on what they are doing, in the gendered terms of the interaction order, and to experience as internally divided their subjective sense of self and the reflected portrayal of that self as it is classified by wider society (Goffman, 1983: 12; Mead, 1962 [1934]). Hence, these stares and comments result in uncomfortable epiphanic moments which remind the women that 'they shouldn't be there' – the weight's arena is men's space and belongs in the male domain.

The fact that these women's bodies are 'on display', forms an important part of the context in which the interaction order has the potential to intrude on female bodybuilders even during the workout. The gym is a space in which body

visibility is heightened in relation to its normal position in daily life. Bodies are being worked on, body parts are being toned and shaped, and inter-corporeal comparisons are being made all of the time, often by casual users in relation to idealized, normative visions of masculinity and femininity. Hard core gyms might provide some degree of insulation from these comparisons, although even then, female bodybuilders are not protected completely from gendered norms and unwanted comments about being 'too muscular' for a woman. Several of those using hard core gyms in this study reported having to deal with 'incidents' regarding comments and stares from male bodybuilders. None of these was as disturbing as Marcia Ian's (1995:89) story of how a huge male bodybuilder who was working out close by turned to her and said casually, 'One of these days I'm gonna knock you on the floor and fuck your brains out.' Nevertheless, the comments and stares still interrupted the flow of the workout. Elsewhere, in the milieu of ordinary gyms, casual exercisers sometimes looked, stared, commented and pointed at the bodies of muscular women in the free weights area, and this sometimes filtered through into the experiences of female bodybuilders. The following reflect the experiences of female bodybuilders in ordinary gyms:

I've had strangers come right up to me in the gym and just say "You're a woman, women shouldn't be muscular. Female bodybuilders look disgusting", "She looks like a man", and "If you carry on training like that you'll look like a man in four months." (Gemma, bodybuilder of 6 months).

Guys have put down their weights and left when I'm training. People tend to be quite horrified to see a small woman lifting heavy weights.' (Lucie, bodybuilder of 8 years)

The strong, direct movements employed by female bodybuilders, such as rowing, benching, squatting and dead-lifting, and the associated gym activities of loading a bar with heavy plates, grasping iron with calloused, chalky hands and shifting weights around, are not body techniques associated with femininity. This is evident in the following comments made by casual male gym users:

Why is she lifting heavy weights like that? Why does she want to look like a man?... She should be doing aerobic and toning exercises not trying to build and bulk herself up...no man finds that attractive. (Male, Gym 1:1)

She must be taking steroids...real women can't look like that! (Male, Gym 6:1)

It's not right, women lifting that amount. (Male, Gym 1:2)

All of the above comments demonstrate the typical types of verbal censure that female bodybuilders receive for transgressing feminine conventions. As Lorber (1994) points out, women who show physical strength are deemed unattractive to heterosexual men and labelled as unfeminine. The feminine ideal in Western society is to be beautiful, small, thin and *weak*, compared to the male ideal, which possesses physical power, presence, strength, size and aggression. Subsequently, 'doing masculinity builds strength, whereas doing femininity builds weakness' (Ross and Basow, 2004:247). In this context it is perhaps unsurprising that the gender deviations of female bodybuilders cause such an outcry. The bodies of female bodybuilders are then, not just symbolic of societal notions of power, but literally embody it.

Against this backdrop it would be easy to perceive the gym as a patriarchal institution that has a detrimental impact on the identity of the female bodybuilder. This would however, be an inaccurate portrayal of how the women themselves navigate, interpret and indeed embrace the gym environment or 'womb' of the weights area. It is worth looking briefly now, at ways in which female bodybuilders manage these negative interactions, before exploring how these women actually find sanctuary away from the outside world, and indeed find empowerment through transgressing this gendered territory. Female bodybuilders, aware of the controversy of their bodies and actions, generally try to workout at a time when few casual weight-trainers will be around. When faced with adverse reactions, they do their best to block out the comments and stares, and try not to

let them infringe on their activities and experiences. This is clearly illustrated by the following comments:

I don't particularly notice other people's comments. Sometimes they piss me off, but most of the time I don't really care (Michelle, bodybuilder of 5 years).

I love the gym. All of it. Apart from the twats...silly little boys with their sideways looks and stares... though I don't notice it as much as my partner does (Barbara, bodybuilder of 7 years).

The guys who make comments are usually really puny and insecure, with a fragile ego – I don't care what they think (Anna, bodybuilder of 5 years).

Latisha (bodybuilder of 3 years), sums up the defiant attitude of female bodybuilders:

I didn't come here to look pretty. I didn't come here to read a book. And I sure as hell didn't come here to talk to boys... I came here to lift. So put your book down, pick a weight up, or move aside and GET OUT OF MY WAY (email correspondence 24/11/2007).

The 'ignorant' casual gym users who make negative comments are dismissed as 'insecure', pathetic and unimportant. The sole focus for these women is their training and the pursuit of their muscular endeavour.

The hospitable back region of the gym

Despite the negative reactions by 'casual' gym users and the occasional male bodybuilder, most female bodybuilders still perceived the gym as a supportive environment. In contrast to the hostility that these women can experience outside the gym in the daily interaction order, the distinctive character of collective encounters inside the gym is indicated by the frequency of comments describing the existence of 'camaraderie among all bodybuilders' (Jacqui, bodybuilder of 11 years). As Jacqui continues, this camaraderie is based on the mutual recognition of the efforts they make in relation to 'intense training and

dieting' and the appreciation of the 'hard work, pain and dedication' it takes to be a competitive bodybuilder. This solidarity also emanates from the pursuit of the same aesthetic goal. Consequently, the identity of the female bodybuilder is affirmed through the shared language, tastes and collective experiences that form part of their 'social capital' (Coleman, 1988).

This is reflected, in the first instance, by the arrangements these women often make to train with a partner, in a reciprocal arrangement involving spotting and encouragement, thus forming an intimate space in which comments, gestures and actions are directed to the task at hand. More generally, in this activity-space of the workout, serious weight-trainers are 'supportive' rather than 'threatened in any way' and frequently 'offer to spot' for those without a partner and 'share training tips' (Katy, bodybuilder of 4 years). People may ask for advice and it is not unusual for female bodybuilders to receive compliments on their physiques from admiring others (those Goffman [1983] would call 'their own'). In this milieu (in contrast to the outside world), the social meanings inscribed on their bodies act as a form of physical capital that translates into a high status (Bridges, 2009:97).

Body in space

Bartky (1988:67) suggests that 'women are more restricted than men in their manner of movement and in their spatiality'. Similarly, Castelnovo and Guthrie (1998) argue that Westernised concepts of female beauty are not only symbolic of vulnerability, weakness and invisibility, but actually constitutes a form of spatially saturated bodily oppression. For instance, embodied actions, gestures and postures not only encourage women to take up as little space as possible but also severely constrict movement. Connell (1983:19) postulates that 'to be an adult male is distinctly to occupy space, to have a physical presence in the world'. Male bodies are judged on their 'action and an active orientation towards the world' particularly by exhibiting 'strength and power' and

consequentially throw their whole bodies into movement. In contrast, female bodies are evaluated upon their 'aesthetic value' which suppress its functioning (Uhlmann and Uhlmann, 2005:93-103). Correspondingly, women are 'less likely to reach, stretch, bend, lean, or stride to the full limits of their physical capacities' (Young, 1990:148). Instead their bodies are seen as burdens to be carried around with them and looked after.

Against this background, feminist analysts of sport conceive that 'the development of the physical, athletic body and the cultivation of a sense of physical power and competence, can be vital components of women's full equality' (Farkas, 2007:1). Roth and Basow (2004:19) believe that by encouraging women to participate in empowering sports and physical activities, it opens up the possibilities to a true form of physical feminist liberation. One which they believe 'would increase women's confidence, power, respect, wealth, enjoyment of physicality, and escape from rape and the fear of rape', on the basis that it would help their command of and movement within physical space.

According to Farkas (2007), women's historical oppression essentially emanates from men's embodiment of physical power that translates into the threat of violence and rape. Sport then, according to Castelnovo and Guthrie (1998:13), creates the 'potential for reducing physical power imbalances on which patriarchy is founded and reified'. As female bodybuilders not only increase their strength, but embody the physical appearance of power, these women hold the possibility of emancipation more than any other sport. As Charlie articulates, her new found trust in her body's capabilities gives her the confidence to overcome the fear of rape and attack:

I'm less afraid of things now. I used to get really nervous walking home by myself after work in the dark....but I guess I feel I'm more able to handle myself now...put up a good fight (Charlie, bodybuilder of 4 years).

For other female bodybuilders, it was the desire to obtain these 'physical powers' (as a form of self-defence/protection) that motivated them to become bodybuilders

in the first place. This is illustrated in the example of Michelle (bodybuilder of 5 years), who recalls a horrendous period of her life, when she felt 'fearful', 'vulnerable' and 'helpless' against the physical abuse of her father. She remembers:

Living in constant fear and terror of my father - not just for myself but for my brother and mum ...I felt useless not being able to protect them, and I guess I thought that by being physically more powerful than my father would maybe stop his violence - that physical size would somehow be my protection for us.

Evidence from other studies suggests that there are many other benefits for female's who participate in sport. Active women, for instance, are more likely to perceive themselves as being better at leading, motivating, sharing, competing and reaching goals, in comparison to their inactive counterparts (Nelson, 1994). Lawler (2002:43) in her study of women who participated in strenuous sports, argues that women 'gain [both] confidence and enjoyment'. One of her interviewees claimed that only through active involvement in sport has she learnt to 'stop apologizing for the space [she] take[s] up in the world'. Similar to McCaughey's (1997) research findings, in her investigation into women and self-defence, female bodybuilders discovered a 'greater sense of self-efficacy' and overall competence from their training. This is articulated in the following quote by Lucie:

Since serious weight-training I've learnt to realise that I am capable of doing things. I feel more independent and self- sufficient.... I can open my own jam jars now – so to speak. (Lucie, bodybuilder of 8 years)

When women enter spaces that are traditionally used by men, and participate in 'forceful space occupying activities' (Shogun, 2002:16), some analysts believe that not only do they challenge the myth of the fragile female body (Castelnuovo and Guthrie, 1998), but during the 'process they are also awakened to their own bodily potential' (Wearing, 1998:110). Heavy weight-training thus allows women

to restore faith in their bodies, their capabilities and to appreciate what they can actually achieve (rather than focusing on aesthetics). This positivity is shown through the words of Mary and Michelle:

Workouts are empowering in themselves...They allow you to see how far your body can be pushed with no restrictions. (Mary, bodybuilder of 12 years)

[Bodybuilding] *gives you the ability to push your body to its limits.* (Michelle, bodybuilder of 5 years)

The satisfaction and elation that accompanies the achievement of being able to do something that was previously not believed to be possible, is demonstrated in the following example: Michelle (bodybuilder of 5 years), after completing 100kg bench press set for the first time declared, *'I have been wanting to do that for five years!.....right now I feel I could do anything'*. According to Heywood (1997/8), this new found ability can potentially trickle down into these women's lives and act as a form of 'third wave' feminism (see Chapter 5). Heywood (1998:60) continues by observing that as women begin to seriously weight-train they become 'less bound by limits they've internalised from years of absorbing cultural mythologies that impose drastic limits on women's strength and potential'. As their strength and muscles grow, so too does their confidence. Using the 'body in space' (expanding, moving, enlarging, growing and strengthening) can act as a form of empowerment for women – emotionally as well as physically. Heywood (1998:60) claims that their bodies demand that they are taken seriously, commanding respect from people and making women more assertive at work. Their new found courage shouts 'this chick don't take no shit', whether this be to colleagues at work, or to an abusive husband.

As sports psychologists have long pointed out, exercise not only has a considerable beneficial impact on psychological perceptions, but the mindset of the individual in turn influences the outcome of the physical activity. The best workouts then occur (as in other sports), when the bodybuilder is at 'one with her

body' and has total belief and confidence in her ability to achieve her goal. Debbie (bodybuilder of 7.5 years) for example, explains that before and during her workout's she 'psychs' herself up with positive affirmations such as '*I am strong*', '*I can do this*', '*I am powerful*'. In this way, new found capabilities and positive psychological attitudes can bridge the chasm that exists between women's minds and bodies. In turn, this power has, at least theoretically, the potential to transcend and impact upon the daily lives of these women.

Postures

According to Sassatelli (1999:6):

Body demeanour in training spaces is obviously divergent from everyday life expectations. Participants need to commit themselves to postures and movements which would be considered inappropriate, and even embarrassing in most situations.

This applies particularly to women, who by accessing leisure spaces traditionally occupied by males, learn to use and experience their bodies in non-conventional ways (Wearing, 1998). In the gym environment women wear clothes that allow them to move freely and effectively (such as trainers and tracksuit bottoms, unlike the typically restrictive clothes such as skirts, tight jeans, high heels and boots that are frequently worn in the outside world), enabling women to stride through space in an unprecedented manner. The safety of the weights area provides a space where they can perform activities and positions that would normally be deemed unfeminine (for example legs wide open, a position considered 'natural' for men). As female bodybuilders' muscles become swollen and engorged with blood, so too do their postures change. They stand with their heads held high, backbone straight and feet firmly on the floor, thus taking up space (Heywood, 1998).

These unorthodox female postures, however, do not pass unchallenged. Charlie (bodybuilder of 4 years) for example, is fully aware of the controversy of presenting her body (via demeanour and carriage) in a non-feminine manner. She notes: '*Occasionally when I have trained my upper body, I'll be pumped up and*

have to stop myself walking like a man. You know take my hair down'. In muscle and fitness magazines photo shoots, these potentially threatening masculine mannerisms are contained by eroticising and sexualising the images of exercises done by women in the gym. For example the gaze will focus on women's glutes, as they bend over to perform straight-leg dead-lifts, or pictures of women's legs spread wide apart invitingly, like a soft-porn magazine. Whilst a few of the female bodybuilders in my study felt some concern about performing compromising exercises (particularly, 'glute exercises' and 'donkey calf raises', where one female sits on the other's back), the majority didn't care in the slightest: *'You can't worry about stuff like that, you've just gotta do what you've gotta do'* (Michelle, bodybuilder of 5 years). Despite some of these drawbacks, the gym provides an area where female bodybuilders can move more freely through space and perform actions and postures which would normally be constrained.

Re-examining 'male' space

As this chapter draws to a close I feel it worthwhile reconsidering the notion of masculinity and dominance. Whilst I have portrayed the ways by which different females have negotiated space within the gym environment (in particular female bodybuilders), depending on their goals and desires, I have tended to gloss over the differences between male gym users and bracketed them all in the same category. That is to say, I have depicted all men as gate keepers of the weights arena and as embodying and enacting traits of dominance and power. While this portrait may be seen as a useful generalisation, highlighting one gendered axis along which the use of space is often structured, it is also somewhat simplistic and misleading and tends to reinforce the second wave feminist notion of an oppressive/essentialist 'male' that I have come to distance myself from during the course of my research.

Against the background of these comments, it is important to point out that men, like women, are not a homogenous group. Indeed within the heavy weights area, there is almost a 'hierarchy of supremacy' that orders and stratifies the men

within this space according to such variables as the age of participants, their experience, muscular size and so on. For example male newcomers to weight-training, particularly teenagers and those bordering on the upper limits of middle age and older may also feel intimidated. Likewise, there is a tendency (though this is made more complicated by class and sports specific aims etc.) to exalt the more mesomorphic muscular males. Consequently, in the same way that women might feel intimidated or threatened within the 'weights area', it can also be argued that there are also struggles of power and dominance between men within this ultimately masculine domain. Connell's (1989) work on 'masculinities', is of particular relevance here. He explains that 'hegemonic masculinity' should not be understood as the male role but as a *particular variety* of masculinity to which women and others (e.g. young men, as well as effeminate and homosexual men) are subordinated. The male dominance to which I refer in this chapter thus only takes into consideration those who approximate to a muscular 'hegemonic masculinity'. Whilst there are criticisms of Connell's approach – suggesting that it reifies specific types of masculinity and femininity and presents a more fixed, categorical concept of masculinities and femininities than is really the case (see Peterson, 1998; Wetherell and Edley, 1999; Francis, 2000) - it still assists in highlighting the differences that exist *within* as well as between gender groups. In light of this, in the same way that 'femininity' is a social construction, so too is the notion of 'masculinity'. Thus, there is a need to look at different types of femininity and masculinity, rather than simply reinforce them as essential binary oppositions. For the sake of this thesis, I class the practice of bodybuilding as embodying 'hypermasculine' characteristics which push the limits of 'hegemonic' masculinity.

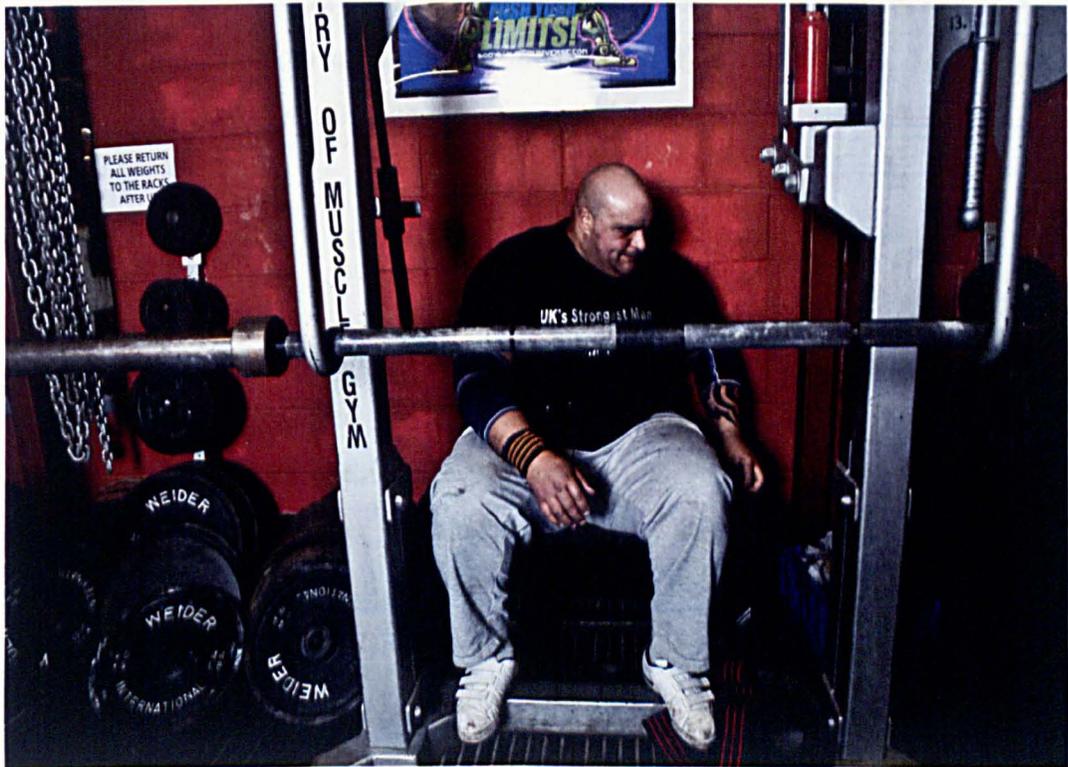
Conclusion

Despite violating the gendered space conventions of the gym environment, female bodybuilders negotiate and establish a space of their own. The gym acts as a partial refuge and retreat against the malevolence of the outside world. In this milieu, female body builders can move about in the gym without having to be so concerned about the responses their 'unfeminine' physiques, postures and movements may provoke on the street. The gym also provides a zone that helps to

re-establish and repair any damage that might have been caused to their self-identity. This occurs not only through positive social interactions with 'like-minded others', but also through these women's total concentration on their proficiency and skills of their weight-training activities, rather than focusing on any perceived aesthetic deficiencies (see Chapter 6).

Sports feminists argue that dynamic activities such as heavy weight-training, can teach women to trust their bodies and to enjoy their physical competence and capabilities. Women can potentially take ownership of this new found power and use it for their own advancement. However, Grimshaw (1999:108) introduces a note of caution to the female centred orientation of this discussion. She notes that although the female body has been inhibited in terms of movements, this should not be placed in opposition to an 'unrepressed' male body. It depends on the gender coding of activities, rather than men having unrestricted freedoms. For example men often feel clumsy, isolated and unwelcome in aerobics classes. Grimshaw also makes the valid point, that 'in certain circumstances, moving in ways that reach the limits of one's physical capacities can oppress or terrorise others' (ibid.). Subsequently, for women to re-enact male behaviour in the gym by occupying as much space as possible (such as dominating equipment, dropping weights, making loud noises) would not necessarily be a positive phenomena. Cultural, essentialist and radical feminists take this argument one step further, insisting that for women to take on masculine pursuits and activities, would be to take on the same traits of violence, aggression, oppression, and dominance as men (refer to Chapter 5 and 8 for more detail).

In order to investigate this debate further, it is valuable to move beyond the spatial elements of inquiry and explore the actual processes, bodily sensations, emotions and feelings of the female bodybuilder that take place as the body is built in the gym. In the next chapter, I turn to the phenomenological experiences of these women, comparing their reality against the aggressive and domineering discourse associated with male bodybuilding.



Male Space: The Hard Core Gym

Photos by Rebecca Andrews

Ripped, shredded and sliced: Reworking notions of 'pain and violence' in female bodybuilding

The bottom line is the desire and the need to push the limits - to be bigger and stronger, to go heavier and longer than Mother Nature ever intended...When you're pounding the weights like this, you subject your body to a tremendous amount of punishment that can lead to wear and tear and injury.

You don't talk smack. You don't bullshit when you're in the gym. You don't chase ass. You just lift. Plain and simple. There is something so peaceful about it, yet something so violent. To get motivated, you dig deep... Deep into yourself. You imagine a little man looking back at you in the mirror. So you take your anger out on the weights. You punish them. Yeah, this is what you call motivation. This is what drives you. (Animal website ⁵⁹)

Introduction

In the previous chapter I argued that female bodybuilders were stigmatised for transgressing gendered space, but managed to turn this aberrance to their advantage. They carve out a space of their own within the masculine territory of the heavy weights area, creating an area where they can move in a (comparatively) unrestricted manner whilst also feeling protected against the harsh ostracism of the outside world. However, as it was pointed out in the conclusion to that chapter, critical commentators of female bodybuilding believe women who enter this male bastion and embody masculine traits are not developing a new form of female liberation, but are simply re-enacting oppressive male characteristics of aggression, domination and self-destruction. To investigate

⁵⁹ *Animal website*, www.animalpak.co.uk, accessed 03/10/2008. 'Animal' advertisements are found in many Muscle magazines such as 'Muscle and Fitness' and 'Flex'. Unlike other supplement advertisements, they use powerful black and white images which are accompanied by a detailed written text, bringing insight into the lifestyle of the bodybuilder. Several of my female bodybuilders used these texts as motivational tools.

this allegation further, this chapter focuses on the phenomenological experiences of female bodybuilders - looking at how the women's subjectivities are expressed, lived and created through their bodies within the weights arena. The chapter begins by depicting the bodybuilder's 'culture of pain' and how this is interpreted by critical feminists and others as being part of a detrimental hypermasculine force that subjects the body to more self-hatred, pain and violence. The chapter then turns to the voices and experiences of the women themselves, to assess whether there are alternative readings other than pathology.

Pain and violence in bodybuilding

White, Young and McTeer (1995) suggest that the subculture of bodybuilding punishes the body beyond what is involved in any other sport, and indeed, actually welcomes pain. At the very heart of bodybuilding lies the process of muscle destruction that takes place in the gym. In order for the desired muscle hypertrophy to occur, muscles must first be broken down by strenuously exercising the body against resistance weights until muscle exhaustion is reached. During the bodybuilding process microtrauma occurs, causing pain, due to the tearing of muscle fibres. The soreness, discomfort, stiffness and temporary disability felt after the workout is a result of damaged muscle cells. Only by adequate rest outside the gym environment is the body able to begin its healing process. The body then responds to the trauma by overcompensation: it increases protein synthesis, replaces damaged tissues and adds more to reduce the risk of injury being repeated. This produces thicker muscle fibres, thereby increasing the size and appearance of the muscles. Consequently, the bodybuilding subculture welcomes this pain as indication of achievement and muscle growth. Embracing the masculine cosmology, so exemplified in Fussell's work (1991), the body is portrayed as an obstacle to be overcome; a battle to be won using violent language, analogies and metaphors (Heywood, 1998; Mansfield and McGinn; 1993). Typical bodybuilding magazine articles depict the body as an object in the gym that needs to be destroyed, controlled and dominated. This is clearly

illustrated in the following titles (which act as both an inspirational tool and workout manual for readers):

In the Trenches – Time To Get Personal'; 'Taking Up Arms' 'Conquering the Die-Hard Chest'; Calf Stampede'; 'Full Blown Abs'; 'Texas Toast' (subtitled: 'That's what your legs will feel like after you try this fried-to-a-crisp thigh trash'); 'Back Bombardment'; 'Screaming Supersets'; 'Intense Triceps Trash'; 'Bloody Thursday' (with the subtitle: 'The guts and gore flow freely in this shoulder session from hell'); 'Killer Instinct' (subtitled: 'A gym potato obeys his instincts, a bodybuilder dominates his'); 'Armageddon'; 'Love And Kisses From Mr. Hate-And-Pain'; 'Slice and Burn' (Locks, 2003: 243-248).

As Heywood (1998:69) summarises, 'the language of bodybuilding is the language of violence, and the object of that violence is one's own body'. These hypermasculine metaphors and imagery are used and alluded to throughout the subculture, and are readily found in magazines, websites, advertising and marketing (e.g clothing logos, products), forums and everyday gym discourse. These frequently include militaristic and warrior analogies, representing bravery, battles and fighting⁶⁰. In Fussell's (1991) autobiographical account, in a Foucauldian style, he compares the bodybuilding subculture to that of the military organization, in terms of rank, attention to order, regulation and discipline. The bodybuilder's role in this way parallels that of the soldier. Saltman (2003) explores this analogy further, citing the following three comparisons: First of all, both are bodies made for war: 'from the disciplined routines in the gym and kitchen, to the posturing and posing regimes on stage and street, to the martial slogans, metaphors and boot camp sergeant's screams, to the battle in the body itself' (ibid.:2). Secondly, in order to elicit big sacrifices from recruits, both soldiers and bodybuilders are promised the reward of transforming their bodies into human weapons (to be tough, hard and superhuman). Thirdly, detailed attention must be given to the body's surface: the body must be smooth and shaven, hair must be cut short and be tidy. The bodies belonging to both organisations must be stripped of their individuality and wear identical uniforms.

⁶⁰ An obvious example of this is the alternative name for biceps, which are commonly referred to as 'guns'.

For the bodybuilder, whose uniform is their very flesh, this entails creating a perfectly symmetrically proportioned physique. Similarly the 'bodybuilder is permanently in a state of military attention' (ibid.:51). Fussell (1991:82) recites the muscle 'roll' call he would repeatedly do on his own body:

Every few hours, no matter where I was, I found myself running through my muscle inventory, checking to make sure I was still there. From head to toe, I'd squeeze and flex every body part: traps? check; deltoids? check; pecs? check; lat wings? check; bi's and tri's? check; quads? check; calves? check. All present and accounted for.

Linked to this military comparison, Fussell depicts bodybuilding as a form of protection and defence against the world:

What were these great chunks of tanned, taut muscle but modern-day armour? Here were breast plates, greaves, and pauldrons aplenty, and all made from human flesh. He had taken stock of his own situation and used the weight room as his smithy. A human fortress – a perfect defense to keep the enemy host at bay. What fool would dare storm those foundations? (Fussell, 1991:24)

This view that muscularity 'armours' the body, complements the impenetrable existence of individuality that underpins dominant ideals of Western maleness: the ideal man is someone who appears independent, self-enclosed and possessed of a strength enabling them to cope with the unpredictability of modernity (Bologh, 1990).

The extreme masculine ethos of the bodybuilder is also captured by 'Animal', a successful and prominent advertising campaign for bodybuilder supplements and products. The 'Animal' evokes caveman like imagery that implies survival of the fittest:

This is a game for warriors. The iron sport is gruelling, painful and arduous. Whether it's in the gym or with your diet, being an Animal is about consistency and giving everything you got 24/7, 365 days a year... It's back-breaking labor, day in and day out. You move the heavy weight

in the gym and eat the right calories to pack on muscle because you know it's what's required. It's not just what you want to do - it's what you gotta do.

Busting your ass with heavy weights and eating big has consequences. To stay healthy and keep growing you need shelter from the elements. You want to know that your foundation is defended against the constant bombardment of the iron battlefield. It is good to have a dependable ally in this war against the weights. Animal Flex has got your back (Animal I)

For Grint and Case (1998) the bodybuilding discourse, depicting hypermasculine traits of toughness, strength and the ability to give and take violence, are representative of a desire to return to a time when 'men were men'. Likewise other sociologists have explained the growth in bodybuilding in terms of a 'postmodern crisis of masculinity' (Klein, 1993; Heywood, 1998).

These hypermasculine characteristics are encouraged through bodybuilding magazines, advertisements and web-sites. Furthermore, as Stulberg, (1996/7:93) points out, media space is used to actively construct sexual identity and regulate sexual power creating further disparity between the sexes. As bodybuilding is usually perceived as a 'man's sport', magazines are marketed for the male consumer. Features are usually about men and for men. On the rare occasions that women's photographs are included, the softer, curvier hyperfeminine look is preferred, appealing to the male gaze and amplifying by sheer contrast, the muscularity, size and masculine appearance of the male bodybuilder. As several critical social commentators have pointed out, when female bodybuilders are featured, they are usually portrayed in a pornographic manner (e.g. Heywood, 1998; Frueh, 2001; Mansfield and McGinn, 1993; St. Martin and Gavey; 1996; see also Chapter 5). Furthermore, in this gendered media space images of women and men training in the gym are represented in complete opposition to each other. Far from the 'warrior' and 'animal' depiction, women are photographed training with light weights, in sexualised and non-aggressive poses, smiling with full make-up and styled hair. The models show no signs of grimaces, sweat, pain or hard work. Likewise, the commentary accompanying the

images contains no swearing or harsh dialogue (compared to articles on their male counterparts) and women's 'feminine' qualities and achievements are emphasised.

Injuries: Being hard enough

In the same way as pain is glorified within the bodybuilding subculture, injuries are often perceived as something to be fought through, overcome and not 'given in' to. White, Young and McTeer (1995: 176) explain this attitude as part of the 'machismo and fatalism of athletic culture', although the 'character building' qualities of toughness, endurance to pain and discipline, can equally be applied to the army or other types of male dominated institutions. Bodybuilding magazines and documentaries frequently include narratives whereby male bodybuilders conquer their injuries and go on to compete, refusing to submit or admit defeat despite their suffering. As Locks (2003) notes however, there are no equivalent narratives in magazines of women training and overcoming injury.

Klein's (1995:105) ethnographic study in California illustrates the seemingly masochistic relationship between injuries and bodybuilding: In one gym, Klein (1995:105) observed 'a bodybuilder suffer a nosebleed while lifting weights; it was triumphantly explained [to Klein] that the man in question was a true bodybuilder, paying dues, training in earnest and willing to both risk and endure injury for his calling'. In another instance he saw a bodybuilder 'doubled over in pain from what would later be diagnosed as a symptom of hepatic tumours on the liver and whose obviously unwell condition was again interpreted by the behemoths in the gym as testimony to his commitment to the subculture' (ibid.:105). Alongside the pain caused by injuries and the pain created by working to one's maximum ability during training, there are also the 'everyday' surface wounds and marks that accompany work-outs⁶¹. These include calluses and skin abrasions from the friction of gripping iron weights, bruises and shin grazes from exercises such as dead-lifts, so called 'blood marks' on the back from exercises such as Pec flies on the bench, and even the sheer weight digging into the flesh

⁶¹ This is not to ignore the extremely serious side effects from the drugs that the majority of bodybuilders take.

can cause muscle soreness and bruises (e.g. on the traps during squats). These are however, daily warrior markings and are nothing compared to the injuries that some bodybuilders contend with due to repetitive heavy weight training, poor technique or poor biomechanics. For instance, during my ethnographic study, I encountered bodybuilders who suffered from hernias, numerous shoulder injuries, torn muscles and torn ligaments.

Reading and interpreting the bodybuilder's pain

Critical Feminists (including cultural, essentialist and radical) make three related points regarding the ethos of bodybuilding and its relationship to violence and pain. Firstly, they condemn the tantalising promise to new recruits that they too can embody masculine traits of power, in terms of 'growth, penetration and dominance' (Saltman, 2003:59). Feminists such as Jaggar (1983) argue that women are naturally less violent than their male counterparts due to their superior innate caring, mothering and nurturing characteristics. Therefore for women to participate in more violent practices, would be to take on inferior male characteristics. Whilst not all critical feminists take such a radical stance, many still believe that as physical force has been used to create and maintain patriarchy, to utilise this power would be to continue oppression based on violence, and domination – thus women must not use violence for their own ends. As Lorde (1997:27) elaborates: 'The master's tools will never dismantle the master's house'.

Secondly they claim that the culture of bodybuilding re-enacts the historical dualism between mind and body. This binary (as discussed in Chapters 3 and 4) is argued to create objectification of the body, hatred of the body, alienation and estrangement. This is nicely illustrated in the following extract from Fussell's autobiography, when he shaves his whole body in order to display his muscle more clearly:

And when I rose from the bath tub and looked at my naked form, I was amazed. It wasn't my body – it was the blood. I looked as if I'd run a marathon through briars. I waited for the shock of pain, but it didn't come. I didn't feel a thing. I was no longer connected to my own body. It had become simply an abstract concept, a shell to be polished and plucked with regularity (Fussell, 1991: 84).

He no longer feels pain, instead he feels nothing. He has become desensitised to both his bodily sensations and emotions. Saltman (2003:63) postulates, that at its core, 'bodybuilding is about *destroying* the body over and over to become Something Else', resonating with the arguments of essentialist and cultural feminists, that the body 'is never good enough as it is' (Bordo, 1988, see also Chapters 4 and 5). Finally, feminists critical of female bodybuilding are quick to point out that the violent language of the bodybuilder such as 'ripped, shredded, tearing, breaking down, cutting etc.' parallels the destructive discourse surrounding other female body modification practices in contemporary society, for example slicing, shrinking, carving (Jeffreys, 2005). According to this approach, women who take up bodybuilding are simply taking on another form of self-destruction, and yet another way of enduring pain and injury, which is carved out upon the body (Fournier, 2002). This concurs with Scarry's (1985) view that pain in all its guises, is a powerful and destructive force that is damaging to both the self and the world.

Whilst there are differences in the above feminist perspectives they are extremely critical of the liberatory potential of female bodybuilding. I will now turn my attention to, and briefly critique, the three main assumptions on which their analysis is based. First, as I have remarked in earlier chapters, I am deeply sceptical of the essentialist notions of men and women; notions which claim that the 'sexes' are inherently biologically and psychologically different. Not all women are caring and nurturing and similarly not all men are violent, oppressive and dominant. Furthermore as McCaughey (1997) claims, regardless of whether women are innately non-violent/non-aggressive or have a choice in the matter, it is only a discussion that can be held by the privileged. Female non-violence and 'purity' has only been an option of white middle and upper class women. For all

other women, especially those who are poor, non-white and living in less developed countries, physical assertiveness has been a necessary form of survival (Roth and Bascow, 2004). I am more sympathetic with the second critical point that comes from a cultural feminist perspective rather than a radical one. Nevertheless, this approach ironically ends by reiterating the very binary of mind/body (and related ones of male/female, culture/nature) that it seeks to 'transcend'. It still claims that there can be a harmonious relationship between the mind and body, though fails to depict what this state might be and furthermore fails to explain the mind/body connection – i.e. where the body ends and the mind begins and vice versa.

In connection to the third point on female bodybuilding, I am particularly interested in the relationship between gender and 'destructive' physical practices. If indeed bodybuilding is self-destructive and masochistic, why is no pity/concern given to the men who take up this practice? Is it only the women who become victims? Surely if it is an inherently detrimental practice, then men become victims of oppression as a result of the influence of a hypermasculine model of what it is to be a man. Whilst the 'self-hatred' that can follow such a norm could provide evidence to support the view that bodybuilding is pathological and that individual participants suffer from insecurity and body dysmorphia, it might also give weight to the argument that both genders suffer under dominant hegemonic constructions of femininity and masculinity.

So far, bodybuilding has been portrayed as a pathological and hypermasculine power, which embraces and encourages pain and violence to the body and can in no way provide any form of empowerment for women. However, the work of other sociologists can be used here to provide an alternative and more positive reading to this fatalistic interpretation. Monaghan (2001:45) admits that 'anaerobic exercise can be extremely painful'. Similarly, Crossley (2004:39-40), in his study of circuit trainers, claims that 'experiences of pain, exhaustion and breathlessness are often deemed unpleasant'. However, instead of translating this embracement of pain as a destructive compulsive obsession, Crossley explains how the exerciser's pain is 'reframed' through symbolic and emotional interaction with others, and by experience learned to become satisfying and pleasurable. For

example, first time drug users (e.g. Marijuana in Becker's studies 1963,1967) find the experience to be unpleasant, nauseating and frightening, but by perseverance, agents 'acquire the taste, learn the techniques, and learn to frame the experience in such a way as to render it positive' (Crossley, 2004: 40). In this way, rather than simply translating the bodybuilder's desire for pain as determining a masochistic attitude and self-hatred of the body, bodybuilder's learn to re-interpret these 'painful' physical sensations as enjoyable (Monaghan, 2001:345). Crossley and Monaghan both point out however, in complete opposition to the work of White, Young and McTeer (1995) and Klein (1993/1995), that there is a significant difference between 'good' pain and 'bad' pain. The bodybuilder learns to distinguish between the right forms of pain, 'bad pain' being comprehended when exercises are performed with improper technique or exacerbate injuries.

In summary, critical feminists and sports social psychologists view this 'socialisation to voluntary pain' as simply an emblem of masculine identity that suppresses emotions (Sabo, 1989:159). Furthermore, Scarry (1985:54-55) argues that pain is not an abstract, passive phenomena, but is *real* – it hurts and is literally carved out and into a fleshy, sentient body. Pain is 'unshareable [and] inexpressible' and regardless from which 'perspective pain is approached, its totality is again and again faced'. In addition, critics argue that bodybuilding propagates gender roles (even more than other sports) - reinforcing the hierarchical ideology of masculinity and the subordination of women. However, these views contrast sharply to the theory of 'physical liberation' (Roth and Bascow, 2004) proposed by sports feminists in the previous chapter. Furthermore, Crossley and Monaghan convincingly argue that there is a possible alternative reading other than pathology, as 'pain is re-interpreted' and re-worked to become pleasurable within the bodybuilder's interactions and 'culture of pain' (Monaghan 2001:345). This point is made more generally by Shilling and Mellor's (2010) analysis of how various cultures have historically employed the infliction and endurance of pain as a positive resource in developing people's self-identities.

At this point it is necessary to examine the lived experiences of the female bodybuilders themselves - to see how these women interpret the 'pain' of the bodybuilding process. How does the reality of their training compare to the

violent discourse of bodybuilding? Do they find empowerment in re-enacting male defined behaviour? What does training actually feel like: what are their bodily sensations and emotional responses? Are they just another manifestation of self-hatred against the body? Or are there alternate explanations? In order to try to answer these questions, I next turn to the voices of the women themselves, comparing the reality of female bodybuilder's training to this portrayal of violence and pain.

Female bodybuilders' phenomenological experiences

The bodybuilder's 'culture of pain' encompasses different physical sensations depending on the individual's interpretation and the sequence of events within the bodybuilding process.⁶² The sequence of 'pain', can be loosely divided up into four periods: During the workout 'rep'⁶³, directly after the rep/set, after the workout, and the Delayed Onset Muscles Soreness (DOMS), that usually occurs between 1-2 days later. During the actual anaerobic exercise when the weight is lifted, exertion is felt through the muscles, joints and chest causing a sensation of tightness and shortness of breath. However, the bodybuilder anticipates that these unpleasant feelings will soon appear to subside in light of another more favourable sensation - 'the Pump':

The pump... It is the holy grail of bodybuilding. It is that most addictive of sensations... It is euphoric and invigorating, an intense swelling of the muscle caused by a training-induced cascade of blood... It is a rebirth experienced on each worthwhile trip to the gym. The pump is instant gratification... An automatic reward for all of the blood, sweat and tears you spill on the gym floor (Animal website I).

⁶² Refer to methods section (Chapter 2) regarding the difficulty of capturing emotions, sensations and physical experiences of participants whilst training.

⁶³ "Reps" is an abbreviation for 'repetitions'. 'In weight lifting terms, a repetition (rep) is one full completion of the exercise movement. A collection of "reps" is known as a "set". "Sets" are composed of continuous repetitions of a given exercise, which is then followed by a rest period before another set is performed'. From, *Fitness Uncovered*, <http://www.fitnessuncovered.co.uk/blog/2009/04/01/sets-and-reps-explained>, accessed 07/08/2008

This incredible feeling has been cited by other sociologists and bodybuilders as being a strong incentive and driving force for training (Gaines and Butler, 1983; Mansfield and McGinn, 1993; Wacquant, 1995). Likewise, in my study, Debbie (bodybuilder of 7.5 years) describes this in terms of the '*amazing feeling*' that accompanies the sense that '*your muscles are bursting out of your skin*'. In a more descriptive manner, Samantha (bodybuilder of 3 years), reflects on her experiences after training her biceps:

The finishing exercises, consisting of relatively higher reps... allow that blissful engorgement of blood to swell the muscles. Veins become sketched out on the body like a road map, and the intensity feels like a burning sensation throughout the designated muscle group.

Whilst the feeling of the 'pump' may be the most coveted sensation, it is not a guaranteed physical state and rarely accompanies the heavier and lower reps and sets⁶⁴. However, even without this feeling, female bodybuilders expressed pleasure and satisfaction in the process. This is as articulated again by Samantha in the following quote, after she had completed a two rep max of squats (in order to improve her strength):

The heavy, low reps – feel like a battle of wills between body and metal, as the mind and body are forced to work in harmony in full concentration. There can be no doubt, no hesitation nor any negative distraction... You are grounded in the moment. For that second, time feels like it has stopped. The world takes on a surreal quality... Only you really exist, you and the force to be conquered. And after...at some bizarre level you feel like you have won, are somehow at peace with the world and yourself. Joy erupts, or you are washed over by a sense of calmness and satisfaction.

⁶⁴ Most bodybuilders will train in the region of 6-12 reps, compared to power-lifters who train in the lower rep range of 1-5. It is argued that power-lifters rarely get a 'pump' (from *Fit Flex* website, <http://www.fitflex.com/pumpandmuscles.html>, accessed 07/08/2008) from their workouts. Bodybuilders will of course incorporate a whole range of reps, sets, and training techniques (e.g. drop sets, pyramids, forced reps, negative reps, cheat reps etc) in order to prevent their bodies and minds from becoming accustomed to the workout.

Similar to the runners high, the bodybuilder's pump is believed to trigger a whole range of hormonal responses causing the release of enkephalins and endorphins into the blood stream which act as natural painkillers. Like Monaghan's (2001:347) male bodybuilders, my participants also identified the feelings of euphoria and the adrenaline rush as comparable to taking drugs: 'the endorphin high – it's like a drug' (Michelle, bodybuilder of 5 years). Experiences deemed unpleasant, such as the tightness and shortness of breath and weights digging into flesh, fade into the background during the execution of the weight. Enraptured in the 'positive moment of bodybuilding' (Monaghan, 2001:331), pain and discomfort become reconfigured into a sensual experience. Female bodybuilders thereby associate these changes with a *heightened sense of being alive*; a sense that manifests itself in an emboldening and a merging of the senses. This is clearly illustrated by the comments made by Samantha who explains how the bodybuilding high involves pain but also something '*beyond pain*', including an '*adrenaline buzz, the satisfaction of working to the max. I feel like I'm flying, buzzing. I feel so alive and enthusiastic about life*'. Another female bodybuilder Sharon (bodybuilder of 12 years) aptly quotes from the film *GI Jane* (1997)⁶⁵ : '*Pain is your friend - it lets you know you're not dead*'. This intense desire to feel 'alive' can be read against the backdrop of an increasing computerised, rationalised and sanitised society – a place Weber coins the 'iron-cage' of modernity (Weber, 1991 [1904-5]).

Furthermore, the bodies of female bodybuilders undergo changes in the gym that initiates a *metamorphosis* in their sensory experience of themselves and their environment. This is captured in the following excerpt by Heywood:

[The gym is] a place of incarnations where our bodies inflate and we shuffle off our out-of-gym bodies like discarded skins and walk about transformed. We begin to grow, to change...we pick up our shoulders,

⁶⁵ There are of course other interpretations that could be read from this quote taken from *GI Jane* (1997). The plot line is about a female lieutenant (played by Demi Moore) who is assigned for 'a test case' as a female trainee in the elite Navy SEALs Commando force. To make the grade, she has to survive a gruelling selection process, referred to as 'hell week'. For this tough heroine to succeed in a man's world, she embodies masculine characteristics such as swearing, shouting, putting herself through a punishing training regime, takes and gives violence, thus proving herself 'to be as a good and capable as a man'.

elevating our chins, shaking ugliness from our torsos with a series of strokes, the glistening dumbbells, listening to the blood's rush...Our breathing is quick, our skin is flushed, our hearts are pounding thickly (Heywood, 1997: 3).

This transformation is demonstrated clearly by Christine (bodybuilder of 5 years), who felt considerably 'better' and energised after she had trained:

I had a really crap day at work today....before I started to train I was feeling tired and pissed off. But surprisingly, I had a really good session...got an amazing pump in my delts [shoulders], normally do shoulder press [dumbbells] with 20kg's, but today I did to 24kg's [in each hand] – so really chuffed with that.

These 'incarnations' occur through an *undivided* focus on the body. As Rachel (bodybuilder of 2 years) comments, '*training time is me time. I can just forget about my worries...focus on my body and how it moves.*' Similarly, for Debbie (bodybuilder of 7.5 years) bodybuilding '*releases a lot of stress and tension and stuff, it makes me feel more relaxed... a place to release my emotions...it's my world for an hour or two*'. Hence, the immersion in the process of lifting allows these women to escape from everyday life. Furthermore, it provides a cathartic action, enabling these women to '*unleash any internal anguish, stress, anger and numbness. Thoughts and worries that overwhelm me are pushed aside...I live and breathe for the moment*' (Anna, bodybuilder of 5 years; see also Kaye, 2005:8). After the endorphin high, my participants articulated a sense of cathartic peace and liberation from letting go of negative feelings and excess energy (Crossley, 2006:39, refer also to Chapter 4). In this way the work-out enables not only a transformation of bodily sensations, but transfigures emotions.

Immediately after a 'hard-core' training session (such as 'legs'), the bodybuilder experiences temporary, partial disability in the worked muscle groups. Asking Rachel, (bodybuilder of 2 years) to explain how she felt after completing her work-out, she replied:

Physically my legs feel heavy, swollen and grounded. It's difficult to walk. Every step feels like I'm walking through a bog. My calves feel really tight....My body's crying out for rest, yet I'm perversely looking forward to tomorrow's workout already....I feel a bit nauseous and yet peaceful, invigorated yet exhausted.

Samantha (bodybuilder of 3 years) tells a similar narrative: '*Post workout...my body feels strange, almost sick, but at the same time everything appears heightened, I feel euphoric.*' For Mary too (bodybuilder of twelve years), these sensations are things to be enjoyed and embraced even when they leave her so tired and stiff that she is '*unable to walk down the gym stairs*'. There is also a puritanical satisfaction in being able to overcome the pain and being able to push the body beyond what is considered possible. This is captured in the comments made by Corina and Michelle:

There's some part of me that enjoys it [the pain]. The pain makes me feel as though I've achieved something, pushed my body to the next level (Corina, bodybuilder of 4 years).

Great session! Totally trashed legs, two hours before they stopped shaking (mobile phone text message received from Michelle, bodybuilder of 5 years)

Post-workout DOMS are welcomed by female bodybuilders as an instrumental pain, signifying a 'good workout', which has successfully torn and broken down muscle fibres. After an intense weight's session, the targeted muscles will start to feel sore between 12-48 hours following the workout and can last from 24 hours to a week depending on the severity of the damage. Feelings such as tightness, heaviness and tenderness make everyday exercises such as bending down, getting up and walking downstairs temporarily difficult. Due to the swelling and soreness, muscles feel 'worked', and 'larger' than they actually are, again creating a sense of satisfaction. As Emma (bodybuilder of 19 years) explains, pleasure is found for these women in being '*able to conquer the pain, to feel invincible*' and to feel in

control of their bodies and lives. Carol, a female weight-trainer who participated in Tate's (1999:38) research, illustrates these findings more ecstatically:

Yeah it's like the dips. I do love them. Oh I used to hate them. I used to hate them because of the pain. They just killed my triceps and pecs. But oh, it's beautiful, absolutely beautiful (Carol, quoted from Tate, 1999:38).

In this way the hurt and discomfort of working to 'muscle exhaustion', 'muscle failure' and to 'the max' is seen by female bodybuilders as 'beautiful, pleasurable and satisfying' (Tate, 1999:38). The pain that comes with pushing their body to its limits is perceived by these women as 'perversely' enjoyable. Female bodybuilders consequently seek out and engage with discomfort and fatigue as a way of transforming it into an experience to be welcomed (see also Crossley, 2004: 55)⁶⁶

Erotics of the gym: New bodies, new pleasures?

The 'erotics of the gym' has been documented in some detail by sociologists such as Klein (1993), Mansfield and McGinn (1993), Wacquant (1995), Monaghan (2001) and Crossley (2006). In Klein's first visit to a hard-core gym, he describes the erotic charge that seems to emanate throughout the place:

The whole place seemed caught up in one large orgasm, and in the first encounter I did not want to be the dreaded interruption of this erotic scene, between humans, mirrors and metal (1993:21).

The weights section has been portrayed as an area of hypermasculinity; as a mass of heaving male bodies, an orgy of engorged muscles, throbbing veins, constricted breathing, exposed flesh and physical interaction (by the way of spotting,

⁶⁶ Male bodybuilders are not radically different from their female counterparts in this respect or, indeed, in some of the phenomenological changes they undergo in the gym (Paris, 1997; Monaghan, 2001). However, the contrast for women is arguably far greater given the social ostracism they risk in the wider interaction order as a result of their more radical transgression of gender norms, and in the distance their experiences are from conventional modes of feminine being (Young, 1990).

correction etc). The 'pump' has been also been famously equated with sexual pleasure:

It's as satisfying for me as coming is, you know, as having sex with a woman and coming. So can you believe how much I am in heaven?' (Arnold Schwarzenegger, cited by Wacquant, 1995a:176)

Interestingly, despite, or because of, the pornographic representation of female bodybuilders, very little has been written about the erotic experiences of women in the gym⁶⁷. However for some female bodybuilders such as Joanna Frueh (2001) and her friends, the euphoria resulting from the 'bodybuilding high' extends into a feeling of erotic potency as illustrated by the following comments: 'I catch myself swaggering to the drinking fountain, radiating sex' and 'I feel horniest when I'm working out' (Frueh, 2001:71). Whilst none of my interviewees cited the erotic intensity that Frueh and others expressed, several 'knew of someone else' who 'got off on weight-training' and were close to orgasm during an intense workout. One female bodybuilder confessed that she found both herself, and others, more attractive when she trained⁶⁸. The intimate dyadic relationship and bond between two people as they train can lead to a form of 'primary intensity' (Rich, 1980). As Michelle (bodybuilder of 5 years) explains, it can be an erotic experience by '*the very physical nature of what you are doing - paying close attention to another person's body whilst they are sweating and breathing hard*'. Irrespective of whether female bodybuilders used sexual terminology to describe their erotic relationships or experiences, all participants expressed a deep pleasure and stimulation in the sensual act of corporeal transformation.

It can be seen then, that 'the gym has been and continues to be a pleasure zone that provides challenge [and] sensual transformation' (Frueh, 2001:81),

⁶⁷ Jonathan Ross when interviewing a prominent female bodybuilder 'Tonya Knight', asked her what her own sexual feelings were in the gym. She was embarrassed and replied that Arnie (Pumping Iron, 1977) must have made a joke (The Bicep Bombshell, 1991).

⁶⁸ The lack of affirmative responses by female bodybuilders in regards to admitting 'erotic' experiences in the gym may be for several reasons. It could be that discussion of this area is the ultimate taboo for these women, however I am more inclined to think that it is due to the small sample size, in comparison to the research that has been conducted on male bodybuilders.

descriptors that resonate strongly with Monaghan's (2001) comments on the sensuality and eroticism of the gym, but that provide an interesting contrast to Crossley's (2006: 38) identification of sexual motivations for gym use. While, as Crossley claims, the motives of some gym users may be to meet attractive others, the sensuality discussed here can generally be seen as a form of auto-eroticism in which female bodybuilders are revelling in the experience of their *own* flesh. In a society where women's breasts and legs are fetishized by men (Saul, 2003), female bodybuilders subvert heterosexual norms by choosing to eroticise and take pleasure in the creation and physical sensations of *their own muscles*. This self-inscription, like other body modifiers, might therefore lead to a 're-mapping and extension of the body's 'erotogenic sensitivity'' (Grosz, 1994:139). This allows these women to explore their bodies and sexuality by 'taking on a pleasure of a different order...[to] reclaim, re-use, and re-intensify, body parts, zones, and functions that have been phallicly disinvested' (Grosz, 1994:201). In this way, female bodybuilders potentially transgress hegemonic notions of sexuality and challenge the 'phallic economy of desire' (Sweetman, 1999b: 201).

Furthermore, for feminists such as Lorde (1984), Cixous (1991) and Frueh (2001), erotic experiences, such as those described by female bodybuilders are of vital importance to women's liberation. As Lorde (1984:282) explains: 'Recognising the power of the erotic within our lives can give us the energy to pursue genuine change within our world'. From a more essentialist feminist perspective, Lorde perceives the erotic as spiritual; 'as an assertion of the life-force of women; of that creative energy empowered...' She believes that eroticism, in its truest form is about 'power', 'honour', 'self-respect', 'satisfaction' and 'completion' (ibid.:278-279). In this way Lorde's work ironically provides the possibility of creating a 'true form' of *female* bodybuilding by rewriting the erotic, by challenging the very core of bodybuilding that relies upon a masculine identity and way of being. Although Lorde's theory is not explicitly linked to activities such as bodybuilding, her work (albeit from a radical/essentialist feminist perspective) provides us with an alternative interpretation that bears similarities to the third wave activism of bodybuilding

that Heywood convincingly advocates (See Chapter 5). As Lorde (1984:281) expresses:

In touch with the erotic, I become less willing to accept powerlessness, or those other supplied states of being which are not native to me, such as resignation, despair, self-effacement, depression, self-denial.

It is this focus on self love, joy and sensuality that is captured in the following quote by Monica (Bodybuilder of 2 years), as she tries to articulate her feelings immediately following a bicep workout:

My biceps are normally 13.5 inches, but when I flex and train them – by getting a pump in my biceps, they swell to just over 15 inches [the average man’s arm is 13 inches]...as I was contracting my biceps [double bicep curl using the EZ bar], the veins were visible.. My arms looked strong - I felt strong and I felt good. I knew that looking around, no one else would find it attractive... It felt like I was doing something purely for my own pleasure...enjoying the sensation of the blood flowing through my arms. Feeling alive, feeling empowered, enriched...with all the positive endorphins flooding through my nervous system...and I felt almost – not attracted to myself exactly but just appreciating my body for what it is, just being... fascinated by it I guess, ... what it can do.

Frueh (2006:24,25) perceives the ‘erotic’ as a positive and pleasurable connection, which takes individuals beyond themselves in a sensuous, intimate and emotional experience of unique meaning. For Frueh, this definition stands in stark contrast to the ‘body of pain’ and ‘erotics of pain’, which she claims to be so prevalent in society. She believes that the ‘beauty idol’ is one example of that body and suffering, one which causes a ‘strange erotics, an erotics estrangement from the pleasure of increase and expansion’. In this context, Frueh argues that the phenomenological delights that take place in the gym can revitalise the passions and release ‘an exuberance of life’ (Bataille, 2006 [1936]:179) that has been suppressed in patriarchal capitalist society. Within this interpretation, the eroticism experienced by these women in the gym translates as ‘an embodied creative power’ that not only provides them with a ‘flight from rationalized

society', but provides 'a key to meaningful existence' (Shilling and Mellor, 2010: 2,9). The 'erotics of the gym' can, at least in part, help to explain the motivations and identity of female bodybuilders, allowing these women to find meaning by experiencing their lives as invested with the force of strong, existentially significant, overwhelming emotion (ibid.).

Summary

It is perhaps useful at this point to review the chapter. In the first section, the 'ethos' of bodybuilding was captured – depicting a subculture saturated with pain, violence, masochism, dominance and other traits representative of hypermasculinity. In the second section, the two opposing debates around this bodybuilding discourse were summarised. First, the argument made by critical feminists was looked at. They claimed that for women to participate in bodybuilding, would mean not only to take on oppressive male characteristics of domination and aggression, but also to engage in the same self-destructive and harmful practices. Then the views of other sports sociologists such as Crossley and Monaghan were briefly discussed. In contrast, similar to the sports feminists cited in Chapter 7, they imply that if women are able to 'embody masculine traits of force and competency' and can overcome the pain of training, this may translate into 'benefits for the pragmatic and experiential body' (Monaghan, 2001:346). In order to examine these two perspectives further, I then turned to the voices of the women themselves - comparing their actual experiences against the violent discourse of bodybuilding. In the last section of the chapter I explored the phenomenological experiences of female bodybuilders, discovering what it felt like to 'pump iron' and feel the blood flowing through their veins whilst they trained. Investigating not only how they viewed themselves and their bodies, but what the actual processes and practices felt like during and after an intense workout.

Conclusion

My findings suggest that whilst many female bodybuilders did indeed embrace both the hypermasculine attitude towards pain, and the satisfaction of being able to conquer it, there are alternative interpretations of these actions that those given by critical feminist and sports psychologists who see it simply as a pathological manifestation of self-hatred and inferiority. Instead, as Monaghan (2001) and Crossley (2006) suggest (from their comparative studies on male bodybuilders, and circuit trainers) traditional understandings of pain exist within, yet are also subverted by the centre of the subculture itself. Thus female bodybuilders *reworked* the meanings and physical sensations of 'pain', so that they became pleasurable, enjoyable and desirable. The women cited feelings of 'heightened awareness', 'euphoria', 'flow', 'release', 'erotic intensity' and gratification. In this context it is hardly surprising that female bodybuilders wish to dwell in the gym for as long as possible, in order to savour and relish these sensations. Furthermore, it is the actual experiences, feelings, emotions and intimate accounts of the bodybuilding process articulated by the female bodybuilders themselves, which helps to explain their commitment to a muscular order. The ethnographic findings in this research oppose the argument made by critical feminists such as Bordo (1988:98) that bodybuilding is an ascetic act lacking sensuality: 'preoccupied with the body and deriving narcissistic enjoyment from its appearance..[with] little pleasure in the experience of embodiment'. Indeed, the 'pain' 'of the actual process of bodybuilding' and 'their subjective and corporeal effects are central rather than peripheral to the experiences and motivations of many contemporary body modifiers'(Sweetman, 1999c:205). This substantiates the importance of focusing on the 'lived reality' of such practices, rather than simply the text or outer appearance (Featherstone, 1991:171; Radley, 1991:112-113).

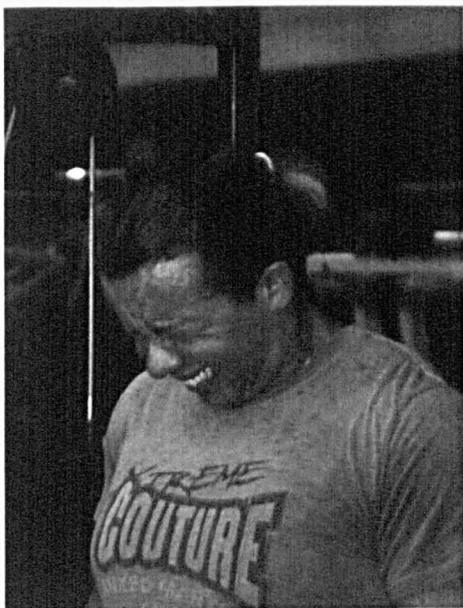
So far in this thesis, I have investigated the daily lifestyle of the female bodybuilder, exploring her interactions and experiences both outside (Chapter 6) and inside the gym (Chapter's 7 and 8). The present situation, in terms of

bodybuilding's potential to 'empower' women, appears complex. However, a final assessment cannot be made until the most extreme and important moment in the bodybuilding calendar is explored - that of the competition time.



Carmen Knights

Photo by Fivos Averkiou



Sarah Lewis – training in the hard core gym

Photos by Rebecca Andrews

A Rite of Passage (to a better life) or a Heroic Journey?

I'VE DEDICATED MY ENTIRE LIFE TO BUILDING UP MY BODY THROUGH HARD WORK, PAIN, HUNGER AND DESIRE. EVERY SINGLE DAY REQUIRES SACRIFICE.

The moment of truth... The time has arrived... Your heart is racing. Your veins are throbbing with carb-loaded blood. The hot lights are blinding you and all you can hear is one voice barking out orders as if you were in a prison line up. 'Quarter turn to the right, quarter turn to the right, quarter turn to the right, face the front'...All the diet, cardio, and busting your ass on the iron for weeks on end. All for that brief window of time to show what you got on stage. You might ask yourself, "Is it all worth it?" If you have to ask, it just might not be. *This is bodybuilding. This is our world, our stage, our time to shine, and our moment of truth.* This is what makes a bodybuilder - the stage, diet, cardio, the selfishness of body over life. Any gym rat can hit the weights hard and get big with eating and skipping the 4:00 am cardio sessions. But it takes *a true bodybuilder* to cut down and step into the light. When you do diet for a show and are *true to yourself* you will be stoked no matter what place you get, because you will know you gave it your all and that is all that matters.

(Italics are my emphasis, quoted from

<http://my.opera.com/mbodybuilding/blog>, accessed 04/08/2009)

Introduction

In previous chapters the daily lifestyle and experiences of female bodybuilders have been explored, both inside and outside the gym. This has revealed the ways in which female bodybuilders manage to develop and maintain a viable sense of self, despite being stigmatized by the gendered foundations of the 'interaction

order' (Goffman, 1983). In this chapter I turn to the most important part of all in the life of the female bodybuilder – the competition, an event that deals with the culmination of their ambitions and 'sets the seal' on these women's identities. Drawing on Victor Turner's (1992) work on liminality, this chapter analyses the consequences of the competition to see whether it provides a 'liminal' stage, whereby women pass from an identity of being 'just' a woman who trains hard, to the identity of a female bodybuilder - an identity associated with a new role in society, with new rights and responsibilities. In addition, it also analyses whether this could more adequately be captured by Turner's notion of the 'liminoid' - an escape from daily life, but nothing that leads to a permanent recognised status in society which would elevate these women from their deviant role which they are compelled to occupy. In order to adjudicate between these two opposing possibilities, this chapter follows the journey of Michelle (bodybuilder of 5 years), from the start of her preparation to compete, to that moment of climax⁶⁹.

The competition as the 'Holy Grail' of bodybuilding

The competition is the most important day in the bodybuilding calendar. It is perceived as the pinnacle of bodybuilding, where the profane daily struggle of hard work, dedication and sacrifice (both inside and outside the gym) culminate in a unique sacred moment. It is a time to be recognised, a time to stand out from the ordinary; to 'be above the masses, different, a star' (Heywood, 1998:171). This is supported by Amy (bodybuilder of 4 years) in the following quote:

It's a time to prove to myself and to others that I can do it...it's a time to prove to all those other people who said I couldn't...I don't want to be known as just 'Amy', if you know what I mean.

Due to the ostracism female bodybuilders receive in their daily lives the competition appears to be of particular importance to them, compared to their male counterparts. It seems to act as a consecration of these women's identities – elevating them from the status of not just a woman who trains hard but to the

⁶⁹ For the benefit of description, on occasions I have integrated and amalgamated my own observations.

status of a female bodybuilder⁷⁰. This distinction is elucidated by Michelle in the following interview extract:

- What advice would you give a female who wanted to become a bodybuilder?

I would say, do they really understand what it takes to be a bodybuilder and do they really know what is that difference between training and bodybuilding? ...the difference is the diet to get ready for competition...Many, many people can train and many, many people can eat well and you know generally follow a good diet with the odd treat etc. But not many people can do that strict, hideous, gruelling, soul crushing diet to get to the end - or go on stage.

The competition then appears to act as a 'rite of passage', whereby female bodybuilders pass from being simply a female who weight-trains in the gym, to actually becoming a female bodybuilder. Given the travails that have been charted throughout the course of this thesis, it should be clear by now that this is no straightforward, automatic process. Success would be a major achievement given all we have learnt about the prejudices people have about female bodybuilders and the stigmatisation these women face, especially outside the gym, in their daily lives. Indeed, there appears to be an element of heroism here (Weber, 1991 [1915]). As these women reject the gendered 'interaction order' (Goffman, 1983; see Chapter 6 for more detail) on which ordinary life is based, in favour of an extraordinary life - which not only threatens the possibility of them ever being able to reintegrate back into society, but also 'entails the deliberate risking of life itself' – they seem to qualify for Featherstone's (1995:58) notion of 'The Heroic Life'. In this context, the lifestyle of dedication, sacrifice and commitment to the muscular order bears similarities with heroic characters such as warriors, who battle against the odds on a 'quest for virtue, glory and fame, which contrasts with

⁷⁰ It is worth noting that not all female bodybuilders in my study agreed that to be a bodybuilder you needed to compete. For instance Laura (bodybuilder of 10 months) argued that 'bodybuilding is a lifestyle, it is not an act of participating in an organized physique competition'. Nevertheless, most female bodybuilders, unlike their male counterparts do compete or aspire to compete (Bolin, 1992).

the lesser everyday pursuit of wealth, property and earthly love' (Featherstone, 1995:59). Other relevant heroic descriptors identified by Featherstone include masculine traits of 'sacrifice, distinction, discipline, dignity, self-denial, self-restraint and commitment to a cause' (ibid.:66). Another similarity between Featherstone's depiction of the 'hero' and the female bodybuilder is their sense of fate. Thus for heroes 'to achieve great deeds requires both luck' and a 'sense of destiny' (ibid.:59). This belief is expounded by Michelle:

I guess I feel very lucky that I'm doing what I was born to do...It's like on some level I've just always known this is what I was gonna do – I knew it was what I've got to do.

Furthermore, the 'gruelling' and 'soul crushing' pre-competition diet (which requires participants to reduce their body fat to abnormally low levels, whilst at the same time retaining their muscularity), requires almost 'superhuman' extraordinary traits of courage, endurance, and sacrifice. In his lecture 'Politics as a Vocation', Weber (1991 [1915]) claims that:

There is the 'heroic' ethic, which imposes on men demands of principle to which they are generally not able to do justice, except at high points in their lives, but which serve as signposts pointing the way for man's endless striving.

The heroic personality thereby sacrifices all and lives a life immersed in suffering, in order to achieve their ultimate goals and values. As Rubin (1994:14-16) explains, the moral, life governing aspirations of the heroic ethic imposes 'a tyranny of demand on everyday living', but provides meaning and purpose in an increasingly rationalised world. In a similar manner female bodybuilders endure their mental and physical hardships, trials and tribulations with the reward of living a life to their own beliefs and principles. A life which may be challenging and difficult, but one that provides them with direction, focus, fulfilment and desire.

Questioning the consequences of the competition

Victor Turner provides a useful analytical way of approaching what is at stake here. Does the competition, as the height of recognition for women as women bodybuilders, provide a *liminal* stage by which women pass from an identity of being 'just' a woman who trains hard, to the identity of a female bodybuilder - an identity associated with a new role in society, with new rights and responsibilities? In addition, it also analyses whether this could more adequately be captured by Turner's notion of the *liminoid*, a break from daily life but nothing that alters their status in wider society - nothing that leads to a new, relatively permanent role? Before we can move on to make some sort of assessment regarding these alternatives, it is necessary to explore his theory of liminality in more detail. Turner (1959, 1967, 1974) developed, in a series of publications, an analysis of Arnold van Gennep's conception of ritual as a status transition. For Turner, ritual involved the individual in 1) a break from the social conditions of their previous existence (preliminary phase), 2) a liminal period and experience in which they were emotionally, psychologically and physically separated from their previous selves (liminal phase), and 3) a re-emergence into society (post-liminal phase). Liminality promoted the experience of *communitas* (during which initiands experienced a collective effervescence, an emotional merging with others, that took them beyond their old selves), and ended with the re-emergence of the individual as a new self, occupying a new social role. While Turner's depiction of ritual cannot be mapped wholesale onto the phenomenon of female bodybuilding, its three key stages noted above serve as a useful heuristic means of exploring how women involved in this subculture develop new identities as bodybuilders and resolve the status problems experienced in their ordinary lives. It could be argued that Turner's analysis might equally apply to men's bodybuilding, but his concern with the process of status transition makes it particularly relevant to women engaged in female bodybuilding. It is they who confront by far the largest gap between the gendered foundations of the interaction order, on the one hand, and their appearances and identities, on the other.

Comparatively, there are perhaps some parallels here with holy women in the medieval period who denied themselves food and embarked on strict religious regimes that involved extreme ascetic practices resulting in a new role which avoided traditional responsibilities of wife and mother. In the late Middle Ages food played a pivotal role in both women's religiosity and daily lives, not 'only because food was a resource women controlled but also because, by means of food, women controlled themselves and their world' (Bynum, 1987:146). In order to protect their souls, women engaged in drastic acts of fasting that suppressed bodily 'impurities' such as excretion, menstruation and sexual drive. However, their dieting controlled more than just their bodies and impacted upon their environment acting as a form of social power over their families and even religious institutions. For example, fasting allowed females to neglect their normal gender roles of food provision, preparation and family responsibilities. Furthermore, devout women could seek refuge from the social expectations of being a woman (marriage, sex and children) by becoming a nun. By practising extreme rituals of piety, such as fasting and self-flagellation⁷¹, the Church may have offered these women a form of liberation 'from their ascribed social identities', enabling them by providing 'new identities within the Church' (Lester, 1995:11). Indeed, holy women, received a cult like status, heralded as having a special relationship with Christ and the ability to perform miracles and superhuman acts. Bynum (1987) argues that these holy women were not anorexic or bulimic, as the aim of their extreme food practices was not to exhibit thinness, but constituted religious rituals through which they sought to create a union with Christ.

These extreme rituals and practices then provided these holy women with a status transition – but can this liminality also be said of female bodybuilders? Bolin hints in her writings that this is indeed the case (see also Haraway, 1991; Harjunen, 2003; Lugones, 2006; LaGreca, 2009 and Mahon-Daly and Andrews, 2002, for alternate ways by which feminist researchers have utilised the concept

⁷¹ These included practices such as purging and restricting their diet to only the Eucharist, self punishments such as depriving themselves of sleep, warmth, binding themselves up in iron chains during puberty to restrict and damage breasts and hips as well as self beating with ropes and chains.

of liminality). Bolin (1992:184) perceives 'dieting and the pre-competition preparation as a liminal phase embodying contestation and anti-structure'. She argues that as women reach their 'peak physique' on competition day, they achieve a moment of 'bodily nirvana and physical transcendence' (ibid.:195) ('a moment in and out of time' [Turner, 1969:96]). Furthermore, Bolin argues that the bodybuilding competition process allows a form of gender blending, whereby the strict gender dichotomies of masculine and feminine begin to dissolve. Whilst male bodybuilders diet - an activity firmly associated with the feminine, female bodybuilders diet to display their muscularity and 'hardness'- considered masculine attributes. Bolin thereby argues that competitions promote 'androgyny' and possibilities for women's 'empowerment'. However, despite this insight, Bolin fails to explain how this liminal and transformative phase results in a status transition - that is to say, what happens to the individual after the peak physique is reached?

Perhaps then Turner's depiction of the 'liminoid' is more appropriate here. A concept that refers to experiences which have the same characteristics of liminal experiences but are a more individualised phenomena that fails to result in a resolution of any sort, but is simply an event separated off from society. In Turner's (1992:54-56) analysis on ritual and ritualised practices, he differentiates between the liminal and the liminoid on the grounds of their relationship to meaning and the separation of work, and to leisure/play in society. In contrast to the liminal, which he perceives as being in some way integrated into the societal structure - as part of a religious or social ritual - the liminoid is constituted as a temporary break away from the routines of social structure. According to Turner, the liminoid rarely occurs outside industrial societies. In complex societies, work lives are more likely to be segmented and to consist of diverse groups of people who may have very little actual contact with each other. Unlike tribal cultures, industrial societies work life is organised and regulated through time and space, and is clearly separate from home and leisure time. Simply put, the liminal is in some way part of societal structure whereas the liminoid is effectively a break with it that has no real impact or influence outside its given leisure period (Turner 1992, 54-56). To elaborate this further, Turner (1982:52) explains: 'The solitary

artist creates the liminoid phenomena, the collectivity experiences collective liminal symbols’.

This understanding of the liminoid resonates with certain feminist perspectives on female bodybuilding, in terms of the idea that women are seeking to transcend prior identities but ultimately cannot do this as the event of the competition re-objectifies them and reinforces their previous identities. For example, Brace-Govan (2002:418) argues that until females focus on their bodywork instrumentally (in other words use their bodies as vehicles that enable them to act in the world in an assertive and empowering manner) rather than on its appearance – under the ‘centrality of voyeurism’ they will never ‘transcend the status of being an object’. Likewise, Ian (2001) claims that as the female bodybuilder relies upon the other - the gaze of the judges and fans - to validate whether or not she has fleetingly achieved ‘thingification’, she is unable to transcend ideology:

She can only see herself as reflected by fans and judges, in their appraisals of her flesh...In other words, the pinnacle of the bodybuilder’s training cycle is the moment when she offers this body, which she has disciplined with religious intensity as if preparing it for sacrifice, to the reigning social ideology of gender, masked as an impersonal aesthetic ideal with which she has nearly killed herself to merge. (Ian, 2001: 82)

Thus far, most academic work has presented female bodybuilder competitions as not even being liminoid, but rather as providing in a pessimistic Foucauldian manner an intensification of discipline, regulation and restriction (Mansfield and McGinn, 1993; St Martin & Gavey, 1996; Lowe, 1998; Patton, 2001; Bordo, 1988; Guthrie and Castelnuovo, 1992). From this perspective, competitions are regimes of truth or disciplinary mechanisms bounded and informed by patriarchal views of what an acceptable ‘feminine’ shape should be. These critiques argue that these women have to conform to a ‘feminine imperative’ characterized by the need to ‘perform femininity during contests’ (St. Martin and Gavey, 1996: 53); a context in which ‘lipstick and blonde locks are as

necessary for the woman bodybuilder as they are for the female impersonator' (Mansfield and McGinn, 1993: 64). Indeed, there has been much evidence to support this view, such as the directives given to reduce muscularity by 20% in 2005 and the calling of the reduction in shoulder size in Figure girls (refer to Chapter 5 for more details on the criticisms of competitions). Thus, according to these writings, competitions don't even provide these women with a break; they simply reproduce stereotypical views of what it is to be feminine and police the desires of those who seek to transgress these and make incursions into the field of masculinity.

Whilst critical commentators have focused on the ways through which women are controlled by men in the sport, there has been a tendency to ignore the ways by which female bodybuilders actually 'resist' these restrictive powers. For example, despite all the directives from the sport's authorities, they have failed to stop female bodybuilders (and now even figure competitors) from going further and evolving in terms of size, hardness and cuts⁷². Similarly, whilst competing women are pressurised to achieve a subjective form of 'femininity' – it would be wrong to present this as a completely determining pressure, as two of the women who reached the British finals in 2008, for example, exhibited facial hair and wore no make-up, and neither was knocked out in the first round of this competition. Thus, female bodybuilders have continued to develop themselves and their identities despite the limitations placed on them by bodybuilding authorities.

The start of the journey

In seeking to probe the validity of these alternative perspectives on female bodybuilding competitions (the ideas that they can be liminal, or that they are simply liminoid and still informed by conventional gender norms) my account begins sixteen weeks away from the event itself. This is when the daily lifestyle

⁷² According to female bodybuilder journalist Hans Klein, directives only have a temporary effect, whereby competitors initially get confused and try to come in softer and smaller, but ultimately regress/go back to their aims of creating their most muscular and best physique possible.

and mundane training phase are left behind as the female bodybuilder prepares to compete. It is at this point that the real breaking down of any vestiges of the non-female bodybuilder persona occurs (in terms of the separation off from any activities and identities not directly associated with their status as a competitive female bodybuilder). In Turner's phrasing, it is the deconstruction of past identity in preparation for a new identity. In my narrative, I follow the pilgrimage of Michelle – on a chronological basis - from the beginning of her competition preparation through to that 'height of recognition'. Here, echoing notions of the heroic as portrayed by Weber, the journey can be seen as a kind of adventure (Simmel, 1971 [1908]). Simmel suggests that in the adventure, time flows in a different way to normal everyday life. The adventurer seizes the moment, takes risks and has a disregard for ordinary concerns of consequence, yet simultaneously creates an alternative order based upon a system imbued with meaning and logical coherence. Against the backdrop of an ever modern life which organises itself around consumer culture and immediate gratification, leaving people fragmented with a 'lack of something definite at the centre of the soul'(Simmel, 1990 [1907]:467), the life of the adventurer might enable an individual to transcend this fate by creating a 'personality' and a unique sense of self. These 'adventurers of the spirit' thus form their actions around a central and unifying purpose, providing the individual with life affirming significance and meaning (Simmel, 1971 [1908b], 1997[1912]).

As the female bodybuilder begins to embark on her 'adventure' there is a sense of excitement, anticipation and restlessness. As Michelle explains:

I just can't wait to get started now... I feel a bit in limbo at the moment...I can't wait until the day ...yes, I love getting on stage - it's the best day of the year.

As the journey commences there becomes a clear separation from those 'others', who may train hard but don't go through this sacred process. There is a satisfaction from being different and standing out from the rest of them, by

enduring what only a true bodybuilder can: *'going through what I go through and knowing other people can't do that'* (Michelle).

There is often a ritual celebration, that marks the start of the pre-comp diet (as well as there being an infamous post-comp 'blow-out' or 'binge', where competitors have been known to eat excessive quantities - refer to Bolin, 1992; Lowe, 1998). Michelle and her close friends and family, who are supportive of her endeavour, meet up at her house for the 'last supper' before the competition, which consists of the indulgent and forbidden foods of pizza, chocolate and wine. After this event, Michelle will start to purify herself from the 'bad' foods and drink that pollute and contaminate her body. Apart from the 'cheat' meal (which many bodybuilders allow themselves once a week in the first few months of preparing to compete), processed foods and foods containing salt and sugar are now eliminated from their diets. This includes dressings and flavourings, making food become extremely bland and repetitive (see Chapter 6 for more details on female bodybuilders' relationship to food).

Bodybuilders may also aid this process of detoxification by using colonic irrigation to rid themselves of impurities (faecal waste and unidentified toxins from the colon and intestinal tract). The cleansing of the body marks a new transitional phase whereby the female bodybuilder begins to depart from her old physical self. At this point, Michelle's weight is 92kg and her calories will drop from 5000 to 3000 per day over the next week. The diet plan will become more rigid and will intensify as the weeks go on. The aim is to shed the unwanted fat cells and uncover the muscles, so that they can be displayed in their full glory. The difficulty lies in burning away the destructive fat, but at the same time protecting the all important muscle (female bodybuilders aim to get their bodyfat percentage to below 9%, sometimes as low as 4%, compared to the 'ideal' 20-25% for women). Protein is therefore an essential alliance here, and is eaten at regular intervals throughout the day (e.g. protein drinks, poultry and fish). Whilst essential fatty acids are encouraged, along with vegetables and a few pieces of fruit, saturated fats are to be avoided and carbohydrates severely reduced.

'Allowed' carbohydrates in limited portions include oats, brown rice and sweet potatoes. Michelle's supplement regime is also dramatically changed and increased in order to burn fat and maintain muscularity. Likewise, to speed up the metabolism and lose fat, cardiovascular training is incorporated into the daily training routine. Besides her routine hour of weight-training, Michelle now adds 30 minutes of 'fat-burning exercise' (such as low impact exercises that keep her heart rate under 150 bpm, for example cycling, cross-trainer and walking uphill on the treadmill) before she goes to work. She also goes back to the gym in the evening to do another 30 minutes as well as fitting in a walk in her lunch break. All spare time is now dedicated directly to her goal. Fisher (1997:141) estimates that on average, professional female bodybuilders dedicate 6 hours a day to their training and competition preparation; which includes weights and cardiovascular exercises, posing, tanning, food preparation and mental strategies.

On the day of the competition Michelle will get just one opportunity to impress the judges. She will have just one chance to show off her hard earned muscular body by enacting 7 prescribed poses and performing a short (60-90 seconds) choreographed routine to music. Her physique will then be evaluated by a panel of judges on its aesthetics of muscular size, symmetry and condition (e.g. vascularity, low body fat). Practising these poses and the routine is therefore an extremely important component of the 'pre-comp' preparation. It has been suggested by some that there is a tendency for female bodybuilders to take these stage performances more seriously than their male counterparts (Lowe, 1998)⁷³. Furthermore, the muscular presentations themselves have been critiqued for being clearly gendered:

Females are more likely to perform fluid, balletic movements and poses on stage; they are also more likely to select popular dance tunes or sentimental love songs....some women incorporate seductive poses,

⁷³ This may be due to the extra judging criteria of 'femininity' and 'grace' mentioned in Chapter 5 or because all the women have sacrificed more than their male counterparts to get where they are (in the sense of defying the gendered interaction order – Goffman, 1983).

glances and lyric in their routines as well...male bodybuilders are more likely to strike muscular poses in a hard, distinct, and fast manner... they are more likely to grimace, growl and at times, even yell during the presentation round. Moreover, their musical selections differ markedly from those of female bodybuilders in that they are more likely to pose to loud and thunderous rock music (Lowe, 1998:122-123).

Despite the fact that these displays may remain gendered compared to hegemonic norms of femininity, the poses conducted by female bodybuilder's appear masculine, defiant and strong, and in no way resemble comparative 'feminine' body displays such as bikini contests, catwalks, lap dances and so on.

Michelle is all too aware of the importance of posing, in order to present her physique to its advantage in front of the judges. Indeed, by making just the slightest body adjustments to her arm, leg or torso, Michelle knows she can accentuate a strong point or hide a weakness. Every day in the studio she goes through her compulsory poses and rehearses routine – becoming increasingly frustrated when she does not perform these to her satisfaction. Far from 'posing' being an easy action, it requires a great deal of mind and body connection. In the same way as a belly-dancer learns to utilise her individual abdominal muscles, so too must Michelle learn body skills and techniques specific to bodybuilding. Initially the compulsory poses (front double bicep, side chest pose, rear double bicep, rear lateral spread, side tricep, and, abdominal and thigh pose) are practised in front of a mirror until they are done 'correctly'. Once the poses have been refined, they are then rehearsed without the mirror in order to replicate the situation on the competition stage (bodybuilders often have friends/coaches who give them feedback on their posing). The bodybuilder must learn to biomechanically 'feel' each pose. As one bodybuilder articulately describes the process:

It can be a sensual experience, being able to focus all your attention on just one movement - onto even just one muscle, and for that moment, just

feel that one specific motion with all of your being. It teaches you a lot about how your body works and feels... very intimate kind of connection to your own body and how it moves.

Michelle begins by holding each pose for 15 seconds, increasing the time to 30 seconds as the weeks go on (she doesn't know precisely how long the judges will ask her and the other competitors to hold the pose, so she needs to be prepared for all eventualities). Posing is a surprisingly strenuous activity that requires tension throughout the whole body and not just in the anatomical area that is being scrutinised. As the muscles begin to tire, they begin to shake, making it hard to maintain balance and posture. Michelle in the following extract talks us through the first pose – the 'bicep pose', which is worth quoting in its entirety to demonstrate the complexity and subtlety of the movements:

The first thing you must remember when you go through the compulsories is that the judges are seated on ground level. So they are directly looking at your feet. So you've gotta lean forward in the front poses, so that the judges can see you better. Before every pose I flex the legs first – giving them a quick shake out before contracting. My front double bicep pose is not really my strongest pose...so you learn little tricks, like you keep relaxing and flexing them, as a moving muscle looks bigger and more impressive than a static one – so you know, you extend your arms out straight and contract them back in. The first pose [Double Front Bicep] is the most important one, it's the 'hallmark' of being a bodybuilder and it's the first one that the judges see...you gotta hold your elbows out from your body – level with each other and slightly higher than right angle. You need to bring the elbows slightly forward to allow you to squeeze your chest muscles and spread your lats [back] at the same time. You must visualise your bicep muscle and squeeze as hard as you can....to make the biceps fuller, you can also cock your wrists down towards your arms, to make the gap between your hand and arm seem smaller and make your bicep look bigger. ...but you can't forget about the rest of your body. You know, your abs need to be crunched - to create a muscular wall...your whole body needs to be tensed.

On top of this, female bodybuilders must also demonstrate 'femininity' through 'graceful movements' of the body. 'Femininity' is expressed through the pointing of toes and 'elegant' hand and finger gestures (which also highlight perfectly polished nails). Poses are tweaked to create the illusion of small waists, and other body adjustments are made, such as one leg being placed in front of the other, to create the appearance of curves. Each pose must flow fluidly into the next one, appear light footed and be accompanied at all times by a smile. Everyday Michelle runs through these poses so that they become 'drilled into her', in preparation for the sacred day of the ritual.

The hard times

It's now only one month away from the contest, and the physical hardship and psychological stress from 10 weeks of strict dieting and intense training are taking their toll (cf Turner 1969: 93-111). As the diet and supplement regime intensifies, so too does the debilitating tiredness, aches and pains (including headaches, muscle cramps, shakes, sleeplessness, nausea and mood swings). Michelle articulates her feelings as she suffers from these effects:

...all sports can require a phenomenal amount of training by the athlete, people train everyday for several hours – so it's not that the human body can't cope with the training – but the diet, that's the special thing – it effects your emotions, your food, your sleep, how you're training, your energy – everything. It really does!

The last few weeks have been exceptionally difficult for both her and her partner Jo. Michelle has decided to quit her job. Whilst at first her employers appeared sympathetic to her competing endeavour, they no longer will let her have the week off before she competes (which had been agreed). She says that they seem to have no comprehension of how poorly she will be functioning just before the

competition (she knows she will be desperate by then, hardly functioning and constantly 'needing to pee', as her body will be flooded with water). Furthermore they claim that '*the diet is changing her that she is no longer herself, but is tired and grumpy and no longer sociable or enthusiastic*'. She admits this herself. She doesn't want to socialise anymore, but disconnects herself from others in order to preserve her energy:

When I'm having a bad day, it takes all my energy to just get by, so I go very inside myself, I don't want to talk to people, I don't want people to hassle me about anything or ask me about food...all my energy goes into getting through my workout and to getting my food and to going to work. I think people sometimes think I'm being rude or arrogant, or moody, or whatever. They don't understand that the very little energy I have, I need to keep.

In the gym her partner acts as a 'gatekeeper' and prevents people from interrupting Michelle during and even after her training. Her partner Jo fends the casual gym trainers and gym friends away to prevent them from asking annoying questions and making stupid comments. Jo tells me that the most frustrating thing of all is that people seem to treat Michelle as though she is sick or has something 'wrong' with her, such as an eating disorder:

One thing that pisses both me and Michelle off, is that people treat her as though she is ill...um people 'Oh, are you OK? Oh dear oh, you do look like you are suffering! How long have you got to go through that for? What are you eating? And they treat her as though she is ill, it's patronising. Yes, Michelle will feel tired and have less energy to talk and to be bouncy as she is normally ... she walks slower, her memory is affected, concentration is affected, there's lots of things that aren't positive but are just simply by-products of the sport and just something that you have to accept with the sport – therefore it's not something that people should feel sorry for her about, because she has chosen this very, very, tough sport, but she has chosen it for herself.

Michelle echoes this emphasis on choice, by stating that during the dark times : *'I have to remind myself (at times) that I chose to do this, it's my choice....it's a personal challenge...I wouldn't know what to do if I didn't do bodybuilding, I wouldn't feel me - it feels totally 'right'*. There is definitely a sense of heroism here, in as far as it takes a special kind of person to conquer this quest. This is further demonstrated by the following extract written by Teagan Clive, which captures the ethos of the pre-competition diet for the female bodybuilder:

In every sport there is more than one game, and the most gut-wrenching events in bodybuilding take place in the kitchen, where athletes come to terms with their long *lonely* diets. Now I don't mean to scare you, but although strict dietary control is an essential and exciting *ritual* for competitive bodybuilders, not everyone should ruthlessly restrict his or her food intake...If trying to eat 'like a real bodybuilder' is going to snuff your sense of liberty and pursuit of happiness, don't do it...If you think that dieting is self-abuse, if it's painful for you, if it's a task and not an *adventure*...don't waste your time trying to eat less...It's your life, and your body. You are what you eat, and your physical identity will be shaped by what you swallow. You alone are responsible for your appearance'.(Quoted from Bolin, 1992:198, my emphasis)

Foucauldian feminists, however, (see Chapter 5) would argue that this so called empowering 'choice' is an illusion, and that far from liberating the pre-comp diet acts as a 'praxis of social control'. For example, there does appear at first glance to be parallels here between anorexia and the 'pre-comp' diet, as in both cases bodies are pushed to the extremes and both are seeking to control their bodies as a way of controlling their lives. Unlike the anorexic who diets to 'disappear' from view however, the female bodybuilder, as she sheds her fat, appears larger, more defined and more muscular - making her more visible. Thus, in contrast to the anorexics shrinking body, the hypermuscular female body cannot be ignored.

At this point the journey to compete appears particularly challenging and arduous. The female bodybuilder is ultimately a lone ranger, fighting a battle that no one else seems to appreciate or understand:

It sometimes feels lonely when you have a bad day and people don't realise the effects of the diet on your body - there's no understanding (not that I want someone to namby-pamby around me), but I just want some consideration...yes on the bad days it does feel lonely because when I'm feeling really crap and exhausted and can't even stand up between sets, then I hate it, absolutely hate it, cause my body won't do what I want it too...and even Jo doesn't know how I'm feeling and what I'm going through.

The pilgrimage to competition is an isolating experience that no one else can truly understand unless they experience it for themselves: 'the big moment in the education of the body is, in fact, the moment of initiation' (Mauss, 1973/1974: 80). In the words of Michelle:

I think that unless you go through the bodybuilding diet yourself, you can never fully understand what it's like...I can't really even start to explain it to you, you still wouldn't get it.

At this stage there seems to be a clear separation from all activities, thoughts, emotions and people not directly related to the sacredness of the competition. Furthermore, this distancing appears to be preparing the way for these women to leave behind any other roles they may have, and any other vestiges of the outside world that may have impinged upon them, prior to entering the ritual space of the competition.

The final stretch - creating the elusive body

It's now the final stretch, less than two weeks before the day of the competition. There's a certain amount of relief as the end is now finally in sight. Michelle is feeling far more positive again, and sees the dark 'hellish' days as behind her:

I was finding it really tough, feeling pretty bloody awful and wondering how the hell am I gonna get through to the end of it...like for a while I was really feeling the strain of the extra training and the stricter diet...but now I'm feeling really good, and everyone seems really surprised.

Moreover, Michelle speaks of an 'unexplained energy' that she has had over the last two days – an almost euphoria and 'manicness', that she herself compares to an anorexics 'high':

Anorexics can actually get to a point where they become stronger than they should be – though their body can obviously go past this, but there's a point that although their bodies are absolutely starved, they are unexplainably strong as the body goes into survival mode...I think that's what I have experienced yesterday and today, because I'm not eating enough fuel to do what I'm doing.

Indeed, there seems to be a kind of restlessness and listlessness about her, her face now drawn by the depletion of fat cells, is animated by bright, almost translucent blue eyes with dilated pupils. She describes her feelings as resulting in an 'almost heightened awareness'. These bodily sensations and emotions trigger memories of a previous competition when she recalls being 'hyperactive' backstage. Moreover, this sublime, 'euphoric' feeling manifests itself in an overall feeling of confidence. This is demonstrated in the gym, when for the first time (one week before the competition) she trains in a vest and tight shorts, compared to her usual baggy T-shirts and tracksuit bottoms. As her body begins to approximate the latent image in her mind's eye, she feels 'happier' and more content with her body

and self. Michelle, like other female bodybuilders (see Chapter 6) is both excited and fascinated to see how much her body has changed.

However, as the body appears to increase its armour (by its hard, muscular and lacquered surface) the self is further exposed to the criticisms and reactions from outsiders. Within the gym, Michelle is greeted by hushed whispers, people pointing and shocked stares. Some men even take one look at her and leave the weights area altogether. Instead of her usual reaction of annoyance and frustration from being unwelcomingly distracted from her training, she now challenges the onlookers in a direct but non-aggressive manner. Far from turning away and avoiding eye-contact, in a dignified manner, she poses audaciously in front of the mirror for all to see.

With one week to go, the final preparations are made (to both the outer and 'inner' body'). These include the physical touches to the body itself by the way of tanning, make-up, hair presentation and the manipulation of the body itself. Bodybuilder's are often synonymously associated by the public as having a deep orange tan, which despite skin cancer concerns, is still associated with health and beauty in popular culture. At competition time bodybuilders tan their bodies in order to clearly show off the definition and separation between muscle groups, particularly under the harsh lights of the stage. Michelle has been using sunbeds in the run up to the competition (over the last few weeks) to provide a base to her tan. The day before the show, her partner Jo, applies 3 coats of a deep tanning product – far stronger than a normal self-tanning lotion. It is a messy and time consuming job, as the 'coats' need to dry between applications. A final layer will be applied on the morning of the show, before going to the competition, as tanning products have been banned from the show itself due to its ability to stain everything (including the walls, floors, doors and toilet seats). Michelle needs her tan to be as dark as possible to define and show off her muscularity, at the same time she needs it to be applied evenly and to provide an aesthetically pleasing colour, as she will be judged on the tone of her skin.

As critical commentators on female bodybuilders competitions have pointed out, women are also judged on other 'feminine' qualities and attributes (refer to Chapter 5). Competitions are undoubtedly controlling, but there are some creative and nonconformist elements that may provide some form of 'empowerment' for female bodybuilders, however temporary or partial these victories may be. For Michelle, as the quote below elaborates, the femininity rules are far from simply a restrictive imperative but are a pleasurable integral part of the stage performance:

It's all about putting on a show, like I become a different person on stage – it's an act. I'm not doing it to become 'feminine', as you'll see when you see my hair and make-up it's not like that – but I do want to present myself the best I can. I have to also bear in mind the judges...I want the judges to look at me favourably and there are certain things that I have to do to do that. There is no point fighting it. And you know, it isn't something I do every day, I don't wear make-up...but then I don't wear a bikini and fake tan every day. ..So for me it's all part of the enjoyment of doing something different. It's exciting for me because it's different.

Through Michelle's journey we can see that far from female bodybuilders being 'cultural dupes' (Garfinkel, 1967) who do not recognise the imperative of the 'mask of femininity' (Tseelon, 1995), they are active agents who are aware of the contingencies of winning and losing and negotiate within these rules and regulations. Furthermore, some female bodybuilders also recognise the charade of this gender construction (See also Chapter 6). As Michelle articulates:

This whole thing about female bodybuilders having to retain their femininity, as if by the sheer fact of them being female bodybuilders they have to make a special effort (hair, make-up, posture etc.)... but when the fuck was it masculine to shave your body, tan it, oil it, tan and oil up other competitors bodies and to check each others bodies out? That's not masculine...muscle it seems to be assumed, can't be feminine – you have to put on this whole charade.

The 'inner' body is also modified during this last week in order to create aesthetic perfection - 'peak physique'- on the day of the show, in the shape of full muscles with no water retention or bloating. Careful pharmaceutical and nutritional knowledge is therefore utilised to manipulate the ratio of water, carbohydrates and sodium. There appears to be no uniform procedure for doing this as individual bodies appear to react slightly differently, and even when the bodybuilder has found a method that works for them, there is no guarantee that their body will peak at the right time (Bolin, 1992). This uncertainty creates anxiety, as illustrated by Michelle's comment:

I suppose I'm apprehensive, because it's like the last week of four months hard work...you get paranoid about cocking it all up at the last minute...you know eating too many carbs and smoothing out, or not having enough and appearing flat on stage.

The 'work' involved in capturing the elusive perfect body, makes the 'normal' athletic attempt to ensure peaking at the right time seem ordinary by comparison. It is an intense and critical period, just the smallest 'error' (in terms of timing, nutrition and supplements) can ruin the bodily appearance they have sacrificed so much for. With just days to go, supplements such as vitamin C are dramatically increased (vitamin C acts as a mild diuretic and laxative, to help prevent bloating and constipation as fibre has been eliminated from the diet). Michelle drinks six litres of water to 'flood the body', in order to 'trick' it so that her body does not hold onto any water⁷⁴. This is in preparation for when she will dramatically stop drinking in order to dehydrate. Despite the inconveniences of needing to 'pee' all the time, the tiredness and lack of concentration from the deprivation of carbohydrates and the anxiety about 'cocking up', this is still a time of excitement and fascination as she watches her body metamorphosise.

⁷⁴ Bodybuilders believe that by drinking excess water in the week leading up to the event, they can prevent any water retention from occurring when they severely dehydrate the day (usually afternoon) before the show as the body has been 'tricked' into thinking that water is readily available.

It's now the afternoon of the day before the show. She must no longer drink liquids but must suffer with a deep thirst that cannot be quenched for the sake of water elimination from her cells (she is only allowed a small sip of water when she feels it is absolutely necessary). This deprivation is offset somewhat by the introduction of carbohydrates back into her diet (a process called 'carb-ing up'), which are used to create the appearance of full muscles on stage. Although she had been looking forward to this moment for such a long time, Michelle cannot appreciate the carrot cake, it just tastes like 'sawdust' in her dry mouth. She hasn't trained in the last two days in order to retain and preserve her energy. She lays around waiting, there is nothing more that she can do now, but to wait until the long anticipated day finally arrives.

Whilst the competition diet and preparation seem to act as a retreat from daily life for female bodybuilders, this doesn't appear to bear much resemblance to Turner's concept of the liminoid. As Turner explains, 'one works at the liminal, one plays with the liminoid' (1982:55). Female bodybuilders have invested too much for it simply to be a leisure break. Far from being simply just an extended break from daily life, this heroism gives the impression that these women are actually going somewhere. Neither does the competition and its process appear to be acting as simply a reinforcement of femininity insofar as the feminine role being usually associated with caring for others. Instead, so far, the competition appears to have more in common with Turner's conception of the liminal. There is a clear separation from friends and family, the body is moulded and marked and ordeals are gone through. In order to investigate this further, we must turn to the ritual itself – the day of the competition. In the following section the ritual is described and then analysed to assess the possibility that it provides a re-entry for female bodybuilders - from being a personality in process to becoming one with roles, status and respectability.

The day of the competition (the ritual)

It is 10am in the morning. Michelle is sprawled out on the sofa in her lounge, eyes closed - trying to conserve as much energy as possible and allowing her dramatic 'Egyptian' eye make-up to dry. Her skin is covered in a dark brown/orange stain – the final application had been applied an hour ago. Her hair, unlike many other female competitors, is braided, and she wears short black and silver nail extensions. Despite her face looking extremely drawn due to fat depletion, she claims she is feeling surprisingly relaxed and 'really good' as she had 'left nothing to chance and knew that whatever the outcome [she] had given [her] preparation [her] all'. At 11 am she arrives at the Guildhall with her partner and a few friends, feeling for the first time a 'pang of nerves' which soon disappears as she sights familiar faces in the crowd and feels that sensation 'of belonging'. She stands in the queue waiting for her category (over 55kg women) to be called out in order to be weighed-in. She notices everyone checking out each other's bodies and making comparisons, but is not affected by this herself as she 'knows [she] is ready'. She weighs in at 80kg, meaning that she had put on an incredible 14kg of muscle over the last year. Once checked-in, she and Jo go backstage to the changing room for the female competitors, in order to avoid the distractions of the venue and to find a quiet spot where Michelle can relax, focus and preserve her energy. Most of her time is spent eating, sipping water, lying with her legs raised to keep them drained, mentally going through her routine, tanning and walking through her routines. It transpires (compared to last year when there were 4 others) that there is only one other female bodybuilder competing, and she is in the under 55kg category. Michelle is disappointed by the lack of competition: *'all that training and dieting and £4,000 in costs, and I could have done none of it and still qualified for the British Finals'*.

About 2 hours later - just 20 minutes before she is due to go on stage, Michelle enters the 'pumping room'. This is the place where competitors do their final finishing touches and preparation before going on stage, such as engorging their muscles, using small dumbbells or dyna-bands. The atmosphere is tense,

filled with both apprehension and excitement. There are five female Bodyfitness (Figure) competitors lined up in numerical order, waiting nervously to go on stage. It is warm, and there is a strange musty odour that permeates the air, consisting of a mixture of sweat, chemicals, flatulence and tanning products. The room is littered with confectionary wrappers, bottles containing alcohol or whatever the chosen final 'sugar' hit is, taken just before the competitor goes on stage to increase their vascularity and muscle cell fullness. The tans, despite the banning of 'instant' ones, have managed to leak and stain everywhere; over the door handles, floor and walls of the backstage theatre.

As Michelle begins to 'pump up' her muscles, she can hear the audience in the hall encouraging and urging on the Masters (over 50's) male bodybuilders via claps, applause and yells. She can hear the commentator, like a Butlins host, trying to 'work' the audience and urging them to join in. During the compulsory poses, calls are shouted out: 'come on James', 'legs', 'that's it, show em your guns', 'go on Mark, you can do it', 'keep legs tight Steve!' 'Keep it tight', 'don't forget the legs'. The male bodybuilders come off the stage and the Bodyfitness girls go on and are met with a chorus of wolf whistles. The girls only perform quarter turns and have no routine, so their time on stage is very quick. At last it is time for the female bodybuilders to go on-stage for their pre-judging. Due to the lack of competitors both the light-weight and heavy-weight are asked to go on stage at the same time. It is finally Michelle's turn, she walks confidently onto the stage, into the light, a huge smile on her face. At the commentator's command she does her quarter turns and then goes through the compulsory poses. The hours of practice pay off, for Michelle it's her 'time to shine'. In front of an audience of over 1000 people and the panel of judges it is now Michelle's time for her two minutes of fame. This fleeting space of time provides a moment when glory is possible – to be seen, to exist, to be 'sovereign' (Heywood, 1998). Against the backdrop of a post-modern consumer culture, saturated and obsessed by visual images (Featherstone, 1991:67) the female bodybuilder, under the gaze of all, becomes the spectacle (Debord, 1979). Her identity is validated and confirmed through the acknowledgment of her embodied performance from others - 'I am seen therefore I am' (cf Descartes).

Before Michelle's pre-judging round is concluded, Michelle has one final chance to impress the judges via her finely choreographed routine (only the winner gets to perform in the evening show) that she has put so much time, effort and preparation into. She stands in the middle of the stage, poised under the spotlight, waiting for the beat of 'Insomnia' (Faithless) to begin. Instead an 'R and B' song blares out. A look of disbelief and anger flashes across Michelle's face as the head judge nods for her to continue on regardless. Battling with her emotions she manages to get through the routine with a gritted smile, and then walks off the stage fuming. Later on she explains how she felt at the time:

It was a complete disaster! I couldn't believe it when the music came on...now I know these things happen, but the head judge had no consideration for the effort, time and preparation that had gone into my routine and didn't make it clear to the audience there was a problem. He seemed to think that just playing any old music would be fine! I was livid.

Due to the disappointing lack of competition, Michelle at least knows that she will get a chance to perform again in the evening show. Comforted by this, she decides to 'kill time' by leaving the backstage arena for a few hours and 'heading out-front'. She is greeted by a few close friends, one of whom has an 8 week baby boy. As Michelle holds the baby, the contrast and incongruity between her hardness, muscularity and tanned skin, against his white, soft skin is striking. Thus breaking down and confusing the long standing western dichotomies between male/female, soft/hard, vulnerable/resilient, natural/unnatural. Supporting the tiny boy's head in her comparably huge tanned hands and muscular arms, she sits back to try and relax and enjoy the show.

After the 'big boy's' (male bodybuilder heavyweights) have been on stage, there will be an interval before the evening show commences. Often 'guest-posers' will do a seminar at this point. At some events there are other forms of entertainment such as pole dancers, martial arts displays and children's activities.

Whilst the competition is a very serious event for bodybuilders, it is also a celebration. The atmosphere, including the music booming out, the stuffy air, and the dimmed lights, are reminiscent of a night club. There's a constant hum of noise and excitement in the air. The majority of people are seated, but there are also others milling around; talking to 'like-minded' others, paying for autographs from famous bodybuilders, buying supplements and clothes from the stalls, or getting food and drink from the bar. In America, these events are called 'Meets' (Lowe, 1998), a place where bodybuilders feel they belong and feel appreciated. It is a unique occasion, where bodybuilders can both see and be seen, within an environment that recognises their bodies as a form of 'social capital' (Coleman, 1988). In this milieu, female bodybuilders consider themselves to be protected from the hostility of the outside world by the 'camaraderie' that exists 'among all bodybuilders' (Jacqui, bodybuilder of eleven years). This common consciousness is forged through sharing the same collective encounters in their quest for muscle. In addition, the emotional collective experience of the rite concurs in a 'collective effervescence' (Durkheim, 1995 [1912]), which unites members of the subculture further, helping to create a collective and sustainable identity when they return once again to the outside world and to their profane daily activities.

Most, but not all the men in the crowd are muscular and are wearing t-shirts and jeans with labels such as 'XXXL' on them. The majority of the women in the audience, regardless of whether they are slim or muscular are 'hyperfeminine' in appearance: with heavy make-up and long hair extensions, displaying full cleavages under their tight clothes. The crowd appears to be mainly from the working and lower middle classes. There are some lesbian couples watching the show, but no single women by themselves or overtly homosexual couples⁷⁵.

The evening show commences at 6pm. The panel of seven judges (2 women and 5 men) are seated at a long table bench in front of the stage. They are dressed very

⁷⁵ Despite these generalisations bodybuilding competitions do seem to draw people from all 'walks of life' – including some elderly people, and families with young children (the affiliation tries to make it a family event by providing face painting and mini Easter egg competitions).

formally in dark old fashioned suits and matching ties, pen's poised - ready to fill in and make amendments to the score sheet that had been completed during the pre-judging round. There's a salient pause as the audience waits for the first category to be called up. The Juniors (under 21's) are called onto the stage to do a group 'pose down'. This is where the competitors get to do 'free posing' to emphasis their muscularity and to compare and show themselves favourably against their opponents, typically for the men against the ferocious beat of rock or heavy metal music. For the uninitiated, even the male competitors can appear shocking. The dieting process has caused a thinning of the skin, thus creating a form of monstrous transparency (Halberstam, 1995:7). Their faces are skeleton like: skin is stretched over their skulls, emphasising the hollows of their eye sockets - from which vacant eyes stare out. In contrast, their muscles appear to have taken on a life of their own (see Lingis, 1988:110) as they seem to be trying to free themselves from the constraints of the skin (Kaye, 2005:195). As bodies jostle against each other in the pose down, flesh against flesh ('flesh fight'), each muscle shouts for attention. A couple of minutes later, the round is over and medals are given out. The group then leaves the stage. For most of the juniors their 'time' in the spotlight is now over - 14 weeks of dieting and strenuous effort, time and sacrifice for just a couple of minutes on stage. The top three (with the highest score) however, are called back for final posing comparisons. The announcement of the winner, typically controversial, is greeted by a strong divided reaction from the crowd. Some members of the audience clap and make 'whooping' noises of delight; others make disgruntled noises such as hissing and booing; to project their frustrations with judges' decisions⁷⁶. Trophies, consisting of various sized bronze sculptures in the design of a male bodybuilder are awarded to the top three⁷⁷.

⁷⁶ Judges are volunteers. In order to become a judge you need to register and then sit on the panel and judge for three shows. Scoring is then compared and the individual's suitability is decided upon.

⁷⁷ Sometimes the trophies are in the shape of shields, swords or other fighting symbols, at other times trophy cups are awarded. Women are awarded with a sculpture in the shape of an athletic woman.

Photographs⁷⁸ are then taken to capture the elusive moment - providing a tangible record for days to come (and to further affirm and validate their identity). The lucky winner is then left to perform his 90 second choreographed posing routine to the crowd.

Michelle is finding it increasingly hard to concentrate. She still has about an hour and half to wait before she will be called on stage, so she decides to head back stage and find some sanctuary. She admits to feeling 'really tired and [is] find[ing] it hard to keep going' as the previous 'adrenaline kick' is no longer sustaining her. She feels dehydrated, exhausted and physically shivery and shaky. Everything takes on a surreal quality and she feels somewhat removed from what's going on around her. The irony of bodybuilding is that despite the appearance of a 'superbeing' on stage, in reality they are extremely vulnerable and weak at this point (see Chapter 5 and Fussell, 1991; Klein, 1993 for more detail). As Michelle explained after the event:

The constant influx of simple carbs, alcohol, and pumping up, combined with the fusty smell of tan and unwashed bodies after a while makes for a definite nauseous feeling...although on stage you look amazing, inside you feel like shit...I just wanted a drink of cold water more than anything.

The exceptionally long and challenging day for contestants fits in with Turner's theory that an ordeal must be undergone as part of liminality (initiation ceremonies frequently include trials of pain and stamina). Furthermore Turner (1969:65) claims that 'Liminality is frequently likened to death, to being in the womb, to invisibility, to darkness'. As bodybuilders have been known to die at competitions (usually due to diuretics), this is far from just a metaphorical comparison, but an indication of 'the precarious boundary between life and death, self and body, inside and outside, person and thinghood that the bodybuilder tests,

⁷⁸ Photographs are available for bodybuilders to purchase. They are also often used in British bodybuilding magazines such as 'Beef' and 'Bodyfitness'.

in the hope of merging, however briefly, with the ideal image of totality that only the gaze of the judge can ratify' (Ian, 2001:79).

With 20 minutes to go before she is due to go on stage, Michelle re-enters the purgatory-like area of the 'pumping room'. This space acts as a 'threshold' before the sacrificial rite takes place, stripping bodies of their external identities and equalising initiates. Costume rules are strict, for instance; bikinis must be made of plain opaque materials (e.g no patterns, no padding, no shiny colours), must cover $\frac{3}{4}$ of the buttocks and not be too highly cut. No jewellery (except for a wedding ring), accessories, body make-up can be worn, and no props (e.g. sunglasses) can be brought on to the stage. As Michelle begins to 'pump' up for the last time, new life is breathed back into her organs, causing the separation between her muscle groups to become so distinctly visible and her veins so prominent, that her body looks like an anatomy chart come to life. Her plumped up muscles glisten underneath the oil and perspiration. It is finally time for that sacred moment, when she will 'go into the light'- to be appraised and evaluated. Everything has been building up to this one moment in time. As she waits for that moment when she will offer up her body to be judged, there is a sense of inevitability, captured in the words of Simmel (1971 [1908]) that the adventurer abandons themselves to the 'powers and accidents of the world, which can delight us, but in the same breath can also destroy us'.

She has made it. After waiting and anticipating this moment for so long, it is finally 'her time'. Knowing she cannot lose, she walks on to the stage defiantly, trying to grasp the totality of this fleeting event. She poses against her lightweight competitor - dwarfing the other's smaller build. She then goes through her planned routine, this time to the correct music. The sound of applause and cheers echo around the hall as the crowd shouts for her. It is over so quickly. Michelle is presented with her trophy by a well-known female bodybuilder. Posing for the photographer - she looks confident, radiant and proud. As she stands in the middle of the stage, with the lights shining down on her and the audience clapping and

cheering from the darkness of the stalls, she finally feels that she has truly become a bodybuilder.

In order for the liminal rite of passage to be completed (according to Turner) there must be a final stage of 'reaggregation' - when the initiate re-emerges with a new identity, new role and social status. Symbolically, the ritual causes a death and shedding of the old self and past life and in turn creates a rebirth as a new person. Not only will the recently initiated individual be given a new status but they will have undergone transformative inner changes to their sense of self. Liminality, then, is a time of confusion and ambiguity, but also one of a transformation and change - opening up new possibilities for the future. It is important to note, when assessing whether the competition does indeed provide a 'liminal' stage (whereby women pass from an identity of being 'just' a woman who trains hard, to the identity of a female bodybuilder), that in Turner's original anthropological studies on rituals were based on African tribes. If we consider the subculture of bodybuilding to be a modern day version of a 'tribe', then perhaps there is a form of status transition and transformation of identity. Indeed female bodybuilders feel they *are* gaining positive recognition, something which is consistent with the idea that this rite (the journey to competition and the competition itself) does provide a consecration of identity; she now feels that she 'belongs', is accepted and 'one of them'. Furthermore, for the successful competitive bodybuilder who places well, there is also some evidence that might be read as a change and elevation of status. As a winner she is more likely to have access to media space in bodybuilding magazines, such as photos and articles written about her (though it is usually very limited exposure), and there are also possibilities of partial product endorsement sponsorships. Moreover, she will gain notoriety, respect and even a kind of 'celebrity' status within the subculture. Her new found status usually lends itself to new responsibilities such as mentoring aspiring female bodybuilders. As a representative in the sport, the successful female bodybuilder may be asked to do 'guest posing' at shows, further validating her identity in her new found role. Likewise she may develop more of a fan base that is supportive, appreciative and encouraging of her endeavours (often expressed via emails/website posts etc).

However, the phenomenon can also be interpreted in another way. If we consider the competition ritual as embedded within the societal structure of the modern day industrial world, what has actually happened? Against this backdrop, there appears to be no real status transition, no re-entry into society with any improved position. After the competition, for the majority of the competitors who do not place well, there is a 'come down', where female bodybuilders must return to their daily lives, with no reduced stigma. As Michelle says:

No one prepares you for what happens next - for how crap you feel in the weeks after competition. When you've got nothing to aim for...you've got no immediate goals, no daily structure – you kinda feel a bit lost. You look in the mirror and you look pale, fat and bloated....you just feel sad and generally unmotivated.

If the female bodybuilder competitor is lucky she may be left with a trophy, but all are left with high financial and relationship costs. Thus from the evidence that has been presented and analysed, I propose, that there can be *no* full transformation, in that the activities and role associated with female body building result in no post-liminal realignment of social roles or of social norms. Moreover, female bodybuilding is not a vocation that can result in a neatly defined career. Indeed, the most influential bodybuilding organisation in the world (the International Federation of Body Builders) refuses to offer professional status to British women (signified by the 'pro card'), while there is no prize money on offer to women in British bodybuilding contests. While it is extremely rare for even male bodybuilders to be fully professional in this respect, it is simply not possible to conclude reasonably that a formal, structurally induced, occupational transformation awaits women who commit themselves to the pursuit of muscle ⁷⁹.

⁷⁹ This is not to rule out the exceptions to this situation in the USA, nor to suggest that female bodybuilders are unable to earn money from their bodies in a number of ways (for example, product endorsements, to websites for fans). However, these exceptions do nothing to compromise the conclusion that there is no general socially legitimised role awaiting the female bodybuilder in wider society.

In fact, female bodybuilders in the UK are unable to support themselves from earnings or sponsorships, relying instead on such activities as personal training, working in shops, managing a pub, and office work. Moreover, there is no resolution to the problems and conflicts female bodybuilders confront in the gendered domain of the interaction order (refer to Chapter 6, for an exploration of the prejudices that they face). There appears to be no permanent change for these women. They confront the same problems, the same conflicts in society as they did before they embarked on their journey to competition.

Conclusion

In conclusion, in the light of the above analysis there is no absolute liminality, in the sense that there is no structured transition to a new role and social status in society. Whilst the individual female bodybuilder may feel that her ritual has led to a new self identity reflected in the recognition by others within the 'tribe' of bodybuilding, it has no impact on the social role she occupies outside the subculture. Thus despite conquering the trials of the competition (pushing the mind and body almost to breaking point), the sacrifices involved have not resulted in a reduction of any of the tribulations and stigma these women encounter in their daily interactions. It is hardly surprising then that there is a post-competition 'blues' (low-mood) that accompanies most competitions. Although this might be deemed true for any strenuous competitive event, even if female bodybuilders are successful in their placing and win the competition there is little financial gain or improved status. This is still the case for the lucky few female bodybuilders in the US who do actually manage to become professional. In the words of a pro athlete:

As an amateur you'd get a trophy and maybe a T-shirt and a goody bag. As a pro, unless you are in the Top 5 or Top 3 you get nothing to show for your efforts. I mean NOTHING. Not even a certificate saying thanks for showing up! What is the benefit of being a pro? Status?

(emphasis in original; comment posted on <http://www.bodybuilding.com/fun/other44.htm> money isn't everything.

The competition period may appear to fit in with Turner's concept of the 'liminoid' as it has no real effect or significance for the world beyond the bodybuilding community. However, under further scrutiny this not an accurate assessment, as the female bodybuilders themselves perceive the rite of passage as far more than just a temporary escape from their daily lives. Indeed the ritual process is imbued with meaning and a sense of purpose. For these women, the competition is not simply a leisure break but an event that is taking them somewhere - to a new identity and new life – yet not to any place recognised as legitimate within the broader social structure.

If neither Turner's work on liminality nor the concept of the liminoid fit neatly into the analysis of the bodybuilding competition – what then appears to be the valid interpretation? Here, it seems useful to suggest that these women seem to be developing personalities of the Weberian 'heroic' type. They have chosen a body regime which involves all of their effort, which serves to organise and evaluate their life, including their relationships and other goals, on the basis of coherent and singular criteria. For these women, who cannot abide by the gender restrictions of the interaction order - heroism is the *only* alternative (Chesler, 1994). They have chosen their path and taken responsibility for their life, their body and their decisions. As Michelle stands on the stage alone: proud, defiant and victorious, her whole persona cries out: 'Here I stand, I can do no other'⁸⁰.

⁸⁰ Weber (1915) uses this famous quote in his Politics as Vocation Lecture. These words were spoken by Martin Luther before the 'Diet of Worms', after he had been summoned to retract half of his 95 theses. Luther claimed that he could not go against his conscience. When using these words Max Weber suggests that regardless of whether it is the 'right stance', there is admiration to be found in a man of authenticity and integrity who takes responsibility for his life and actions. Refer to Weber, M. et al. (2004 [1917] xlii-xlv).



Lynn Gray – demonstrating a back double bicep pose

Photo by Rebecca Andrews



Xyleese Richards, winner U.K Championship, 2009



Photos by Giles Thomas



Michelle Jones and Venetia Gloux

Backstage at the Brits

Photo by Fivos Averkiou

The study started from the feminist perspective that meanings and practices surrounding women's bodies play a central role in the social reproduction of gender and gendered relationships. Whilst these bodily meanings and practices can become inscribed onto women's bodies, however, they can also be potentially resisted through actions and processes that begin to destabilise cultural norms of feminine appearance. Within this context, female bodybuilding has been heralded by some feminists as one such liberating practice; a form of activity that questions, interrogates and even begins to undermine conventional notions of female bodies as frail, limited and governed by their biology. This research has provided a new dimension to this vital debate through its detailed analysis of the lives of UK women involved in this activity.

The purpose of the thesis was to investigate whether female bodybuilding can be seen as an emancipatory and empowering transgression of hegemonic standards of feminine embodiment. In seeking to explore this question I felt it was necessary to understand what it was like 'to be' a female bodybuilder. As such, my study endeavoured to facilitate a rich portrait of the values, practices, norms and, above all, the *lived experiences* of female bodybuilders. My research approach sought not only to analyse the wider milieu in which female bodybuilding occurred, but to explore via ethnography, participant observation, and interview, the interactions and phenomenological experiences associated with this activity.

Throughout this thesis I have strived to present an honest, open, accurate and fair portrayal of events. Nevertheless, it is important to note that the findings resented in this study are my personal interpretations of the subculture and are derived from my own corporeally situated perspective on what I heard, witnessed and experienced during this study. I am 'responsible for the reconstructing and

telling of the field' (Coffey, 1999:160). As such, it is important to acknowledge that I do not seek to present a universal 'female bodybuilder' experience, but rather my own impression that there existed common themes and some shared experiences that drew these women together. Consequently, instead of offering what could be construed as a one-dimensional conclusion here - that makes generalisations as if they applied to all female bodybuilders, at all times, and in all places - I seek instead to reveal the contradictory positions and conflicting notions of empowerment and oppression in the lives of these women. In doing this, I hope to be able to provide a more nuanced and sensitive understanding of the topic than would otherwise be the case.

This concluding chapter begins by providing an overview of the main findings of the research, looking at each chapter in turn and providing a brief summary of my analysis. I then discuss the long term effects of bodybuilding for these women, and call for further research to be conducted in this area. After discussing my empirical findings, I then turn to the theoretical debates that have arisen during my research 'journey'. In ending this thesis, I provide some concluding remarks about the nature of ethnographic research, before assessing how my study has contributed to Sociology.

Summary and analysis of my chapter findings

The theoretical chapters leading up to my empirical research contextualised the 'problem' of the female body. Feminist theorists have argued that women's bodies have historically been the main site of oppression, constraint and victimization for women. In this regard, **Chapter 3** explored the dominant western ideologies that have portrayed women's bodies as different, defective and inferior. Whilst the male body has been heralded as 'complete' and 'whole', the female body in comparison, has been regarded as unruly, irrational, weak, emotional, unstable and in need of regulation and strict jurisdiction. Grand-narratives (including those of religion, law, philosophy and science) have affected

the bodies and minds of women, permeating directly and indirectly into their daily lives via different mechanisms of social control - ensuring that gender inequalities remain. This chapter described the ways in which perceived anatomical and psychological disparities between men and women have been used to justify the subjugation of women, and how this in turn has impacted upon their identities, physical capacities and social potentialities.

Chapter 4 described the contemporary 'landscape' of 'women's bodies' and examined the feminist argument that despite the apparent progress of women's liberation, beauty norms are actively - though subtly - still operating to bolster a patriarchal system in which women are disadvantaged in comparison to men. Although feminists concur that women need to be liberated from harmful, compulsory and hegemonic gender roles, there has been little agreement on how this bodily emancipation should happen. Some feminists (including post-structuralists, postmodernists and some radical feminists) have advocated radical alternative body projects as having the potential to reclaim, empower and re-inscribe the body by resisting normalised forms of feminine appearance. Others (such as cultural, essentialist and some radical feminists) have, however, argued adamantly that *all* body modifications are women-hating behaviours and simply different ways of controlling, harming and mutilating the female body. The aim of the chapter was not simply to provide an overview of women's contemporary body modifications and the debates surrounding alternative body projects, but to highlight the need for more in-depth research into these radical practices. Whilst there has been some progress, in the sense of a small, but growing corpus of work such as Pitts' (2003), there has been a general failure to adequately capture the lives, experiences and identities of women as they engage in such modifications. This is important as feminist analyses have tended to divide into two opposite camps that fail to highlight the complexities of female body modifications: tending to reduce them to a manifestation of all-pervasive patriarchal oppression, or to celebrate them as resistant of such domination.

Arguably the most gender controversial body modification practice of them all – female bodybuilding – was investigated in **Chapter 5**. The chapter provided a brief history of the neglected area of female bodybuilding, before moving on to examine the opposing feminist reactions to this extreme practice. In a similar

manner to other female body modifications, female bodybuilding has been viewed radically differently depending on the standpoint of the feminist. Whilst some believe that female bodybuilding holds the potential to liberate women from physical restrictions of imposed femininity, others claim that it is just another way to regulate and control the female body through patriarchal ideology. The chapter concludes by arguing that presently there is not enough qualitative empirical evidence to assess the empowering potential of female bodybuilding and that it is essential to explore the world from the viewpoint of the actors themselves. Furthermore, it is necessary to explore the actual practices and processes of the female bodybuilders to see whether they disrupt habitual practices of femininity (Bordo, 1992:167). I thereby proposed that only by detailed ethnographic work, researching the subculture from the 'inside, out', can we begin to answer and assess whether female bodybuilding can be empowering for women. The purpose of the rest of my study was subsequently to try to rectify this absence of empirical work by providing an insight into the lives of these extraordinary women.

The next four substantive chapters explored the life of female bodybuilders – looking at the most important aspects of their 'world' - life outside the gym, inside the gym and the competition - key themes which were drawn from the interviews and field notes. I will now return to the overriding aim of the thesis and evaluate each chapter regarding female bodybuilding's 'empowering potential'.

The daily lifestyle and interactions of the female bodybuilder was explored in **Chapter 6**. It demonstrated the difficulties, sacrifices and penalties paid for transgressing the gender interaction order and the different strategies that female bodybuilders employed to sustain a positive sense of self and identity to counteract this adversity. Whilst bodybuilding holds out the promise for women of developing a different relationship with their bodies, selves and surroundings, it is a double-edged sword as women become ostracised for being socially deviant (Gilroy, 1989). The muscular female body is potentially empowering as it defies the ideologies of conventional femininity. As elaborated upon in the theoretical chapters of this thesis, cultural notions of gender are primarily made up of the values, norms, practices, images and expectations of the body, in which femininity means the construction of an appropriate surface presentation of the self through body size, movement and behaviour. Through these constrictions of

femininity, Foucauldian feminists such as Bartky (1988), Bordo, (1993) argue that women's bodies become docile ones that conform to certain oppressive norms of beauty, appearance and discipline (for example by slimness, constricted bodily space, suppressed needs, self-monitoring behaviour, passivity and weakness. Female bodybuilders defy these attributes by embodying traits of power and strength, as muscles and size are traditionally symbolic of male power. They challenge the myth of female fragility and delicacy and the cultural assumption of being the 'weaker' sex. Furthermore they refute women's societal role by putting their needs and themselves first, resisting traditional feminine traits of domesticity, nurturance, gentleness and dependence (Nelson, 1994). Thus, on the surface, it appears that the women in my study, by rebelling against normative ideals of feminine behaviour and appearance 'threaten the system of sexual difference' and consequently of 'male dominance' (Birrell and Theberge, 1994).

However, critics focusing on the textual symbolism of female bodybuilders' flesh, argue that any liberating potential is undercut by the fact that it is usual for these women to still strive to be physically appealing in terms of the norms of heterosexuality (Heywood, 1997; Hargreaves, 1994; Mansfield and McGinn, 1993; Schulze, 1990). Although focusing on the evaluation of Chapter 6 and life outside the gym, in order to assess this critique, I need to briefly refer to my findings in Chapter 9 on competitions. These findings show that heterosexual hegemonic beauty norms are encouraged in part, by the rules surrounding female bodybuilding competitions; sites described as submitting to 'the femininity project in terms of the almost hyperfeminine ornamentation, posture and demeanour required for competition' (St. Martin and Gavey, 1996; see also Guthrie and Castelnuovo, 1992; Daniels, 1992). These rules encourage a veneer of femininity to be placed over the project of muscularity (competitions have been viewed as a context in which 'lipstick and blonde locks are as necessary for the woman bodybuilder as they are for the female impersonator' [Mansfield and McGinn, 1993:64]). Furthermore within the subculture of bodybuilding, women are represented in magazines as displaying elements of this contrived femininity, such as bikinis, make-up, painted nails, long hair, breast implants and erotic poses etc. However, despite many female bodybuilders incorporating 'markers of

femininity' into their body-projects, I do not accept that this automatically means that there is a wholesale recuperation of conventional gender ideals. There are several points to make here. First, if this 'recuperation' had successfully occurred, how could we account for the hostility these women faced time and time again in their daily lives? Secondly, their appearance could be seen as a 'postmodern' contradiction that embraces both femininity and masculinity and highlights the charade of gender (see Newton, 1979). Thirdly, whilst the 'feminine apologetic' does exist to differing degrees amongst women bodybuilders, these are not necessarily the reflections and motivations of the women themselves. As I have argued in the Competition Chapter (9), these women are not cultural dupes but negotiate and work within the constrictions of a male environment. Indeed, the women in my study had their own individual definitions of femininity. In this way 'make-up' and 'muscles' could be seen as a negotiation conducted by individual women as part of their attempt to piece together different elements of self-building in order to construct a satisfactory sense of identity.

According to Bordo, as female bodybuilding involves extreme practices of dieting and exercise, it inevitably reproduces normative notions of gender and upholds the dominant patriarchal order. Here, the strict lifestyle regime followed by muscular women is claimed to be far from liberating or empowering, but based instead on oppressive restriction, deprivation and regulation, resulting in self-monitored, subdued, docile bodies (Bordo, 1993; Hesse-Biber, 1996). However, according to my findings in Chapter 6, the regimented lifestyle of the female bodybuilder was Janus-faced – it had both empowering elements to it as well as at times being constricting. Whilst it did restrict their social interactions and place a strain on relationships, most of the time the women found the structure comforting and a means to achieve their goal (as well as becoming ingrained as part of their bodybuilder identity). Although the women admitted that the manipulation of the body using training and food becomes an all-encompassing and obsessive pursuit of perfection, they claimed that they were doing this for *themselves*, to create a body-project to their *own* ideal rather than for the benefit of men or others. In this way, the women make their own decisions and take control of their own lives rather than being controlled by male standards and institutions. For the women

involved, strict self-discipline was associated with direction, control, accomplishment and future opportunities, which even with the negative constrictions of this lifestyle meant choosing a life in accordance with their beliefs and feelings of uniqueness and pride rather than 'lack' and 'insufficiency'. Thus, the interpretations of the women in my study challenged the claim by Bordo that women's bodily discipline acts solely to reassert existing gender configurations (White et al, 1995; Willis,1990).

However, to leave the analysis there would provide only a partial account of the lifestyle of the female bodybuilder. Although I disagree with Bordo (1993:179) that any disciplinary action involved to create the perfect body is an 'illusory' power, there are negative consequences associated with investing too much in the body's appearance. My findings reported many incidences of body dissatisfaction and insecurities, which coincides with Bordo's theory that women's bodies are never good enough as they are, and are forever seeking improvement (although I would add here that all bodies are unfinished entities). Although there were indulgent moments when women cited the immense pleasures and enjoyment in their muscularity, my findings could be used to support the conclusion that female bodybuilding does not generally appear to create high self-esteem through body-image. Against this backdrop of social stigma and self-criticism, it may seem difficult to comprehend why a woman would choose to become a female bodybuilder. Here we must turn to the motivations of these women cited in Chapter 6.

Contemporary *mainstream* body modification practices are arguably conducted to present an attractive appearance for men and others within the 'rules' set down by what Butler (1990) has referred to as a 'heterosexual matrix'. However, according to my study, female bodybuilders chose to bodybuild as something 'purely' for their *own* benefit. Whilst original motivations to weight-train varied - from having sports time for themselves and recovering from a sports injury to more pivotal moments in their lives, none of them directly claimed it was a way to lose weight or to become more attractive to men. Moreover, several of

the women insisted that bodybuilding had a profound and beneficial impact on their lives. A few of these women argued that the lifestyle literally 'saved' them from alcoholism and eating disorders, giving them positive control over their bodies and lives as a form of therapeutic healing. Others also argued that since bodybuilding they had learnt to appreciate their bodies more. In this manner, the women's lives were transformed, at least in part, by their attempts to reclaim their bodies for themselves and their own desires. Following on from this, it is also possible to argue that as this sense of 'selfhood' emerges, this will inevitably affect social relations and instigate important changes in society (Mackinnon, 1987; Rich, 1980; Heywood, 1997; Willis, 1995). However, in reality does this actually occur?

In order to make some brief concluding comments on Chapter 6, it is necessary to return to the fundamental notions of empowerment as laid out in the Introduction, and ask some important questions. First of all, is there any form of individual empowerment? The women cited feelings of empowerment in the form of strength, power, self-control, discipline and determination. In terms of increased self-esteem, self-confidence, positive body image and self-awareness (Hall, 1990), the situation appears complex and can be interpreted as liberating or oppressive depending on the specific issue scrutinized. Secondly, do muscular women's bodies change the gendered relationships and social structures for women in society? As these women actively seek to redefine femininity to include muscles, physical size, power and mental strength, they appear, at least symbolically, to reconstruct elements of cultural discourses regarding female attractiveness and behaviour (Spitzack, 1990). However, further questions need to be asked. Does female bodybuilding lead to *permanently* changed subjectivities and improved lives? Does it actively empower and affect women's position in *society*?

The findings of Chapter 6 appear to raise as many questions about the potential of female bodybuilding to empower women, as they seem to answer. To reiterate, the situation appears complex, contradictory and confusing. Depending on the context and the biography of the muscular woman, the practice can be seen

as both liberating and oppressing. Accordingly, it is perhaps more appropriate given the focus of my study to concentrate on how subjectivities are negotiated through bodywork (Obel, 1996:196). Throughout this thesis I have argued that in order to shed light on these extraordinary women we need to turn to their phenomenological experiences. In addition, to further understand their motivations, we need to explore the key environments of the female bodybuilder; environments which play an important role in shaping these experiences. For these reasons I now focus on the findings from the two 'inside the gym chapters' – a place where these women feel most at home and experience the 'work-out' as the peak phenomenological heightened pleasure in their daily lives.

Chapter 7 provided an ethnography of the gym, focusing on women's empowerment through underexplored narratives of space. For the women in the study, the gym acted as a partial refuge and retreat against the malevolence of the outside world. It was a place where female bodybuilders could move about without having to be so concerned about the responses their 'unfeminine' physiques, postures and movements may provoke on the street. Not only does the gym provide an arena where they can build their bodies, but it creates a comparatively protected sphere whereby female bodybuilders can rebuild and re-repair any damage caused by 'attacks' on their identity elsewhere in their lives. This identity restoration happens both through self-affirming interactions with appreciative and 'like-minded' others, and through a complete immersion in their weight training endeavour.

The female bodybuilders in my study carved out a powerful niche for themselves – of space, and of accomplishment. They articulated a sense of confidence, control, autonomy, bodily expression and strength that was confirmed in observations made of their training (manifest through their demeanour, gestures and appearances). This provides evidence for the argument made by sports feminists that dynamic activities, such as heavy weight-training, can teach women to trust their bodies and to enjoy their physical competence and capabilities. Furthermore the women appeared 'unapologetic', with regards to not only taking up body space in terms of size and structure, but in terms of bodily movement, mobility and actions. Hence, these women remained undeterred that their bodily

behaviour and deportment did not conform to hegemonic notions of femininity such as being 'delicate' and 'graceful' and 'passive'.

In this way, despite gendered interactional 'obstacles', the gym might be seen overall, as a place of empowerment for the female bodybuilder. A space in which she can use her body in an instrumental, aggressive and authoritative manner and potentially take ownership of this new found power and use it for her own advancement. Furthermore, bodybuilding could be perceived as liberating women, as it attacks traditional notions of femininity and replaces them with new constructions of women's bodies, behaviours and practices. However, yet again the situation is complex. Cultural, essentialist and radical feminists argue that for women to take on masculine pursuits and activities, would be to take on the same traits of violence, aggression, oppression, masochism and dominance as men. For example, Grimshaw (1999) points out that dominating space and striving to reach the limits of physical capacities may terrorise or oppress others. Thus, on one hand, female bodybuilding can be discerned as empowering, as it enables women to embody male traits such as power, strength and muscularity, thereby challenging cultural constructions of gender and sexual difference (Schulze, 1990). Whereas, on the other hand, it can be argued that despite these women building new bodies, new femininities and identities for themselves, they ultimately do not act in a sphere of 'bodily empowerment' as they still submit to the dominant, cultural masculine structures and ideologies on which bodybuilding is based (Klein, 1993). To investigate this debate further, Chapter 8 focused on the phenomenological experiences of these women in the gym, looking at how their subjectivities are expressed, lived and created through their bodies and through the amalgamation of muscle and iron incorporated within their physical selves.

My findings in **Chapter 8** suggest that whilst many female bodybuilders did indeed embrace both the hypermasculine attitude towards pain, and the satisfaction of being able to conquer it, there are alternative interpretations of these actions to those given by critical feminist and sports psychologists, who see it simply as a pathological manifestation of self-hatred and inferiority. As Monaghan (2001) and Crossley (2006) suggest (from their comparative studies on male bodybuilders and circuit trainers), traditional understandings of pain exist within, yet are also subverted by the centre of the subculture itself. Thus female

bodybuilders *reworked* the meanings and physical sensations of 'pain', so that they became pleasurable, enjoyable and desirable. The women cited feelings of 'heightened awareness', 'euphoria', 'flow', 'release', 'erotic intensity' and gratification. In this context it is hardly surprising that female bodybuilders wish to dwell in the gym for as long as possible, in order to savour and relish these sensations. Furthermore, it is the actual experiences, feelings, emotions and intimate accounts of the bodybuilding process articulated by the female bodybuilders themselves, which helps to explain their commitment to a muscular order. The ethnographic findings in this research oppose the argument made by critical feminists such as Bordo (1988:98) that bodybuilding is an ascetic act lacking sensuality: 'preoccupied with the body and deriving narcissistic enjoyment from its appearance..[with] little pleasure in the experience of embodiment'. Indeed, the 'pain' 'of the actual process of bodybuilding' and 'their subjective and corporeal effects are central rather than peripheral to the experiences and motivations of many contemporary body modifiers'(Sweetman, 1999:205). This substantiates the importance of focusing on the 'lived reality' of such practices, rather than simply treating them on the basis of their status as a 'text' or 'outer appearance' (Featherstone, 1991:171; Radley, 1991:112-113).

However, in terms of bodybuilding's potential to 'empower' women in society more generally, the situation appears far more complicated. Although the women articulate an increase in confidence and self-esteem that helps them to re-enter the 'outside' world again, they are still confronted with the same discriminations and stigmatisation as they did before they entered the gym. As they leave the refuge of the weights arena, they seem to face the same difficulties and problems as before (refer to Chapter 6 in terms of stigma and isolation). However, a final assessment could not be made until the most extreme and important moment in the bodybuilding calendar was explored - 'the competition' - an event that deals with the culmination of their ambitions and 'sets the seal' on these women's identities.

Drawing on Turner's (1992) work on liminality, **Chapter 9** assessed the 'outcome'/consequence of the competition for female bodybuilders by focusing on Michelle's experiences. It concluded that whilst the female bodybuilders

perceived the rite of passage as an event that was taking them somewhere – to a new identity and life within the bodybuilding community (associated with elevated status), there was no liminality in absolute terms. Indeed, despite conquering the ‘gruelling’ and ‘soul destroying’ diet and beating their opponents on stage, there was no full transformation. The activities and roles associated with female bodybuilding result in no post-liminal realignment of social norms and roles. Indeed, there is no vocation awaiting them within the subculture and, moreover, there is no resolution to the problems, conflicts and ostracisation female bodybuilders contend with in their daily lives. Thus the sacrifices and commitment that women make to the muscular order have no impact on the social role they occupy outside the subculture.

In light of the evidence from this Chapter, it is difficult to comprehend how competitive female bodybuilding can provide *societal* empowerment for women. Whilst there is a re-definition of normative gendered appearances (as discussed earlier in the findings of Chapter 6), under the gaze of the judges, women’s bodies are still judged, objectified and found wanting (according to the criteria laid down by male leaders in the sport). Furthermore, there is little to suggest that the competition holds a ‘transformatory potential’ (Young, 1993), that permanently changes women’s political and social position, resulting in a step towards gender equality. This is however, not to ignore the women’s individual satisfaction. For the competitor there is a huge sense of accomplishment in achieving this fleeting perfection of the body. Feelings of individual uniqueness, self-control, autonomy and self-respect equate with a sense of individual empowerment. Nevertheless, as socially discredited individuals facing an unaccepting world (Goffman, 1983), there exists no place for these stigmatized women in the moral order of society; they are ‘cut off’ from respectable society like other subcultural groups have been in the past (e.g. Hall and Jefferson, 2006).

For the female bodybuilders in my study, the costs and sacrifices - even the potential of an early death - are worth it. The satisfactions intrinsic to building muscle outweigh the disadvantages. Their involvement in this muscular order is a sensual and visceral affair that ‘eats into’ their identities as they pursue physical

transformation (Falk, 1994). Female bodybuilding is based in restricted leisure space and may appear no more than a symbolic threat, or an 'imaginary solution', to gendered norms (Clarke *et al*, 2006). However, I would argue that whilst 'the body cannot even temporarily transcend ideology - it can certainly bother [it]' (Schulze, 1997:29). In any event, female bodybuilders offend the sentiments of society's stylistic, experiential and physical norms. They shock people's sense of normality and find pleasure and self-affirmation in what is deemed unacceptable. As was concluded in Chapter 9, the women in my study seemed to be developing personalities of the Weberian 'heroic' type, by carving out a life of their own choosing, of dignity, lived in accordance with their own values. They have chosen a body regime which involves all of their effort, which serves to organise and evaluate their lives, including their relationships and other goals, on the basis of coherent and singular criteria. The female bodybuilders have been the agents of their own bodily transformation and created a 'life-space' of their own, for which they take full responsibility. They have chosen a 'heroic-journey' through life that gives them meaning, purpose, fulfilment and drive. Their lifestyle gives them both pleasure and pain; it frees them and constricts them. For those outside the female bodybuilding subculture, it may be very difficult to comprehend their all encompassing desire for and commitment to muscularity - indeed it seems fair to state that you have to *live* it and *feel* it to really know it.

What does the future hold for these women?

Pitts (2003:78) argues that in order for extreme body projects to be 'reclaimative' rather than mutilative and 'harmful', they must at some point eventually come to an end. The competition ritual, however, does not seem to act as a full completion of events, as the competitor must then prepare herself for the next competition - to create a 'better' body than before. Furthermore, I am left concerned as to what will happen to these women in their future (e.g. 20 years time). The birth of new drugs in accordance with scientific and technological advances has meant that the creation and building of 'grotesque and monstrous'

bodies has been made possible in an unprecedented manner. The long term effects of these drugs are still not known. Whilst 'side effects' such as arthritic problems, hernias and nose bleed due to high blood pressure commonly occur, we do not know what the life expectancy is for competitors or 'serious' bodybuilders today (e.g. heart, liver and kidney failure). In addition, women who take steroids risk permanent 'gender defects' (i.e. excess facial and body hair, enlarged clitoris, deep 'broken' voice) that will never allow them to be accepted fully back into the gendered interaction order. Whilst I have purposefully avoided an in-depth discussion of drugs (as justified in my Methods Chapter - 2), the effects of them are real, permanent and irreversible. For the women in my study, it is still too early to know the full consequences of their actions, in terms of their drug taking and hard-core lifestyle. However, these women are fully aware of the risks they take and have a fatalistic attitude to the future. This is demonstrated by Michelle's comment: *'I would rather live a short life and do what I want to do, rather than a long life of regret'*. Indeed, their bodies, identities and lives are so wrapped up in the pursuit of muscle that I find myself wondering if they could ever afford to doubt the life they have chosen. I am reminded here, of the negative articulations given by an American ex IFBB professional female bodybuilder, who had retired after becoming disillusioned with the sport. Towards the end of her career she feels 'trapped within her body' and trapped within her life:

So I was training people at the gym and training myself, thinking this is all I'm ever going to have, this is all I'm ever going to be and how much longer am I going to be able to continue doing this, because I get older everyday...and my body, just hurt me constantly all the time, and I thought, 'I cannot do this anymore'. (cited in Kwiatkowski, 1995:58)

Furthermore, she is filled with feelings of remorse, guilt, self-blame and self-hatred. For example when she is in terrible pain because of her joints, she reminds herself: 'you know, you wouldn't be here if you hadn't done this to yourself' (ibid.:50). The full extent of her emotional anguish is captured in the following comment:

You try not to look in the mirror and see what you've become. You don't look like a woman any more. Some of the side effects are permanent, like my voice. I don't like to talk around people...several of the early competitors have killed themselves (ibid.:64)

Although I do not claim this person's experience to be representative, it does highlight yet again the immense costs and consequences for this chosen lifestyle. In order to discover the long-term effects, and related to this, bodybuilding's potential for these women, a longitudinal study, or a life history approach would be needed. To explore these women's lives further, more research is also required into the phenomenology of drug taking (particularly steroids), exploring the positive aspects and not just the negative (e.g. allowing these women to create a body of their choosing, strength, power, aggression, confidence, sexual pleasures etc.) and how they negotiate and deal with the side effects.

Theory and the body revisited

In the preface to this thesis I used the analogy of the journey to describe the research process and in particular its relevance to me during this investigation. As I acknowledged there, I have travelled a long way since this journey began. My theoretical stance, together with its ontological and epistemological implications, has been challenged through the experimental aspects of the research. Faced with the complexities and contradictions of the life of the female bodybuilder as revealed by my empirical work, I began to doubt and question the usefulness of the second wave feminist perspectives on which I had initially positioned my thesis. In this way, the main body of the thesis can be seen as an implicit critique of conventional feminist theories predicated on simple binary oppositions and the use of one-dimensional concepts such as patriarchy.

My research findings highlighted the contradictions and complexities in the lives of female bodybuilders – demonstrating how these women actively negotiated, resisted as well as upheld, hegemonic notions of femininity. Furthermore it

captured the complex ways in which female bodybuilders create (and continually renew) their identity through everyday practices. These 'findings', which illustrated the dialectical processes at work between agency and structure, called for a more sophisticated theory that went beyond the more simplistic theoretical framework provided by second wave feminists. Due to these inadequacies I have moved towards a post-structuralist approach which would allow a more nuanced exploration of the ambiguities in empowerment as discovered in the life world of female bodybuilders. In this section it is my intention to explore the tensions between my research findings and these theoretical perspectives further.

Questioning concepts central to second wave feminism

Through the earlier review chapters I began to critique the main concepts on which second wave feminism is founded. In Chapters 3 and 4, I noted the problems that can arise from the assumptions underpinning, and unexamined uses of, the terms 'woman', 'patriarchy', 'oppression', 'transgression', 'resistance' and 'empowerment'; problems that have been highlighted by post-structuralists and postmodernists. The notion that women are united by patriarchal oppression appears - at this stage of my research journey - rather naive. Indeed, as Gelsthorpe (1992) points out, 'women are never just women', they have a class, a sexuality, an ethnicity and come from diverse backgrounds with different life experiences. In this way there is no 'universal' woman as such, founded upon biological and essentialist interpretations, but multiple and distinctive *women*.

In relation to this, 'patriarchy', is also presented by second wave feminists as being an ahistorical and 'fixed' concept; suggesting that all men belong to a homogeneous group with a unified masculinity. It follows from this assumption that all men dominate and all women are oppressed. However, this idea of a monolithic patriarchy fails to explain social and historical changes. Furthermore, it cannot make sense of the different experiences and variations between and within the genders. For example, why is it that some women resist patriarchal constraints? Why do some women oppress other women, and indeed dominate some men? This is not to suggest that women's position is not one of subservience

within the broad global gender order, but rather to explain that this oppression is neither inevitable nor one-dimensional. In the context of these debates, it may be more appropriate to follow Walby (1990) in her suggestion that there are multiple forms and degrees of patriarchy. Clarke's (1998:47) understanding of women's oppression also becomes particularly useful here – an oppression conceptualised as 'multifaceted, multicomplex, in some places interlocking, and in all cases involving relations of power, privilege, domination and subordination and always located within a specific cultural and his/her/historical context'. If we take such insights seriously, they may help us to conclude that female bodybuilders, like other women, are not simply 'oppressed' but engage in complex and contradictory practices that uphold and challenge a number of gender inequalities.

Traditionally, feminists have highlighted the importance of listening to women's voices and experiences as a means of exposing the many ways by which women have been 'oppressed'. However, whilst I believe that this endeavour has been a necessary one, rectifying a previous absence, it cannot by itself explain the complexities and contingencies of patriarchal relationships. For this reason, there has recently been a recognition that in order to understand the structure and reproduction of male dominance, feminists need to research men and masculinities – on the basis that women and femininities are created in direct relation to these phenomena (Kelly, Burton and Regan, 1994:33–34; Mac an Gail, 1996; Thorne, 1993). Hall (1996) also warns us that in order to end oppression, feminists must be careful not to exclude men's experience from analysis, as that would be to repeat the old exclusionary mistakes of malestream history. Consequently, there is a need to incorporate a more relational and inclusive approach to gender. This 'need' was exposed in my empirical chapters, particularly with regard to investigating space and noise dominance in the gym, and the pain and masochism associated with bodybuilding ideology (see Chapters 7 and 8). In this sense, it could be argued that both men and women are 'prisoners of gender although in highly differentiated but interrelated ways' (Flax, 1987:45).

I want to turn now to the concept of 'transgression', a notion which is pertinent to the debates and findings set out in this thesis. Ian (2001:70) argues that 'gender transgression is not what bodybuilding is about'. She claims that

regardless of individual's intentions, the bodybuilding discourse - under the guise of a heroic ideal - 'actually uses these subjects to maintain, even more rigidly than main stream culture...ideals of masculinity and femininity'. Furthermore, Ian critiques the very notion of transgression, claiming that it is a 'fantasy' which bears similarities to the second wave feminist notion of 'transcendence'. Both concepts, according to her, suggest a utopian body, and yet as she points out: 'Bodies can no more free us from ideology than we can free them from death' (ibid.:93). Whilst I agree with Ian that all bodies are situated within discourse and ideology and cannot for one moment rise above them (i.e 'transcend' them), I am concerned with her suggestion that ideology totally prevents individuals acting against dominant norms. Such a view precludes the possibility of human agency and makes it very difficult to understand how actual contestation and social change occurs in society. Transgression and resistance can, I suggest, exist as distinctive phenomena *alongside* normative hegemonic structures: while their effectiveness may vary depending on the context in which they operate and the precise form they take, it is unjustified to simply assume they are always blunted by and incorporated within dominant social norms

For this reason, as I mentioned earlier, the female bodybuilder's body *is* transgressive as it rebels against normative ideals of femininity – at least in terms of the interaction order. However, as I have also argued, this is not a simplistic, straight forward transgression as these women also abide by certain feminine practices. Thus, their bodies cannot be argued to simply *be* 'transgressive' or 'resistant' or indeed 'conformist' in isolation, but assume shifting meanings depending upon the cultural context in which they are embedded. Furthermore they are not statically situated, but are constantly shifting and moving as they engage in complex strategies of compliance and resistance. Rich's (2002) study provides us with a way of interpreting the agency and 'resistance' of these women. As she argues, 'whilst at times they invoked gender dualisms, in keeping their positions in flux, moving back and forth into the margins...they were at times active in subverting and decentralising dominant relationships' (Rich, 2002: 219).

When discussing the problems of 'resistance', another concept of importance to the findings of my thesis, it is necessary to turn briefly to the issue of 'intentionality'. Some of the women in my study (though by no means all)

embraced and chose the bodybuilding way of life as a form of resistance and rebellion and a way to 'reclaim' their bodies for themselves (see Chapter 6). For others, the narratives of resistance were more subtle, suggesting only by implication the ways that their lifestyle choice challenged normative understandings of gender. Indeed, for these women 'the conscious refusal to be defined as [a] victim provides them with a sense of agency' (Sparkes, 1996:173). Unlike Bordo who claims that these women are living under a 'false consciousness', as cultural dupes, I have argued that it is vital that we take seriously their voices, experiences, desires and intentions as crucial sources of information. This is not to claim that we should take these women's stories of resistance as the complete truth, providing a pure reflection of its effects and outcomes, but to say that these women are active agents within constraining contexts. Thus, I take seriously the notion of resistance suggested by Rich (2002:208) that 'emerges as neither static nor in all instances monolithic, but [as] something deployed at various times and locations'.

Following these discussions, it is reasonable to conclude that *no* practice can in absolute terms emancipate and empower women. 'No body' can stand outside of society that we inhabit and be heralded as a total and complete empowering practice or icon (Grimshaw, 1999). Instead, it is therefore necessary to research the ways in which women negotiate, accommodate and resist within the given social context. In the same way as Pitts (2003:81), my study, 'highlights the female body as a site of negotiation between power and powerlessness, neither of which are likely to win fully'. Empowerment then can be seen as a shifting, transitory and evolving process full of complexity and contradictions - just as one 'problem' seems to be resolved, others are revealed.

Contemplating post-structuralism

As mentioned earlier, during the course of my research I realised that second wave feminist theory was inadequate in capturing and uncovering the subtleties and complexities of the lifeworld of the female bodybuilder. Post-structuralist and postmodernist approaches seem more equipped to grasp these

intricacies and provide a more sophisticated analytical framework. Thus far, I have taken from them their recognition of diversity, difference and complexity: it would have been out of place in an empirically focused thesis to embark on abstract theoretical discussions unrelated to the study in hand. This conclusion, however, provides a space for me to reflect in a little more detail on the advantages and limitations of adopting these approaches, and why it is that a 'hybrid' incorporating their insights together with an approach that takes into account post-essentialist 'fleshy' female bodies might be the best way to develop our understanding of female bodybuilders.

Elbert (1991) points out that postmodernism and post-structuralism consist of an array of sometimes conflicting discourses, yet they also share a range of productive insights about the inadequacies of grand narratives, unqualified generalisations and binary oppositions that usefully illuminate the findings of my research. While postmodernism can be seen as emerging as a critique of modern scientific endeavours associated with the Enlightenment and its allegiance to progression and objectivity, post-structuralism might also be said to have evolved as a critical response to the principles and practices of Structuralism. Both schools of thought reject the belief in metanarratives and the idea that 'the truth' is out there waiting to be discovered. Accordingly, they reject feminist standpoint epistemology on the premises that there can be no 'universal woman', 'women's experience' and even the possibility of accessing any authentic female voice (Nicholson, 1990). In their attack on the notion of monolithic universals, they call for more fractured, fluid and multiple understandings. Power, according to these perspectives, is not seen as something that is simply possessed or as all encompassing; rather it is partial, invisible, contextual, complex and dynamic. Foucauldian post-structuralists for example, explain power as formed through multiple and shifting discourses (Foucault, 1980). For feminists such as Bordo and Bartky, this approach has appeared particularly enticing as it demonstrates the micro ways by which bodies are controlled and disciplined (see chapters 4 and 5). Power is not seen as being possessed by a singular authority, but as being manifold, elusive and internalised into everyday practices.

Postmodernist and post-structuralist perspectives are useful then, in highlighting the limitations of the feminist standpoint that implies all women are oppressed and dominated by men. They suggest instead that women are not passive victims, but rather are situated in dialectic power relationships which not only shape them but are *shaped by* them. This approach enables an alternative reading of the complexities of ‘empowerment’ exemplified by the female bodybuilders in my research, as it allows for ‘an incorporation of resistance and contradiction since the self is passively positioned in some discourses, but at the same time is active in positioning in other discourses’ (Rich, 2002:76). In addition, postmodernist and post-structuralist theories deconstruct binary thinking and being, and undermine traditional fixed biological notions of men/women. Instead they call attention to ‘gender relations’, as complex, interdependent and fluid social processes.

However, embracing these perspectives comes at a price – as in its strictest sense postmodernism and post-structuralism have been viewed as anti-political and anti-feminist. As Soper (1990), points out, if there is no such thing as ‘woman’ on whose behalf to speak, and indeed no ‘truth’, then the concepts of political action and emancipation are rendered useless. Following this line of thought, feminists such as Maynard (1994) and Francis (1999) have argued that a ‘pure’ feminist post-structuralist approach is impossible.

Before I give up in the search for relatively sound theoretical resources, however, it is possible that there exists a middle-way which might enable us to maintain the most useful insights of contrasting approaches. Whilst there does appear to be an unbridgeable chasm between post-structuralism and feminism, for example, some feminists have proposed combining the perspectives selectively, by incorporating aspects of post-structuralism/ postmodernism into their own feminisms (e.g. Clarke 1998; Rich 2002; Francis 1999). Alcoff (1997:5) explains this ‘third way’ approach in the following quote:

Instead of championing postmodernism as uniquely theoretically correct and trying to win for it discursive hegemony...[it is more useful] to use postmodernist work – for instance on the discursive constitution of

subjectivity, the plurality and open-endedness of meaning, and the ubiquity of power - as a disposable toolkit with which to work on particular philosophical and/or cultural issues as needed....a conscious eclecticism...

This eclectic approach looks promising for my work in relation to understanding and researching female bodybuilders. It allows me to still explore the gendered identity of these women without using central concepts such as 'woman' and 'emancipation; uncritically. I am further enticed by Munro's (1998:29) statement:

As a feminist I don't fear that post-structuralism necessarily results in a lack of intentionality or agency. On the contrary I believe that it offers possibilities for preconceiving the subject, resistance and agency in more complex and powerful ways.

However, whilst I am 'getting to grips' with the possibility of creating my own amalgamation of feminist theory and discourse, I am still concerned that post-structuralist and postmodernist theories have tended to overlook 'fleshy' material bodies. Throughout my thesis I have insisted that such real, material bodies matter, a stance I believe has been further supported through my empirical findings. Indeed, as I have previously pointed out, the lived experiences of enfleshed subjects are pivotal in understanding the motivations and identities of the female bodybuilder. This then, highlights the importance of focusing on the phenomenological experiences of 'actors'.

Back to Fleshy bodies

Thus, whilst post-structuralism has been vital in explaining power relations through the use of discourse, I share the concerns of those critical commentators who argue that it views humans as constituted ontologically through language and cultural texts, rather than being grounded in material bodies which have basic needs, senses, habits and sensualities (Shilling, 1993). This problem has been highlighted further by Kuhlmann and Babitsch (2002),

who claim that despite the contribution of postmodernism to the development of gender and women's studies, its approach has not been incorporated into research and activism on women's health issues. Thus there currently lies a 'gap' between theory and empirical work, or perhaps, as Kuhlman and Babitsch more aptly identify, there exists a 'fault line' between the two approaches which they explain in the following quote:

A central 'fault line' seems to be the issue of whether the body is recognized as possessing its own materiality, beyond cultural inscriptions and social process of production. This issue ties into the question of whether or not and how processes occurring within the body can be measured and analyzed (Kuhlman and Babitsch 2002:7)

They claim that whilst prominent post-structuralist theorists on 'female bodies', such as Grosz, Haraway and Butler (see Chapter 1, p.18, p.19 and Chapter 4 p.102, p.103 for more detail) have brought vital new dimensions to feminist theory, there has still been a neglect of material bodies; ones which age, feel pain, become diseased and so forth. This position is supported by Birke (1999:2):

Whilst recent sociological and feminist theory has made enormously important claims about the processes of cultural inscription *on* the body, and about cultural representations *of* the body, the body that appears in this new theory seems to be disembodied, or at the very least disembowelled. Theory, it seems, is only skin deep.

However, as my research findings highlight, it is important that feminist theory takes into account real fleshy corporeal bodies - ones which touch, smell, taste and have internal organs - without falling back on the simplicities of biological essentialism. For Kuhlmann and Babitsch (2002:11), there can be no clear or comfortable solution to the 'female body' problem - as there appears to be no single approach or theory that can adequately provide all the answers - each perspective has its advantages and pitfalls. Instead they call for an 'uneasy' collaboration that would include 'divergent dimensions [such] as cultural

inscriptions, medical discourse, living conditions, and individual feelings and perceptions as well as biological processes inside the body, as factors which all contribute to the very different ways we are embodied' (ibid.).

It is at this point that I return to the feminist phenomenological approach that I advocated in my Methodology chapter (2), an approach that allows the subjective experiences of women to be expressed, as embodied agents who think, act and know through their bodies. I espoused this position not with the belief that it captures an authentic experience which is 'epistemologically self-sufficient', but that an appreciation of the lived female body is 'epistemologically indispensable' (Alcoff, 2000) to understanding women's lives within specific cultural and social positions. In Chapters 1 and 2 I mentioned some of the prominent feminists (who reside) within this field (e.g. Young, Marshall, Kruks, Alcoff). In this conclusion, I want to engage further with two theorists who have made promising advances in this area and help reveal to us its potentiality.

Martin's (2001) work on the cultural analysis of women's reproductive systems incorporates three different approaches into her methodology. She provides a discourse analysis of scientific and cultural interpretations of female bodies and compares it against the phenomenological experiences of women themselves. In addition, she incorporates a sociological analysis exploring how social and economic factors (e.g. class and ethnicity) shape American women's reproductive lives. Her findings show that despite the pathological metaphors found in bio-medical discourse (e.g. the use of terms such as 'failed', 'decay', 'disintegrates' to describe menstruation) that form women's perception of their selves and bodies, there are indications of 'resistance' that draw on the phenomenological experiences of the women themselves. Furthermore, and rather interestingly, it is working class females who are most likely to resist the medical discourse, preferring to rely on their own interpretations through both their embodied experiences (emphasising how their body looks, smells and feels) and the cultural significance of these experiences (for example believing periods to be a woman's rite of passage). Martin's work looks encouraging, in the sense that it

explores the two-way interchange by which embodied subjects both shape and are shaped by discourse.

Finally, I wish to briefly look at Davis' (2007) attempt to avoid either political paralysis or a standoff between post-structuralist theory and women's health activism. She claims that there needs to be three major shifts in feminist body theory. First of all, the body should not be viewed simply as a discursive text, or as a continual deconstruction of Cartesian dichotomies. Neither should it be reduced to a simplistic biological essentialism. Rather, feminist theorists need to acknowledge that bodies are made of flesh, have internal organs, age, become ill and are real material entities, at the same time as realising that they are also culturally manufactured. Exploration is needed into the differences (social context, geographic position, individualities) between women's bodies, alongside the recognition that bodies are constantly evolving, changing and interacting with their surroundings. Secondly, feminist theorists need to turn their attention to finding different ways to 'address how differently located women perceive, feel about, and understand their bodily experience's' (Davis 2007:62). To reiterate, this approach is advocated not with the belief that the 'truth' can be uncovered, but with the idea of using women's lived experiences as 'a starting point for understanding a particular body, at a specific moment in time, (or) in a particular social location' (ibid.). These subjective interpretations should not be understood alone, but as Kuhlmann and Babitsch's champion, within and against other forms of knowledge. The third shift, according to Davis would be to revisit the notion of women's agency as expressed by postmodernists and post-structuralists. Davis argues that:

Agency is not simply a discursive effect, an artefact of shifting cultural discourses. It involves a practical and – to some extent – intentional activities of situated knowers, who interpret, reflect upon, and rework their experiences (Davis, 2007:62).

She further claims that it is *because* knowledge is inevitably situated and contextual that these lived experiences must be made visible and accessible – as

they expose the ways in which social conditions are both enabling and constraining.

In the context of all that I have heard, witnessed, experienced, read and mindfully wrestled with, I propose that the methodological approach utilised by Martin and the theoretical approach advocated by Davis, holds promise for developing new feminist theories of the body. This might involve an approach that allows for an exploration of the subtleties and complexities of women's lives (and men's lives) and the social reproduction of gender inequality, using multiple means such as discourse analysis, phenomenology and social stratification analysis. Research on women's bodybuilding would benefit from these collaborative orientations. For example, a multi-dimensional research design could usefully be applied to the practice of 'female bodybuilding within the gym', or an exploration of 'female bodybuilders and steroids', by beginning with the phenomenology of the women's experiences (i.e. feelings, side effects, negotiations) and juxtaposing them against the interaction order (e.g. media/societal, relationships), medical and scientific discourse (e.g. anatomy) and bodybuilding discourse. In addition, all of these investigations would need to acknowledge the similarities, differences and complexities between (and within) the women – situating them as agents within societal constraints.

Concluding comments

The research has been a challenging, fascinating and sometimes exhausting experience. Immersing myself in the field required a dramatic lifestyle change. By its very nature, ethnography demands time, commitment, energy and patience. The difficulty lies in combining good research practice (by accessing and becoming embedded in the social fabric under study) with good research and writing skills (interviewing, note-taking, and presenting the findings).

Furthermore, ethnography is full of political, ethical and moral 'minefields' that need to be navigated carefully. For example, feminist ethnographers must justify

to their own conscience what intimate 'data' should remain private and what should be exposed to the public academic sphere. Research, from this approach is a deeply emotional and political affair and is inevitably subjective. In writing up, I have been the medium through which the field has been constructed, represented and analysed. As I elaborated upon in the methods chapter, my 'fingerprints' are all over the research and the subsequent findings.

Despite these limitations, I believe that ethnography was the most appropriate method by which to explore the 'lived experiences' of female bodybuilders. As Taylor (1993:17) recognises, researching the lived body can often be difficult, as 'living' is essentially a practical activity; it is done rather than reflected upon and not necessarily told as a narrative. Yet, it would have been impossible to fully comprehend the meaning and importance of female bodybuilding without attending to the 'intricacies of its lived sensuality' (Katz, 1988:167). Furthermore, as this study has illustrated, participant observation may be the only method of obtaining accurate and in-depth data about deviant and stigmatised subcultures. It is a unique study – there are, at present, no other ethnographies on female bodybuilding. Indeed there have been very few studies of female bodybuilders in the U.K at all. I have consequently listened and tried to capture the voices of women who are rarely heard. I have also incorporated under-explored and undeveloped work on spatial analysis in my data and emphasised its relevance in social analysis. Most of all my practical research has highlighted the importance of relationships in the field and how they impinge directly on the research.

Despite the explosion or flourishing of 'body studies' since the 1980's, paradoxically the 'sporting body' has been hesitant to engage in studies focusing on the 'lived' experiences of participants. Thus a wider objective of my study was to help redress this balance and to point out the limitations of simply focusing on theoretical and 'textual' analysis of the body. In this manner, my research can be regarded as both a contribution to the sociology of the sporting body and to feminist debates around contemporary forms of non-mainstream body modification. I have advocated throughout this thesis the importance of focusing on the 'lived reality' of the practices, by exploring the understandings of the actors themselves. My study has illustrated the importance of looking at the actual

processes of the phenomena - elements of embodied actions, and the importance of 'fleshing out' gender politics (Fournier, 2002).

This unique ethnographic study into the lives and experiences of female bodybuilders is of considerable interest in its own right (Hetherington, 1998:39). In addition my study adds to the small but increasing body of knowledge in this research area, by emphasising the processes, practices and interactions of female bodybuilders. My research has also contributed to current academic debates within gender, sociology of sport, embodiment, ethnography and identity.

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