

# The female bodybuilder as a gender outlaw

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## Abstract

This paper is a sociological exploration of the female bodybuilder as a 'gender outlaw', a figure who is stigmatised not because she has broken a formal law, but because she has disregarded so flagrantly dominant understandings of what is aesthetically, kinaesthetically and phenomenologically acceptable within the gendered order of social interaction. Illustrating our argument with reference to a two-year ethnographic study of British female bodybuilders, we begin by explicating the contours of this deviance - associating it with multiple transgressions manifest in terms of choice, aesthetics, action/experience and consumption - and explore the costs accruing to these stigmatised women. In the second half of the paper, we attend to the motivations and experiences of female bodybuilders themselves in explaining why they remain engaged in an activity rendered perverse by dominant gendered norms. Exploring their commitment to an interaction order based upon muscle rather than gender, our conclusion suggests these women offend the most fundamental 'collective sentiments', possessing no authorised place in the cultural consciousness of society.

**Keywords:** female bodybuilding; the body; gender outlaws; the 'interaction order'; ethnography

## Introduction

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; comment posted on [http://www.buzzhumor.com/videos/3052/Women\\_Bodybuilders](http://www.buzzhumor.com/videos/3052/Women_Bodybuilders) [accessed 9 March 2009]).

This paper examines the female bodybuilder as a 'gender outlaw' (Bornstein [1995](#)), a figure who is stigmatised not because she has broken formal laws, but because she has disregarded so flagrantly dominant understandings of what is aesthetically, kinaesthetically and phenomenologically acceptable within the gendered order of social interaction (Goffman [1983](#)). As Ferrell and Sanders ([1995](#), pp. 5, 11, 15) argue, the stigmatisation of marginal groups made visible by their 'deviant aesthetic' of dress, speech and bearing has a long history, and is related to their outsider status and their undermining of 'the stylistic certainty and aesthetic precision'

associated with the 'functioning of legal authority and social control' (see also Katz [1988](#)). However, the fact that the appearances, actions and desires of female bodybuilders 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). This is reflected in typically hysterical media coverage that portrays these women as 'scary monsters', 'at war' with society and their own bodies, looking and sounding like men and rejecting what is culturally tolerable (Theroux [2000](#), Thomas [2005](#), The Independent [2008](#)). If, as Cohen ([1971](#), p. 10) suggests, we 'only know what is saintly by being told just what the shape of the devil is', the media are clear that the shape of this particular devil is muscular and is a woman. The moral gravity of these women's offences against gender is such that all 'decent' citizens, even family and friends feel entitled to police, judge and sentence them.<sup>1</sup>

In establishing firmer foundations on which to analyse female bodybuilders as multiply transgressive gender outlaws, we begin with Goffman's ([1983](#)) identification of the 'interaction order' as the ritualised, constraining domain of face-to-face relations integral to the presentational context in which identities are forged. While some of the demands of this sphere stem from the universal pre-conditions of human life, including the irreducible bodily components of co-presence, the interaction order also produces and reinforces gendered values (Goffman [1979](#), [1987](#)). As Kessler and McKenna ([1978](#)) argue, dominant Western norms admit of two sexes and genders - and two only - and the status of being male and masculine or female and feminine is one of the first things individuals attribute to each other in an encounter and is central to the normative grounding and progression of encounters. The significance of these attributions is, therefore, more than nominal: they inform judgements about the acceptability of the interacting self (Shilling [2008a](#), pp. 64-84). Indeed, societies have historically constructed on this male/female identification systems of exchange, taboo, apprenticeship into adulthood and stratification on the basis that there exist normal modes of male and masculine and female and feminine, appearance and behaviour (Rubin [1975](#)). Contemporarily, albeit with context-based exceptions, the gendered interaction order remains the place that men are expected to display at least their capacity for physical dominance, as a counterpart to their social dominance, even if the manner of such displays has become increasingly subtle (Goffman [1974](#), pp. 196-197, 1979, p. 9, Bartky [1988](#), p. 68).

This gendered interaction order does not physically compel men and women to present themselves in particular ways, though disrespecting this order can have serious consequences (Rudacille [2006](#)), but provides strong incentives to conform. For Goffman ([1983](#), pp. 2-8), as for Mead ([1962](#)[1934]) and Cooley ([1922](#)[1902]), these derive from the fact that our ability to experience ourselves positively is strongly affected by the responses of others. If we transgress gendered norms in our actions or appearances, stigmatising feedback makes it difficult for us to cognitively or affectively evaluate our self-identity in anything other than negative terms. Transgressors also stand to be excluded from the 'order' of respectful interaction as morally culpable individuals facing 'an unaccepting world' (Goffman [1990](#)[1963]). Female bodybuilders are not, of course, alone in transgressing the gendered interaction order. Men seen as fat, at least in Western culture, risk emasculation given the negative meanings ascribed to their corporeality (Monaghan [2008](#)). Trans-gendered individuals are also deemed unacceptable on the basis of their erasure of 'natural' identities, while female boxers, bouncers and soldiers have also been analysed as deviant by virtue of crossing gender boundaries and becoming 'symbolic men' (Davis-Floyd

[1992](#), Lovell [2000](#), Menneson [2000](#), Hobbs *et al.* [2007](#)). At the extreme, male bodybuilders are also stigmatised for going beyond hegemonic ideals of masculinity. However, this is a hyper-masculinity and a 'body project' (Shilling [2003](#)) that does not threaten their identities as men in the same way as bodybuilding threatens women's identities (Fisher [1997](#)). In contrast to their male counterparts, female bodybuilders are multiple transgressors and we analyse them here as women who pollute gendered norms in their choices, their aesthetics, their actions and the phenomenology of their bodily experiences and their consumption behaviours.

## Researching female bodybuilders

This paper explores these transgressions by drawing on a two-year ethnographic study, based in the South of England, complemented by interviews with twenty-six female bodybuilders all of whom lived in the UK. As Ferrell and Hamm ([1998](#), p. 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 (Creswell [1998](#), Krane and Baird [2005](#), p. 94). 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](#), p. 87).

Quantitative and interview methods may still dominate the field of sports studies, but there exists a strong and growing tradition of ethnographic studies across a range of sports and leisure activities (e.g. Markula [1995](#), Sands [2002](#), Bolin and Granskog [2003](#), Wheaton [2004](#), Sparkes *et al.* [2007](#), Sparkes [2009](#)). Ethnographic methods, moreover, appear particularly suited to revealing the 'ways of life' pursued by the marginalised 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 under-investigated (Sparkes [2009](#)). While a number of studies have focused on the textual meanings and symbolic representations of women's muscle, however, they have frequently neglected the actual practices and daily lifestyle of female bodybuilders. Subcultures of male bodybuilders have been documented in some detail by the likes of Klein ([1993](#)) in America and Monaghan ([2001a](#)) 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.

The majority of the ethnographic study reported on here focused on one site, a gym located in a large city in the South of England that formed part of the biggest health and fitness club group in the world. This gym was possessed of 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. 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 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. Tanya Bunsell, the principal field researcher and a qualified personal trainer, had over 10 years' experience of working in various gyms and this assisted her in gaining rapport with female bodybuilders. During the period of the study she immersed herself in the routines of this lifestyle by training, dieting and interacting with female bodybuilders. While not regarding herself as a bodybuilder, Tanya was sufficiently strong to gain the respect of these women when working out with them, while not being so visibly muscular that she was unable to pass as an 'ordinary user' to other gym members and to those friends and family members she interviewed.

An additional important point relevant to making initial contacts and widening research access that needs to be mentioned is that Tanya is a woman and was of similar age (late 20s) to those female bodybuilders she first encountered. Indeed, her first contact resulted from one of the subjects in this study offering to spot for her in the free weights area. This interaction would simply not have happened, had she been male. Tanya's preparedness as a woman to engage in long hours of serious weight training (an activity rendered unfeminine and deviant by gender norms) also helped convince the female bodybuilders she spoke to that she was sympathetic to, and serious in wanting to understand, their activities and commitments. Being a woman also made it easier for Tanya to raise and discuss intimate issues (ranging from unwanted body hair to sexual relationships) with these female bodybuilders.

In addition to this ethnographic immersion in the gym environment, formal and informal interviews were conducted with all 26 female bodybuilders in the study and these were supplemented by a total of 76 interviews with friends and family members of these women and other gym users. Interviews were facilitated initially through a female bodybuilder Tanya got to know in the early stages of the research. As she became more integrated into the subculture, however, contacts in gyms and bodybuilding competitions spread throughout the female bodybuilding community. Tanya also kept a field diary of her own experiences which acted as both a research log - detailing significant events during the course of the research - and a reflexive account of her experiences of undertaking this research and 'sharing the life' of a female bodybuilder (Krane and Baird [2005](#), p. 96).

Of the female bodybuilders in the study, seventeen were either competing contemporarily or had competed in the past, and their ages ranged from 23 to 48 years. All these women were dedicated to maximising their muscular size and definition; they were not involved in 'soft', figure-fitness activities. While several worked out in 'hard core' bodybuilder's gyms, dedicated exclusively to building muscle, most trained in public gyms closer to home and adequate to 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, five had children and all but two of them were white British (the others were black British/Afro-Caribbean).

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 our 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 we identify the female bodybuilders in this study exclusively in terms of the time they spent pursuing this goal.<sup>2</sup>

The aim of the research was to facilitate a rich portrait of the values, practices, norms and, above all, the lived experiences of female bodybuilders. Central to this was an attempt to explore the 'body pedagogics', or corporeally relevant aspects of education and socialisation (Shilling 2007, 2008b, Shilling and Mellor 2007), involved in becoming and being a female bodybuilder. Data from observations and the field diary were categorised according to these theoretical concerns 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. Chris Shilling, the principal author of this paper, also conducted regular interviews with Tanya about her experiences and provided what Sparkes and Partington (2003) refer to as a 'theoretical sounding board' by encouraging reflection regarding theory, data and emerging themes. This theoretically informed ethnographic process provides the context in which female bodybuilders as multiply transgressive figures emerged as a key research theme, a theme that will now be explored in more detail.

## **The outrages of female bodybuilding**

Female bodybuilders are united by the choice they have made to prioritise the pursuit of muscularity. Whatever else divides them, the aim of achieving maximum muscular size and definition is key to these women's identities. This choice, in itself, is highly transgressive of gendered norms (Bartky 1988), as reflected in the comments of friends, family and work colleagues remembered by female bodybuilders when they first embarked upon or even expressed interest in body building. The following examples illustrate this point:

Why are you doing this? What are you trying to prove? (asked of Lucie, bodybuilder of eight years, by her mother)

I'm concerned about you; I'm worried about your health. I don't understand why you're doing this to yourself. (asked of Sascha, bodybuilder of three months, by her father)

What's wrong with you? Don't you want a boyfriend? (asked of Pat, bodybuilder of seven months, by her mother)

Such remarks suggest that any woman interested in building muscle must be psychologically deviant or deliberately trying to offend others. Girls are meant to learn that female strength is

unappealing to men, that being attractive to men is important, and that competing with boys in sports risks having called into question one's gender and sexuality (Nelson [1994](#), p. 45). In this context, the pursuit of muscularity is regarded as particularly peculiar, especially for adult women generally expected to be juggling waged-work with familial responsibilities. It raises the spectre of membership of a deviant group that exists outside of the legitimate boundaries of daily sociality and interacts with technologies of muscle, based on the physical self, rather than technologies of domesticity, based upon caring for others.

It is not simply their choices that remove these women from the gendered norms of interaction. In terms of aesthetics, female bodybuilders transgress upon what has traditionally been viewed as the corporeal sign of masculinity, muscle (Connell [2000](#)). Several physical markers signify the transition towards male adulthood (for example, enlargement of the testes, development of facial and pubic hair and changes to the voice), but size and strength are key 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 kinaesthetic expectation that men dominate social and cultural spaces (Goffman [1974](#), Young [2005](#)). This is associated with the view that muscularity 'armours' the body and that this complements a monadic individuality underpinning 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 vagaries of modernity (Bologh [1990](#)). Against this background, when a woman displays muscular aesthetics, it impinges on most people's sense of normality in relation to gender and sexuality. In the following extracts, Deborah and Rachel provide examples of how this transgression was manifest in people's comments and questions:

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? (asked of Deborah, bodybuilder for six months, by her brother)

Why do you want to look like a man? (asked of Rachel, bodybuilder for two years, by a work colleague)

These comments express cultural incomprehension, underpinned by aesthetic revulsion, provoked by women seeking to acquire a traditionally masculine attribute and turning their back on the visual dimensions of femininity. Ideal visions of the female body have altered considerably historically, but curves, voluptuousness and softness resonate visually in our culture with the feminine virtues of caring, interdependence and fluidity (Grosz [1994](#)). Even the thinner, sometimes waif-like, models that populate fashion shows display a vulnerable feminine appearance that has nothing in common with the explosive muscularity sought by female bodybuilders.

The characteristic forms of action and experience with which female bodybuilders are associated constitute other related ways in which they transgress and outlaw themselves from the gendered foundations of interaction. Bodybuilding involves exercises with weights in which hard work results in the breaking down and subsequent building up of muscle fibre. In terms of the physical strain, noise and sweat involved in this activity, female bodybuilders are engaging in work removed from conventionally feminine activities that has more in common with heavy manual

labour characteristic of traditional working-class male industrial jobs. Seen within this context, there is an 'excess' of action that also constitutes an excess of production in what these women do. These strong, direct movements involved in lifting a bar loaded with discs are not body techniques appropriate to feminine 'virtue' and 'modesty' (Mauss [1973](#)[1934]). 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.

She must be taking steroids ... real women can't look like that!.

It's not right, women lifting that amount.

The work involved in multiple repetitions and sets bears no relation to the 'ambiguous transcendence' that Young ([2005](#)) associates with feminine movement. Female bodybuilders are embarked on an unambiguous quest to transcend themselves. These women need no 'male gaze' to validate their economy of bodily activity. Swaggering around the gym, focusing on themselves and their goals, grunting as they lift weights, organising their world around the pursuit of muscle, and relegating the importance of activities and relationships unrelated to this goal, these women inhabit a milieu experientially removed from the authorised sphere of femininity in the interaction order.

If female bodybuilders engage in an excess of action and experience in relation to what is considered proper for women, they also partake of an excess of consumption. A high protein, high energy, high calorie diet directed towards growth is essential to building muscle. While it is acceptable for women to be concerned with slimming - a concern manifested in girls of increasingly young age (Frost [2001](#)) - female bodybuilders eat a protein rich diet every few hours in attempting to increase their size. As the following observations illustrate, female bodybuilders are frequently made aware by those Becker ([1997](#)[1963]) refers to as 'normals' that this pattern of consumption is 'unnatural':

My ex-boyfriend used to laugh at me for eating all the time, especially at all my protein and creatine supplements. He said it was unnatural for anyone to eat so much protein, let alone a woman! (Amy, bodybuilder for four years)

People are always really shocked when I tell them that I eat 3000 calories a day, they say stuff like 'aren't women only supposed to eat around 2000?' (Barbara, bodybuilder for seven years)

My work colleagues were really curious to start off with as to what I ate, and why I ate so often ... they are still surprised at how much I can eat for a girl. (Rachel, bodybuilder for two years)

This 'excess' is compounded by the widespread assumption that female bodybuilders take steroids and other muscle building drugs. Performance enhancing drug consumption is generally seen as unacceptable among men, but is even more stigmatising when women are involved. The reasons for this were articulated by one male casual gym user who remarked 'men taking

testosterone are just enhancing what is already in their bodies, whereas women are putting something into their bodies which is not “natural” and is therefore mucking around with their sex'.<sup>3</sup>

It is worth exploring this assertion about testosterone in a little more detail as it illustrates something important about how populist appropriations of science are used to justify gender norms. 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. Consuming testosterone, moreover, is a vital part of the drug regimes of female-to-male transsexuals, although female bodybuilders usually take far higher dosages than those used in female-to-male sex change cases. As such, it is perhaps not surprising that the issue of drugs and female bodybuilders is filled with controversy as it intrudes on so many people's sense of what is natural and central to biological sex.

In summary, the female bodybuilder is deemed outrageous by 'normals' because she rejects the relatively passive roles, customs, body techniques and appearances associated with Western apprenticeships in femininity (de Beauvoir [1993](#)[1949]). It is boys who are traditionally socialised into forms of action that deploy their bodies against attempts to reduce them 'to the status of an object' (ibid.), yet female bodybuilders are refusing culture's view of women as 'immanent others' and are adopting masculine modes of bodily appearance, comportment, action, experience and consumption.

## **Doing deviance and serving time: the sentences imposed on female bodybuilders**

Durkheim's ([1984](#)) argument that deviance exists not because people engage in acts that are inherently deviant, but because their actions 'shock the collective conscience' seems particularly applicable to female bodybuilders. Their transgressive behaviours and appearances offend the cultural sensibilities of those who view as natural the social distinctions that separate men and women, and masculinity and femininity. There are consequences associated with these transgressions furthermore, and these are not merely symbolic, expressed in disapproving but remote comments and stares of casual gym users or members of the public, but are manifest in a series of concrete penalties.

In terms of their personal lives, the partners and friends of female bodybuilders were not simply critical, but initiated an inter-personal coldness or distance that sometimes resulted in relationship breakdown. Pauline (bodybuilder for six months), for example, reports how



resentment grew after 'My partner said to me "I think you should lose some of your muscle, you're looking too bulky"'. Monica (bodybuilder of two years) broke up with her boyfriend after being told by him, 'I don't want you to train anymore ... Having sex with you from ... behind is like having sex with a man'. Alice (bodybuilder of one and a half years) illustrates the difficulties that such attitudes pose to female bodybuilders seeking intimate heterosexual relationships. As she said, there are problems involved in trying to date 'normal' men who treat her as an abnormal woman. Alice remembers talking to one man, for example, who said to her 'you are an attractive woman, but your arms are just too big. They intimidate men'.<sup>4</sup>

The families of these female bodybuilders were rarely more understanding and often levied their own micro-sentences against these women. Amy (bodybuilder of four years) noted how her sister became hostile to her whenever the subject of bodybuilding was raised. This was evident when she said to Amy 'your back is disgusting, really lumpy, you'll look like a freak'. Mothers, fathers, sisters and brothers frequently criticised and condemned and this negativity was associated with various emotional sanctions, as illustrated in the following observations:

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. (Jenny, bodybuilder for five years)

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 for six years)

In terms of their interactions in the public sphere, Sharon (bodybuilder for 12 years) illustrates the problems female bodybuilders can face when she was refused money in a bank because the teller did not believe she was a woman (her Christian name appeared on the debit card). In a technocratic age in which the body is a marker of identification, embodied subjects who subvert their ascribed identities are vulnerable to various inconveniences (Aas [2006](#)). More generally, Caroline (bodybuilder for 17 years) reflects the experiences of many female bodybuilders when talking about unprovoked comments (from people in cars or just walking past her on the street) questioning her feminine identity by asking 'are you a geezer?' or 'are you a man or a woman?' These comments are not simply insulting, but are often delivered with a derision and aggression that signals clearly to the recipient that they exist outside of the parameters of the sphere of respectful interaction (Goffman [1983](#)). Indeed, there is a fear of otherness implicit in them often associated with attempts to maintain categorical and geographical boundaries (Sibley [1995](#)). Other female bodybuilders report similar incidents and experiences that confirm Lowe's ([1998](#), p. 44) conclusions, from a study in the USA, that these women have to live with negative remarks about their physiques positioning them as 'other', that invade their privacy, and question their right to inhabit public space.

I've had strangers come up to me and want to arm wrestle me! (Alice, bodybuilder for one and a half years)

People look at the size of me and just assume that I'm a man. I get called 'sir' all the time. It really frustrates me. (Christine, bodybuilder for five years)

On several occasions I've been told to get out of the women's toilets. (Katie, bodybuilder for six years)

Female bodybuilders are not always even protected from moral outrage in gyms. While these women often view the gym as a 'home' in which they engage in activities congruent with their self-identity, not even this location is entirely safe from the norms of the wider interaction order.

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'. (Gemma, bodybuilding for six 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, bodybuilding for eight years)

Several friends at the gym commented on how big my biceps had got, 'show him your bicep', 'you big lesbian you'. (Laura, bodybuilding for 10 months)

The criticisms and condemnations emanating from private, family and public sources involve more than just verbal opinions. Firstly, there is a general stigmatisation of these women. The process of stigmatisation involves a 'special kind of relationship between attribute and stereotype' (Goffman [1990](#)[1963], p. 14), and focuses here on discrediting every aspect of female bodybuilders' lives that transgress the gendered foundations of social interaction. Second, this discrediting formed the prelude for actively supporting gendered norms by imposing sentences on these morally culpable gender outlaws. This is evident in the lover who expressed distaste for his girlfriend's back, to the colleague who indicated that large biceps were a sign of lesbianism, to the bank teller who refused service to the customer on the basis that she did not look like a woman. Such responses involve for female bodybuilders an interruption to the flow of social life prompted by looks and comments that ask these women to reflect back on themselves 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 classified by wider society (Mead [1962](#)[1934], Goffman [1990](#)[1963], p. 12).

The reactions reported above may not constitute a 'moral panic' among society, but indicate deep-seated anxieties about a phenomenon that touches on people's sense of normalcy and reality (Cohen [2002](#)). They also raise questions about how female bodybuilders respond to the labelling and sanctions they face in terms of the identities they develop and the cultural 'careers' they pursue.

## **Restitution and reform?**

How do female bodybuilders respond to these sanctions? Is there any sense in which they are moved to reform and resume their place as respectable gendered interactants within society? There are three points to make here. Firstly, there is little doubt that female bodybuilders are widely aware of and have personally experienced the forms of criticism and sanctions listed above. The findings of our study are confirmed by other research suggesting this negativity is a regular occurrence for these women (e.g. Dobbins [1994](#), p. 8, Ian [1995](#), Fisher [1997](#), Hayward 1997, Schulze [1997](#), Lowe [1998](#), Frueh *et al.* [2000](#), p. 8).

Second, irrespective of their verbal responses to these criticisms, it is common for female bodybuilders to make limited compromises with conventional notions of femininity in their make-up, dress and posture. While only one of those in this study worked out in an ostentatiously feminine combination of hot pants and crop top lycra set, half these women involved themselves in such activities as dying their hair blond, acquiring hair extensions and breast augmentation. Such actions involved these women in undertaking what Grogan *et al.* ([2004](#)) describe as a 'balancing act' between the competing demands of femininity and muscularity, and were frequently undertaken in response to the effects that training regularly with heavy weights and taking steroids and oestrogen blockers had, in increasing the distance of their bodies from gendered norms. Regular exercise increases muscle, drug regimes and pre-competition dieting result in the loss of fat and breast tissue, while steroid use often results in hair loss. Additional consequences of steroid use, such as acne and facial hair, prompted women into other make-up measures and laser treatment. One female bodybuilder, initially adamant she would not compromise, decided after two years to undergo breast augmentation when she became tired of being mistaken for a man. Female bodybuilders would also sometimes alter their demeanour and carriage in crafting a non-masculine presentational self outside the gym. As Charlie (bodybuilder for four years) noted, 'occasionally when I have trained my upper body, I'll be pumped up and have to stop myself walking like a man and also you know, take my hair down'.

Feminising actions are encouraged by bodybuilding competitions, sites described as submitting to 'the femininity project in terms of the almost hyper-feminine ornamentation, posture and demeanour required for competition' (Daniels [1992](#), Guthrie and Castelnuovo [1992](#), St. Martin and Gavey [1996](#)). While these expectations 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](#), p. 64]), this is no wholesale recuperation of conventional gender ideals. These women remain 'outlaws' in relation to the gendered interaction order and prevailing conceptions of 'real' women.

Thirdly, whatever compromises female bodybuilders make, none was prepared to revise their primary aim of developing a muscular body. There is for these women a pleasure intrinsic to building muscle that overrode the costs associated with breaking social taboos, a finding consistent with Grogan *et al.*'s ([2004](#)) suggestion that the development of female muscularity can be used positively to help resist certain gendered norms. Furthermore, irrespective of the consequences of their decision, these women felt they had no option but to continue with a lifestyle that provided them with an alternative to that they found intolerable. Like other sub-cultural groups, female bodybuilders are excluded from mainstream society and pursue social relationships among like-minded and like-bodied individuals. They are not only committed to

their vocation, but also to inhabiting an alternative order of interaction based upon muscular, rather than gendered, foundations. They offend 'the strong, well-defined states of the collective consciousness' not accidentally (Durkheim [1984](#), p. 39), nor through ignorance of the norms they violate, but because they feel compelled to go beyond the norms of feminine choice, aesthetics, action/experience and consumption, and are committed to building a self and social life based upon these transgressions. It is to the motivations and commitments of these women themselves that we now turn.

## **The muscular order of female bodybuilding**

Having examined the revulsion and condemnation provoked among 'normals' by the transgressions of female bodybuilders, it is important to understand what motivates these women. This raises the important subject of 'the lived reality of transgression' (Webber [2007](#), p. 139) and helps explain the commitment of female bodybuilders to an interaction order based upon the pursuit of muscle rather than the cultivation and reflection of gendered ideals.

The motivations that propel women into female bodybuilding are varied. For some, bodybuilding represents an extension of training they undertook for sports while, for others, a particular event triggered interest. As the following extracts illustrate, however, there came a time for all these women when they realised they were or wanted to be, different from dominant feminine norms.

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 for four years)

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 for five years)

I became interested in bodybuilding when I was 17. 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 for 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) 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 observation is illustrated by the comments of Christine, Amy and Monica:

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 for five 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 for four years)

I know it sounds narcissistic but I do enjoy watching myself train in the mirror. I love seeing my biceps or delts engorged with blood and watching my veins stand out like a road map. I get real pleasure from it. (Monica, bodybuilder for two years)

Weight lifting has a long male history stretching back to ancient Greece and Egypt, while the early years of bodybuilding are generally located in the period 1880-1930 (Dutton [1995](#)). It was during this time that Eugene Sandow engaged in public performances of 'muscular display' and promoted the 'Grecian ideal' of symmetry and mass as a model of masculine physicality. Female bodybuilders are engaged in a visual ideal long viewed as the antithesis of femininity. This does not stop them from being proud of and gaining enormous satisfaction from, developing a muscular form. Indeed, it is their immersion in and commitment to a muscular aesthetic that illustrates how far these women have travelled from the norms of acceptability associated with the interaction order. Refusing to conform to conventional ideals of femininity, these women are engaging creatively with their embodied potentialities in forging a new female look.

The extent of their journey is evident further in the activities associated with the workout and the experiences associated with this action. If hard physical labour in the gym is far removed from conventional forms of feminine action, so too are the corporeal sensations and transformations they describe as resulting from these activities. Merleau-Ponty ([1962](#)) talks about our bodies being our 'vehicle in' and 'viewpoint on' this world and analyses how our perspective on life is constructed by our senses 'unfolding' onto what surrounds us. The bodies of female bodybuilders, however, undergo changes in the gym that initiates a metamorphosis in their sensory experience of themselves and their environment. As Heywood ([1998](#), p. 3) puts it, 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'. These incarnations occur through a series of stages. To begin with, the gym facilitates an undivided focus on the body. As Rachel (bodybuilder for two years) comments, 'training time is me time. I can just forget about my worries, focus on my body and how it moves'. The focused, active engagement with weights also involves an immersion in the process of lifting that allows these women to 'release 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 for five years; see also Kaye [2005](#), p. 8). As the workout progresses, the heart rate increases, muscles are 'pumped' with blood and the brain releases endorphins. The phenomenological experience of inhabiting a body undergoes a sensory and sensual change (see also Monaghan [2001b](#)). Debbie (bodybuilder for seven and a half years) describes this in terms of the 'amazing feeling' that accompanies the sense that 'your muscles are bursting out of your skin', while Heywood describes the general processes surrounding this transformation for women:

We begin to grow, to change ... we pick up our shoulders, 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 [1998](#), p. 3)

Female bodybuilders experience these changes as a heightened sense of being alive, a sense manifesting itself in an emboldening and merging of the senses. Boundaries between pleasure and pain weaken and dissolve within the bodybuilding 'high'. What would previously have been uncomfortable becomes transformed as a 'beautiful and pleasurable' pushing of the limits (Tate [1999](#), p. 38). Like Becker's ([1997](#)[1963]) marijuana users, there is a process of learning how to interpret the feeling of being 'high' here that develops through symbolic and emotional interaction with others. This reconfiguration of sensual experience is clear in the comments of Samantha (bodybuilder for three years) who explains how the 'high' is part of the culture of bodybuilding and involves the ability to 'get in touch with' something 'beyond pain' involving 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. Post workout, my body feels strange, almost sick, but at the same time everything appears heightened, I feel euphoric'. Similarly, for Mary (bodybuilder for 12 years), aches and pain are enjoyed and embraced even when they leave her so tired and stiff that she is 'unable to walk down the gym stairs'.

This euphoria extends for some to a feeling of erotic potency as illustrated by Frueh's ([2001](#), p. 71) admittance that 'I catch myself swaggering to the drinking fountain, radiating sex' and 'I feel horniest when I'm working out'. Here, the gym is a pleasure zone that provides 'challenge' and 'sensual transformation' (Frueh [2001](#)), descriptors that resonate strongly with Monaghan's ([2001b](#)) comments on the sensuality and eroticism of the gym. Against the background of these observations, it is not perhaps surprising that female bodybuilders talk of being 're-born' in the gym, a re-birth that removes them from passivity and subjection, enabling them to focus on and revel in their bodily capacities.

This phenomenological sense of re-birth is also associated with distinctive forms of consumption. Muscle-increasing exercise needs support from consumption activities based around the regular intake of calories (most bodybuilders eat every two to three hours), supplements and rest. As Becky (bodybuilder for two years) put it, 'time is ordered on a basis in which bodybuilders wake up, eat, medicate, work out, eat, work out, eat, medicate, sleep'. Liquid intake must be carefully planned in the gym itself. Some will drink caffeine or energy drinks while training, but most will prepare the post-workout protein drink by whisking a scoop or two of protein powder in a container of milk or water. Consumption is linked rigorously to the goals of 'bulking up' and then reducing excess fat and fluid in achieving maximum muscularity and definition.

This obsession with food possesses parallels with the behaviour of anorexics (Bordo [1988](#), Tate [1999](#)), but is associated with a radically different goal. Women historically have had access to less food than men, have been viewed as responsible for preparing food and have been expected to engage in 'restrained eating' in conforming to feminine notions of frugality and slenderness (Wolf [1990](#), p. 196, Warde and Martens [2000](#)). Female bodybuilders struggle against eating inappropriate foods, just like their male counterparts. Nevertheless, they are concerned to consume calories in excess of those needed to sustain life in order to accomplish a physical transcendence in which they grow stronger and more visible than they were previously. Consumption activities such as these exist at a considerable distance from the norms of gendered presentation and interaction. Furthermore, female bodybuilders often take considerable pleasure in this pattern of eating for muscularity:

One of the things I like about bodybuilding is eating every two hours. I eat nine small meals a day. No I never miss a meal, my body is so used to it now and it expects it! (Barbara, bodybuilder for seven years)

I really like my food and you spend so much time dieting [for competition], that as long as I eat my protein regularly I'll eat whatever I like. (Danielle, bodybuilder for five years)

As should be clear by now, the process of being re-born as a female bodybuilder is facilitated by the existence of a supportive social milieu, in which the pursuit of muscle is valorised within the gym itself. This provides vital sub-cultural support for continued individual transgressions of the conventional interaction order. In contrast to the hostility that female bodybuilders experience outside the gym and despite those occasions described earlier in which gendered norms intrude into the gym, the distinctive character of gym life is indicated by the frequency of comments describing 'camaraderie among all bodybuilders' (Debbie, bodybuilder for seven and a half years). As Debbie continues, this camaraderie is based on mutual recognition of efforts made in relation to 'intense training and dieting'. In this context, female bodybuilders usually feel they can walk and move in the gym without having to be concerned about the responses their 'unfeminine' postures and movements provoke on the street.

To begin with, they often train with a partner, in a reciprocal arrangement, thus forming a dyadic, intimate space in which encouragements and actions are directed to the task at hand. More generally, serious weight trainers are often 'supportive' rather than 'threatened' and frequently 'offer to spot' and 'share training tips' (Corina, bodybuilder for four years). People ask for advice and it is not unusual for female bodybuilders to receive compliments on their physiques from admiring others (those Goffman [1990](#)[1963] would call 'their own') embarked on the same quest for physical perfection. For some, this camaraderie culminates in the experience of an incomparable collectivity in which the social relations of the gym provide an interaction order based on the pursuit of muscle rather than on the display of gender. As Alice (bodybuilder for one and a half years) 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'. In their collective as well as their individual pursuit of sacred muscularity, it is as though these women become swept up in an effervescent experience which enables them to experience a new form of belonging (Shilling [2005](#)). 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 [2001b](#)). Again, 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.

The motivations of female bodybuilders, the satisfaction they gain from achieving a muscular appearance, their phenomenological experiences of lifting weights, their commitment to a diet facilitative of growth, and the relations of sociality they can experience in the gym itself, illustrate how these women are immersed in a muscular order of interaction and presentation radically different from the gendered interaction order.

## **Conclusion**

In this paper we have analysed female bodybuilders as gender outlaws, a group who are stigmatised not because they have broken a formal law, but because they disregard so flagrantly people's sense of what is aesthetically, kinaesthetically and phenomenologically acceptable within the gendered order of social interaction (Goffman [1983](#)). Gendered interactional norms may facilitate for some women a convergence between their dispositions and desires, on the one hand, and the cultural forms available for their expression, on the other (Simmel [1971a](#), [1971b](#)[1908]). For those who remain uncomfortable with these norms, however, there remains a gap between their sense of self and the normative avenues available for its expression. In these cases, life can become a struggle. Far from 'fading from view', as Leder ([1990](#)) suggests happens for healthy people during their daily lives, the body for these women is foregrounded in consciousness and experienced as culturally dys-eased and outlawed. One response to this problem involves conforming to the appearances and performances validated by the gendered foundations of social interaction. Another involves rejecting these norms.

Bodybuilding holds out the promise for women of developing a different relationship with their bodies, selves and social surroundings. While Bordo ([1990](#)) suggests that women's bodybuilding merely produces differently feminised bodies imprinted with the gendered meanings of culture, women's motivations and the vitalistic satisfactions they gain from this activity suggests it would be wrong to treat it merely as a site of 'femininity's recuperation' (St. Martin and Gavey [1996](#), p. 54). If this recuperation occurred, how do we explain the continued hostility female bodybuilders experience in the interaction order? Instead, the choices, appearances, experiences and actions/consumption behaviours of these women place them firmly outside the bounds of respectable interaction. As socially discredited individuals facing an unaccepting world (Goffman [1983](#)), there exists no place for these stigmatised women in the moral order of society, they are 'cut off' from respectable society like other sub-cultural groups have been in the past (e.g. Hall and Jefferson [2006](#)). The satisfactions intrinsic to building muscle outweigh these disadvantages, however. Female bodybuilders are not simply making choices or gaining satisfactions from their deviance. Instead, their involvement in this muscular order is a sensual and visceral affair that 'eats into' their identities as they pursue physical transformation (Falk [1994](#)). The alternative, muscular order, they participate in is based in restricted leisure space and may constitute no more than a symbolic threat or an 'imaginary solution', to gendered norms (Clarke *et al.* [2006](#)). Nevertheless, female bodybuilders offend the sentiments of society's stylistic, experiential and physical norms. They shock people's sense of normality, find pleasure and self-affirmation in what is deemed unacceptable and can justifiably be analysed as gender outlaws.

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## Notes

1. The history of women's bodybuilding has been dealt with elsewhere (e.g. Wennerstrom [1984](#), Klein [1985](#), Mansfield and McGinn [1993](#), St. Martin and Gavey [1996](#), Lowe [1998](#), Patton [2001](#), Huxtable [2004](#), Scott-Dixon [2006](#)), but it is worth noting that even the organisations overseeing female bodybuilding have sought to feminise the pursuit of muscle. The International Federation of Body Builders imposed femininity rules on female contests in the 1990s, for example, and in 2005 instructed women bodybuilders to reduce their muscularity by 20%.

2. All names used are pseudonyms.

3. Female bodybuilders are, unsurprisingly, guarded when discussing drug consumption and this has been a difficult issue to deal with in this paper. The number of dedicated female bodybuilders in the UK is small and any details of drug use/experience would place them at a risk of identification. While not ignoring the issue, we have focused on other dimensions of the transgressions of these women. For those who wish to explore further the relationship between drugs and bodybuilding, see Monaghan ([2001a](#)) and Grogan *et al.* ([2006](#)).

4. There exists a community of 'female muscle lovers' or 'worshippers' (including many men, yes, ironically mostly men) that female bodybuilders (especially in the U SA) can draw on as a means of helping to finance their activities (e.g. by charging for access to websites and personal audiences, known as 'schmoozing' [Fisher 1997]). The fetishism of muscle involved in this adoration, however, does not invalidate female bodybuilders' observations concerning the difficulty of dating 'normal' men (though it is worth highlighting the fetishism of the body/body parts [e.g. breasts/legs] that is often normalised within male heterosexual desire).

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