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# Body Projects and the Regulation of Normative Masculinity

ROSALIND GILL, KAREN HENWOOD AND CARL MCLEAN

Drawing on interviews with 140 young British males, this article explores the ways in which men talk about their own bodies and bodily practices, and those of other men. The specific focus of interest is a variety of body modification practices, including working out (at a gym), tattooing, piercing and cosmetic surgery. We want to argue, however, that the significance of this analysis extends beyond the topic of body modification to a broader set of issues concerned with the nature of men's embodied identities. In discussing the appearance of their bodies, the men we interviewed talked less about muscle and skin than about their own selves located within particular social, cultural and moral universes. The surfaces of their bodies were, as Mike Featherstone (1991) has argued, charged primarily with 'identity functions', allowing men to establish a place for themselves in contemporary society.

Using a social psychological approach which can be characterized as a discursive analysis (Henwood et al., 1999; Lupton, 1998), we aim to make connections between men's private feelings and bodily practices, and broader social and cultural trends and relations. This article shows that in talking about seemingly trivial questions such as whether to have one's nose pierced or whether to join a gym, men are actively engaged in constructing and policing appropriate

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masculine behaviours and identities, regulating normative masculinity. We identify five key discourses or 'interpretive repertoires' (Wetherell and Potter, 1992) which together constructed the meanings of attempts to modify the appearance of the body. The five discourses or repertoires were focused on the themes of individualism and 'being different'; libertarianism and the autonomous body; unselfconsciousness and the rejection of vanity; a notion of the 'well-balanced' and unobsessional self; and self-respect and the morally accountable body. Our analysis lends support to the claim that the body has become a new (identity) project in high/late/postmodernity (e.g. Featherstone, 1991; Shilling, 1993), but shows how fraught with difficulties this project is for young men who must simultaneously work on and discipline their bodies while disavowing any (inappropriate) interest in their own appearance. The analysis highlights the pervasive individualism of young men's discourses, and the absence of alternative ways of making sense of embodied experiences.

The article is divided into four sections. In the first, recent theoretical work on masculinity and embodied identity is discussed. Next, we introduce this study in more detail, discussing the sample, methodology and wider research project of which this article forms a part. We also outline our approach to the material. The third part of the article presents the analysis, examining the five discourses or repertoires which we found to be constitutive of men's talk about the body's appearance. Finally there is a short discussion and conclusion.

## Masculinity, Identity and Embodiment

Over the past decade, there has been a dramatic rise in the visibility of the male body in the media and popular culture. Men's bodies are on display as never before, from the muscular heroes of the cinematic action genre, to the 'sixpacks' that grace the covers of *Men's Health*, and the 'superwaifs' of contemporary style magazines (Edwards, 1997; Nixon, 1996; Tasker, 1993). Where once images of women dominated advertising and magazines, increasingly men's bodies are taking their place alongside women's on billboards, in fashion photography and large-circulation magazines. However, it is not simply that the *number* of images of the male body has increased; more significant is the emergence of *a new kind of representational practice* in mainstream popular culture, depicting male bodies in idealized and eroticized fashions, coded in ways that give permission for them to be looked at and desired (Moore, 1988; Simpson, 1994). This genre of representation is not entirely new, and, as Abigail Solomon-Godeau argues: 'contemporary representations of masculinity, either in elite or mass cultural forms, reveal significant correspondences to older visual paradigms of ideal

masculinity' (1997: 21–2). In this way, past meanings are 'reactivated' from a classical tradition which held sway until the 19th century at which point 'nude' became equated with 'female sight' (Dudink, 2001). What is important about the current moment is that the coding of the male body as 'to be looked at' (Mulvey, 1975) disrupts conventional patterns of looking in which 'men look at women and women watch themselves being looked at' (Berger, 1972: 47). The male (body) has become an object of the gaze rather than simply the bearer of the look. In the terms of Bryan Turner's analysis, we have become *flâneurs*, who 'survey and consume' others' bodies in the 'airport departure lounge' of post-modern society (Turner, 2000: 42).

A variety of explanations have been put forward to account for this shift in 'visual culture', variously crediting the gay movement, feminism, the style press or consumerism (and specifically the marketing of heterosexual women's desire) with responsibility (e.g. Chapman and Rutherford, 1988; Edwards, 1997; Featherstone, 1991; Moore, 1988; Mort, 1996; Nixon, 1996; Simpson, 1994; see Gill et al., 2000 for a longer discussion). While the reasons for it are contested, there is widespread agreement that a significant change has occurred, in which men's bodies *as bodies* have gone from near invisibility to hypervisibility in the course of a decade. This change is regarded as so significant that a number of anxieties have been raised about its impact on men (particularly boys and young men), including concerns about health, self-esteem, body image and eating disorders (see Grogan, 1999 for a review). More fundamentally, there have been suggestions that males may increasingly be *defining themselves* through their bodies, in the wake of social and economic changes which have eroded or displaced work as a source of identity, particularly for working-class men (Henwood et al., 1999).

One of the aims of the research project of which this article forms a part was to examine this claim, holding it up against men's lives. While speculative, this much-repeated claim resonates with much contemporary social theory about the body, which has highlighted its centrality to 'the modern person's sense of self-identity' in high modernity (Shilling, 1993: 3).

Most contemporary sociological writing about the body has been concerned to locate its increasing significance in changes in the cultural landscape occasioned by the shift to what is variously characterized as high, late or post-modernity (Featherstone, 1991; Giddens, 1991; Shilling, 1993; Turner, 1984). Central among these changes are the gradual 'desacralization' of social life, the erosion of grand political narratives or certainties, and the rise of both individualism and consumerism (Shilling, 1993). Giddens (1991) argues that the dissolution of tradition in late or high modernity has been accompanied by

'ontological insecurity' and a reflexive concern with identity and the body. Secure and stable self-identity no longer derives automatically from one's position in the social structure, and in its place we are seeing attempts to ground identity in the body, as individuals are left alone to establish and maintain values with which to live and make sense of their daily lives. In late modernity 'we have become responsible for the design of our bodies' (Giddens, 1991: 102).

Shilling (1993) argues that high modernity has produced an unprecedented 'individualization' of the body, in which meanings are privatized and the body becomes a bearer of symbolic value. In consumer society it has become, in Bourdieu's terms (Bourdieu, 1984) a source of symbolic capital, less because of what the body is able to *do* than because of how it *looks*. Thus we are witnessing an extraordinary fetishization of muscles and muscularity in young men at precisely the moment that fewer traditionally male manual jobs exist, and those that do require less physical strength than ever before. Highly developed muscles have become 'semiotically divorced' from specific class connotations, and are no longer indexical of participation in manual labour.

Despite this, the work of Bourdieu alerts us to the ongoing significance of class for understanding embodiment. Bodies, for Bourdieu, bear the imprint of class in three main ways – through the individual's social location, the formation of their habitus and the development of their tastes. The management of the body is central to the acquisition of status and to the maintenance of class (and other) distinctions. Skeggs's (1997) work on young, British working-class women shows this vividly by highlighting the way in which they used the shape, styling and design of their bodies to resist or transgress class assumptions that rendered them inferior.

One related way of thinking about the rise of 'somatic society' (Turner, 1984) has been through the idea of 'body projects'. This notion has been advanced as a useful way of thinking about both the 'unfinished' nature of bodies through the life course and the pressures in affluent Western societies to 'work on' the body, transforming and accomplishing it as part of individual identity (Giddens, 1991; Shilling, 1993). Featherstone (1991) argues that the body is charged as a vehicle of self-expression, reinforced by consumerism. Body projects are attempts to construct and maintain a coherent and viable sense of self-identity through attention to the body, particularly the body's surface (Featherstone, 1991).

The important insights developed in the theoretical writing discussed above concerning the relation between the body and identity might lead one to suppose that there had been a good deal of research on this topic. But this has not been the case. Many writers lament the fact that the increasing theoretical interest in the body has not been accompanied by empirical studies (e.g. Davis, 1997;

Wacquant, 1995; Watson, 2000). Nettleton and Watson point to the 'theoreticism' of the field and argue that 'the sociology of the body has, by and large, ignored the voices that emanate from bodies themselves' (1998: 2). Even in gender studies, where one might have expected a concern with the body to be paramount, there has – with notable exceptions (e.g. Connell, 1995; Watson, 2000) – been little research into the embodied nature of gender identity for men who are not disabled or chronically ill. Arguably this failing is exacerbated in relation to men's bodies compared to women's. Watson argues that 'current debate around men's health and perhaps men's place in society is crippled by the lack of attention paid to personal accounts and perceptions of maleness' (2000: 43). Indeed, it is something of an irony that while representations of men's bodies have become a pervasive feature of the visual landscape, in sociological research men themselves remain largely invisible and unheard on this topic.

A further problem with some writing on the body has been its failure to transcend the mind–body dualism, with the result that over-socialized and rationalized modes of embodied selfhood are presented. In this vein, Shilling and Mellor accuse Giddens of ignoring the *sensual* aspects of embodiment:

> Giddens views people as, essentially, minds who happen to occupy bodies; bodies which have been colonized by society to the extent that they can increasingly be reconstructed in line with the mind's eye view of what they should look like. (1996: 7)

A third problem with writing located in the 'new sociology of health and illness' has been that, despite a focus upon embodiment, consumption, risk and emotions, there is still a marked skew in favour of illness (Saltonstall, 1993; Williams et al., 2000). As Monaghan (2001) has pointed out, very little is known about people's experience of health, particularly 'vibrant health' and physicality. This study makes a modest contribution to this, with a focus upon young, healthy male adults' experiences of embodiment.

## Mapping Men's Embodied Identities

The research on which this article is based set out to 'test' or examine some of the theoretical claims discussed above. In particular, it aimed to explore the idea that the surface of the body has come to constitute a 'project' and key source of identity for young men. By asking men to talk about their own bodies and those of other men, we sought to learn about their experiences of embodied identity in relation to work, education, leisure, consumption, media representations, health and a range of different kinds of intimate relationship including being a child, brother, father, friend and partner.

This research is based on 140 semi-structured interviews with boys and men aged between 15 and 35 in four British regional locations in the UK (London, Bangor, Manchester and Newcastle). Most of the interviews were carried out in 1998–9, with the remainder conducted in 2000–1. A second phase of research, based in Australia, is ongoing in 2003. Men in all four British locations were recruited from a variety of sites, deliberately chosen to vary the extent to which, and ways in which, the men might be expected to be 'body conscious'. Sites included gyms, nightclubs, shopping centres, schools, universities, youth clubs and gay organizations. The sample is socially diverse in terms of class, 'race', ethnicity and sexuality. It does not contain any men who were visibly disabled or who identified as such – and this is certainly an important omission in this discussion of 'body projects'.

Men took part in one of two types of interview – individual life-history interviews, or focus group interviews in which they were in discussion with two or three other men, as well as the male interviewer. The two types of interview were designed to be complementary. In the individual life-history interviews topics were more personal and intimate: the young men were asked to reflect upon significant moments in their own biographies (e.g. moving from primary to secondary school, first sexual relationship, leaving home), as well as more obviously body-focused topics related to bodily changes and body care. In the focus groups the emphasis was less upon individuals' biographical accounts than upon discussion of issues and concerns (e.g. body modification, pressures on men today, health and fitness). The individual interviews and focus group interviews not only differed in terms of substantive content, but also differed markedly in tone (cf. Frosh et al., 2001). There was generally (as expected) greater personal disclosure in the life-history interviews and, by contrast, many of the focus groups were characterized by an ongoing banter and repartee that can be variously understood as humorous, defensive or competitive, and which we analyse as part of the performance of gender in the interviews – a powerful way of '*doing masculinity*'. This point will be returned to later. Elsewhere we have produced detailed analyses of the interviews in relation to consumerism, transgression, relationships and feelings about the new eroticized representations of the male body (Gill et al., 2000; Henwood et al., 1999, 2001). In this article our focus is the broad topic of body modification.

The topic of body modification was approached in the interviews in a variety of ways. Men were asked about their own practices in relation to their appearance, touching on topics from shaving and 'grooming' to cosmetic surgery. They were also asked to talk about other men's bodies in a variety of different ways. For example, men participating in individual interviews were asked for

reflections on how their own body and embodied identity differed from that of their father. Men in the focus groups were shown pictures of bodies from adverts and magazines, which served as invaluable prompts for discussion. Additionally, they were asked more general questions about body modification, such as 'What do you think about body piercing?' or 'How do you feel about the increase in the number of men having cosmetic surgery?'

In relation to tattooing and piercing, the sample was probably representative of the young (predominantly urban) male population as a whole. About one-third had a tattoo and/or at least one part of their body pierced (usually ears or nose), and a significantly larger proportion professed an interest in or desire to modify their body in one of these ways. However, only three of the men could be described as heavily pierced, with rings or studs in nipple and tongue as well as multiple piercings in their face and ears. None fitted contemporary descriptions of the 'modern primitive' (Klesse, 2000; Vale and Juno, 1989). In terms of 'working out' it is our impression that our sample were slightly more likely to go to the gym than the general population of their peers. To our knowledge, none had undergone cosmetic surgery, although this was something that many men discussed at length and with great animation.

In undertaking this research, we had been led to believe that we would face considerable difficulties – if not hostility – in getting young men to talk, particularly on a topic so private, intimate and sensitive as the body. However, this has not been our experience. Men talked openly and at length about their perceptions of and concerns about their bodies, and about a range of bodily practices. Indeed, far from being reluctant to talk about their bodies, many men seemed adept at it, and happy to do so.

What was striking, however, was that in talking about their bodies men repeatedly drew upon a very limited range of discourses or repertoires. Our initial interest in examining *differences* between men – along lines of age, class, 'race' and sexuality – gave way to a fascination with the *similarities* between men's accounts (which is not to say that the differences are unimportant, and they remain a central focus of this research – see Henwood et al., 1999). The degree of congruence between men's talk was at times astonishing: the same expressions and figures of speech would recur in interview after interview, so that when we read the transcripts we often wondered whether a typing error had led to inadvertent duplication of the same passage in multiple interviews. But this was not the case. Instead it became clear that men's talk about the appearance of their body is structured by a very limited range of key discourses. In the remainder of this article we discuss the five that we identify as most important.

But before moving to the analysis it is worth saying a few words about our

approach to the interview material. In characterizing our analysis as discursive, we are not intending to weigh into the rather sterile debates about foundationalism and constructivism, or the material versus the discursive. We would endorse the position of many writers in arguing that these dichotomies are not helpful: the material and the discursive are inextricably linked, and nowhere more clearly than in the body, as the very notion of embodied identity is designed to show (Davis, 1997; Scott and Morgan, 1993; Ussher, 1997; Watson, 2000).

The focus on discourses is intended to point up the *deliberative* nature of contemporary identities (Giddens, 1991). We argue that the presence or absence of tattoos or piercings on the bodies of our interviewees is far less interesting in sociological and social psychological terms than the justificatory narratives they employed to account for their body modification practices. In using a discourse analytic approach we are interested in exploring the 'interpretive repertoires' or 'practical ideologies' used by men to construct their identity (Burman and Parker, 1993; Wetherell et al., 1987; Wetherell and Potter, 1992), and we show how five 'discursive selves' are constitutive of men's body modification talk.

### 'Being Different': Individualism and the Rebellious Self

One of the most widely shared and taken-for-granted themes in the entire corpus of interviews concerned individualism and, specifically, the value attached to 'being your own man' and 'being different'. It is somewhat paradoxical that the thing that most *united* the 140 men we talked with was their conviction that they were *different* from other men. Nevertheless, this feeling was clearly strongly held and central to the men's senses of self. Few men made any attempt to account for their sense of difference, either in terms of their personal biography or social location/identity; for the vast majority it was asserted as a self-evident truth. Our interviews lend support to claims that the body and consumption are used by men as vehicles for 'expressive individualism'. Interestingly, though, the theme of 'being different' was used to justify widely divergent and even opposing product, body modification or lifestyle choices. For example, some men argued that they bought brand label clothes to 'be a bit different', while others used precisely the same argument to justify why they did *not* buy particular brands. This highlights an important point: namely that to understand men's embodied identities it is important to examine their interpretative repertoires or discourses and not just their specific behaviours.

The men in our sample used three means to accomplish themselves as individuals who are 'different', in addition to outright assertion.

Rebels Without a Cause

First, there was a widely shared attack on uniformity and conformity. It is often said of the cohort aged between 15 and 35 that they are an a-political generation, 'Thatcher's children', steeped in individualist and consumerist values and with no interest in social change (Hayes and Hudson, 2001; Pilcher and Wagg, 1996). Our research indicates that things are more complex than this. Like other researchers, we found little evidence of political radicalism among our sample, and, indeed, individualist and consumerist values were rife. However, despite this, we did find evidence of a *strong attachment to the notion of rebellion* – as expressed through the desire to 'be different'.

Unlike some earlier generations of 'rebels', for example the 1968 generation or the punks of the mid- to late 1970s, the generations represented by our 20-year cohort appeared to have no particular target for their rebellion, and no particular substance to their demands. In fact, they frequently used the very things that had been targets of previous generations' rebellion – consumerism or a desire to be extremely wealthy – as tools or emblems of their rebelliousness.

In as much as their rebellion can be said to be about anything, it is clearly a revolt against conformity and uniformity. These themes emerged again and again in our data, with hostility to everything associated with the conventional: office work, marriage, the 9 to 5 day, etc. These themes are not unambiguous, because clearly many of the men were also simultaneously attracted to security in jobs and relationships, and, despite sneering at the idea of '2.4 children', this was an aspiration as well as something to be attacked for many men (and a reality for several others). However, a central part of establishing their identity involved attacking those things deemed mainstream or conformist.

Sport and exercise routines were frequently discussed in terms of difference versus conformity. Again, we should point out that opposite choices could be characterized in the same terms – with both the decision to join a gym or not to join a gym depicted in relation to these themes. Several men who did not use a gym justified their decision in terms of the conformist nature of gym culture (others characterized it as boring, false or 'posy'). Members of one focus group expressed the concern that joining a gym led to a loss of independence, and a worrying change of attitude among men, predisposing them to become unthinking followers! Frequently contrasts were made with more collective or sociable forms of exercise such as team sports, or 'pitting oneself against the elements', which was perceived as more indicative of a free and independent spirit.

Asserting Autonomy

Another means of accomplishing oneself as an individual who is different involved claiming complete independence and autonomy in relation to all body (and other) choices. Connell (1987, 1995) has argued that the value of 'independence' is a central feature of hegemonic masculinity, and our research would support this. We found that many men attached significantly greater authority to choices that had (apparently) been made independently of any outside advice or influence. Elsewhere, we have discussed men's considerable discomfort and ambivalence about conceding that their perceptions of physical attractiveness might be in any way influenced by marketing or advertising, with only those who were critical of these processes admitting that they might play a part in structuring desires and subjectivity (Gill et al., 2000). Generally, men were keen to characterize any decision – particularly those about their bodies – as entirely their own, unaffected by influence from parents, teachers, friends, lovers or the media. Phrases such as 'not jumping on the bandwagon' or 'doing your own thing' recur throughout the interviews. This can be seen in the extract below in which a white working-class male in his late twenties explains why he has pierced ears and would consider getting a nose stud.

> *John*: I think to some degree it is a sort of a tribal marking. You know, it's like, it's saying I am this kind of person, isn't it? You know, associate me with all those other kinds people who are like that, you know. I am not mainstream, I am not normal. And it's something that you can, you can't miss, you know, so they are sending a message to every individual they meet. But I would, I wouldn't imagine, well I don't know. Perhaps it'll just become accepted as well. You know, people don't tend to care too much about nose piercing these days and stuff. Whereas like 10 years ago they would have done and stuff. You know, and like, you know when I first got my ears pierced at school, it was always a bit dodgy. You know, and my parents didn't really like it. And you had to be really careful which ear you got done, 'cos one of them meant you were a poof but the other one didn't.

> *Int.*: Which way, which way round?

> *John*: I can't remember. I can't remember. I got both ears pierced and said sod them.

Here, the rebelliousness made explicit in the statement 'I am not mainstream, I am not normal' is implicitly reinforced by John's defiance of his parents' wishes and also his refusal to observe semiotic conventions about signalling sexual orientation. He constructs himself as someone who dares to be different. He also emphasizes that his piercings were done long before they became normal or accepted, and thus cannot be considered as evidence of him merely following a trend. Although he uses the notion of 'tribalism', it is clear that his piercings are less about any kind of group or subcultural identification than they are

communications about the self, which are sending 'messages' to other people. This supports Soyland's analysis that 'the decorated body is no longer described as very important as a way of signalling group identity, but highly important for individual identity' (1997: 229; see also Sweetman, 2000).

Criticizing Other Men

The claim by individual men that they are different is made more persuasive through the construction of a number of implicit and explicit contrasts with other men. Thus while men characterized their own decisions as independent, those of other men were compared unfavourably. For example, one man argued that men's magazines are bought by people who need someone or something to 'tell them how to live their lives', but that he did not need this.

Another focus group discussion followed a similar theme, with the conclusion that being different and above influence meant rejecting all (brand) labels.

> *Int.*:   You mentioned Dolce & Gabbana there, I mean, do you think labels play a big part in it?
>
> *Paul*:   Yeah, I would have said so, definitely. It's all, it's all a big image thing, isn't it, really?
>
> *John*:   How to be [inaudible] on a magazine.
>
> *Paul*:   Well, this is it.
>
> *John*:   And people treat it like the Bible. I'm not saying people do, but I reckon people do.
>
> *Jake*:   See something in it and they want to copy that.
>
> *Paul*:   Well, this is it, yeah. This is it.
>
> *John*:   It's in this magazine, it costs this much so it must be cool. Who cares what it looks like or smells like or whatever.
>
> *Int.*:   What kind of clothes do you like yourself, or do you buy?
>
> *Paul*:   Loose, scruffy, no labels.

In this extract, the representation of magazine readers is that they use magazines like (life) style Bibles, slavishly copying the fashions displayed, regardless of what they actually look or smell like. The speakers construct their own identities contrastively in terms of the intrinsic value of their own choices, and their defiant refusal to buy labels.

Men frequently compared their own autonomous choices with those of other men depicted as 'sheep-like', 'fakes' or 'clones'.

> *Owen*:   Well I hate. Everyone buys the same. You see all the lads on a Friday, Saturday night, and they're all wearing the same shirts.

[words omitted]

*Gareth*: There's no individualism, you know.

*Owen*: There's a lot of fakes around as well, that's the thing.

### The Libertarian Self and the Autonomous Body

The desire to be regarded as independent and autonomous is also evident in the second discourse identified. In this, men constructed a libertarian model of the self, which stressed individuals' rights to do whatever they wanted with their bodies. While the 'rebellious self' emphasized mental independence and autonomy, this libertarian discourse stressed individual bodily autonomy. Put at its simplest, this discourse asserted: it's your body so you can do what you want with it. The existence of this repertoire probably owes a great deal to feminist campaigns about the body, especially relating to abortion, fertility and childbirth, each of which promoted a set of rights which flowed from bodily integrity. It also has resonances with campaigns about homosexual equality and the age of consent.

This discourse was used most frequently in relation to questions about cosmetic surgery, with almost every man constructing his answer in terms of an individual's right to choose. Perhaps more than any other topic, cosmetic surgery created a *consensus* among the men with the vast majority defending an individual's choice – as long as it was for the 'right' (see below) reasons. Here are three examples.

> *Mike*: I wouldn't say I get on my high horse about it. If someone wants plastic surgery and it helps their self-esteem, fine. Personally, if someone wants to have plastic surgery, then jump on the bandwagon and condemn them. And go 'oh well' you know, and take some sort of well, you know, 'aren't you happy with', you know that sort of quasi-religious, 'aren't you happy with what God gave you' sort of thing.

> *Int.*: And talking about the gym a bit earlier on and stuff. Kind of like a rise in people's awareness of themselves arguably has increased over the last 20 or 30 years. I mean, so stuff like plastic surgery is a lot more common. I mean, what's your position on something like cosmetic plastic surgery?

> *Steve*: Uff, dear! If an individual wants to do it, he can do it.

> *Pete*: I suppose if an individual's got some feature that really, really does their head in, you know, and can't cope with it and stuff, then if they want cosmetic surgery, fair enough.

In each of these responses the issue of cosmetic surgery is framed in terms of an individual's right to choose. What was also fascinating about responses to this question, however, was the way in which many of them took up a defiant tone, as if they were having to defend themselves against a strong counter-argument. In the first extract above the target of critique is made clear: it is quasi-religious

arguments suggesting that one should be content with the body endowed by God. Clearly the speaker believes that condemnation of cosmetic surgery on religious grounds is widespread, and that, in answering the question, he must contest this belief. This was paradoxical in view of the fact that, far from being contested, there was almost complete unanimity on this issue. While other speakers did not index the argument they were critiquing so clearly, there was a pattern among most of the responses to phrase them in defiant terms. One gets the sense from reading the transcripts or listening to the interviews on this topic that men felt that they were responding to the existence of a very strong moral agenda against cosmetic surgery. Their replies are characterized by an anti-moralistic stance, and the elevation of the individual's right to self-determination over their body as the only truly ethical position.

The position taken was an anti-authoritarian one, but, interestingly, one in which the authorities being rejected were rarely specified. Clearly most of the men believed that a libertarian position based upon bodily autonomy required considerable defence against authoritarian and moralistic counter-arguments. However, the arguments are as significant for what they leave out as for what they make clear. What struck us most forcibly about this discourse of the libertarian self and the autonomous body is that the self appears to be completely *socially dislocated*. There is no sense of a self-in-interaction or a self as part of a broader collectivity of people. In fact, the self whose rights to bodily self-determination are being championed seems to be entirely isolated. While the majority of men seemed to be at great pains to appear libertarian and to defend the rights of the individual, few mentioned the *social context* in which individuals wanting cosmetic surgery exist. There was scant recognition of the kinds of pressures that might lead to someone being willing to undergo major surgery to improve their life, and where pressures were recognized they were constructed in exclusively individual terms. It was striking that few of the men considered challenges to narrow and exclusive definitions of attractiveness to be an option that was even worthy of comment. A defiant individualism seemed to have utterly eclipsed any other potential perspective.

However, as we will show below, although no notion of the social or the political sets limits on this individualist libertarianism, there are other limits constructed around bodily autonomy: notably, one should not be vain, one should not be obsessional and one should not 'let oneself go'.

### Rejecting Vanity: The Unselfconscious Self
If the men are attached to notions of the rebellious self and the libertarian self, they are also deeply invested in a rejection of vanity. Vanity was discussed again

and again in the interviews as something to be condemned and guarded against at all costs. More than this, being thought vain or narcissistic was clearly something profoundly feared by the vast majority of the men we interviewed, who employed frequent disclaimers about any aspect of their behaviour that might conceivably attract the label 'vain'.

Several men in our sample used skin-care products, including cleansers and moisturizers for their face and body. However, the decision to use such products was universally justified in instrumental terms, rather than in relation to their appearance. For example, many men accounted for their use of moisturizer in terms of the health of their skin (rather than its appearance). One working-class man from Newcastle offered us a detailed justification of his use of hand cream by reference to the damage engendered by his work as a welder. Other men identified problems caused by cold, wind or sun that necessitated use of skin-care products.

Working out at the gym was also frequently characterized in terms of health rather than appearance by men who were gym users. Men routinely distanced themselves from potential accusations of vanity by prefacing accounts of their bodily practices with disclaimers suggesting that they do not go to the gym to make them look good, but to put them through their 'cardiovascular paces' or to tone otherwise flaccid muscles. Others suggested alternative instrumental justifications including the need to train to get acceptance to the fire service, or build muscle for self-defence. Gay men were more likely than straight men to admit that they were concerned about their appearance, but they too were sensitive to potential criticisms of themselves as narcissistic (cf. Levine and Kimmel, 1998). Men who were not gym users often characterized gym culture as vain. While they did not agree about the desirability of skin-care products or gym attendance, then, they were in agreement about the undesirability of vanity. We found only two examples of someone characterizing attendance at the gym as being primarily about achieving a particular look. This was a Newcastle gym instructor:

> *Phil*:  People train for aesthetic reasons to look good and that tends to be about, I would say, about 75 percent for appearance. For appearance. It's the aesthetics. Women definitely want to be sort of a little bit slimmer you know, and blokes as well. There's not that many people that come in and say 'I am worried about my health' you know.

However, even though this man attributes to *other people* a desire to look good rather than improve their health, it is significant that he is reluctant to apply the same logic to his own training:

> *Phil*:  I am more sort of interested in performance now than the appearance.

The other individual suggested that the desire to look good was *just one of a number* of his personal reasons for working out:

*Int.*:  Do you work out yourself at all?

*Rick*:  Yeah. Every other day I go swimming, weights, walk a lot, cycling.

*Int.*:  And do you enjoy going to the gym in that way?

*Rick*:  Yeah, I think it's smart, and more like a ritual. Not in order to, to put, to bulk up really. It's something to do. You look good, you feel good. It's, I don't know, I smoke as well though, so I do it in terms of like, to make up, to make up for my vices, whatever.

With the exception of this Welsh young man, our interviewees were not prepared to admit that any of their bodily practices might have anything to do with the desire to look attractive. Clearly there is a powerful taboo in operation which makes this very difficult for many men. We are sceptical of the idea that physical appearance has no bearing on men's decisions to embark on punishing weight-training schedules, painful tattoos or body piercing. Our analysis suggests that rather than being unimportant, the desire to achieve a particular look must simply be presented in a way that does not transgress the taboo about appearing vain. It is interesting to speculate about the extent to which this taboo operated particularly strongly in the interview context. There may be other contexts (e.g. in the gym with groups of other men, over long periods of time) in which the disavowal of vanity would not be so central. Clearly, however, there is a certain level of concern for one's appearance that is deemed acceptable and appropriate by men – indeed, as we will see, there is great censure in store for those who 'let themselves go'. The skill for men seems to be in negotiating the boundaries between appropriate concern and vanity.

We must stress that we are not suggesting that men were deliberately attempting to deceive either the interviewer or themselves; it is not a straightforward matter of them attempting to somehow mask the 'real' reasons for particular behaviours. Rather, our point is that vanity and narcissism are crucial constructs used by men to understand their own and others' experiences of embodiment – if only negatively – and to construct a meaningful psychological and moral universe. This should become clearer as we develop our argument below.

The discourse of rejecting vanity was most evident in the talk about cosmetic surgery. Here, as we have seen, men developed libertarian arguments stressing the right to individual self-determination. However, men's defence of the right of anybody to have cosmetic surgery to change their appearance was not as unrestricted as it may have appeared earlier. In fact, the limits to the discourse of libertarianism fall precisely at the point where an individual's desire for surgery

might be characterized as vain. Vanity was repeatedly rejected as a legitimate reason for seeking surgery, while 'major disfigurement' constituted reasonable grounds. And the boundary between legitimate and illegitimate grounds was constantly policed, as seen in the extracts from individual interviews below:

*Martin*:  Cosmetic surgery, it's just too extreme I think. I mean to have plastic surgery you've either got to have something seriously wrong with your face or you've got a massive nose or something. Or you've got to be incredibly vain.

*Tom*:  If you've got a defect, I don't see anything wrong with it … but a lot of people are self-conscious, paranoid. I'd say paranoia comes into it a lot, you know, or perfectionists.

In the two above examples the dividing line between a legitimate desire for surgery and an illegitimate one appears clear. In the first, you would have to have something 'seriously wrong', and in the second 'a defect'. This would qualify you for moral entitlement to surgery, raising your claim above the realm of vanity, paranoia or perfectionism. But is the division really as clear as it seems? The extract below records the discussion of members of a London gym, after an initial question from the interviewer.

*Int.*:  Plastic surgery, what do you reckon to that?

*Paul*:  Unless you have got like a huge great birth mark across the whole of your face, *then* it's fair enough. But to change your nose, and you've got the other one now, the extension, haven't you. They must be so paranoid about themselves.

*Richard*:  It's sort of medical versus fantasy isn't it basically. And if there is a medical need, someone might have a psychological problem, you know, they may have been tormented as a child, because their ears stick out too far or something you know. Then I think that is acceptable and if you have been disfigured in an accident, and you know you've seen reconstructive surgery.

*John*:  But not for vanity.

Here birth marks are constructed as falling within the legitimate category, as are ears that stick out, but surgery for reshaping noses is deemed illegitimate and vain. If a treatment can be characterized as medically necessary then it will escape the slur of vanity. Of course, what is so interesting about this talk is that the notion of vanity is *entirely flexible*. While one person might argue that a fractured nose joint offered legitimate authorization for surgery, another might argue that this falls into the realm of vanity alone. The men we interviewed drew their lines in different places, including and excluding different kinds of surgery, and different kinds of justifications. For one man, teasing at school about a mole represented 'psychological suffering' and therefore a legitimate case for surgery, while for others this would clearly fall within the 'fantasy' category discussed in

the extract above. What some people understand as simply part of accepting who you are and getting on with your life, others experience as trauma.

We want to suggest that the particular place where men draw the line between legitimate concern and vanity is less significant than the fact that they all believe that a line can and should be drawn. That is, for all the men interviewed a division between appropriate concern about one's appearance, and vanity or narcissism was deemed a meaningful one. Again, we would argue that this relates back to the individualism of the men's psychic landscapes. The men's vocabularies (both verbal and psychological) for making sense of embodiment are so individualistic that there was little space for even thinking about what might lead someone to regard cosmetic surgery as the least worst option for them (cf. Davis, 1997). It seems that the notion of vanity or narcissism has become a kind of catch-all category for explaining all of the things that are impossible to think in purely individualistic terms. Men are themselves struggling with this, and their attempts to 'legislate' moral entitlement to surgery bear witness to this: they want to invent a middle category between disfigurement and vanity, and are struggling to construct a discourse 'psychological suffering' to capture this (see extract above). It is also evident in the *silences* in the interviews about the meaning of tattoos, scarification and piercing. We have already noted in the first analytic section that these practices were sometimes understood in terms of conformity/rebellion or indeed 'tribal' belongingness. However, it is worth pointing out that, despite the fact that each of these practices results in *a visual modification of the body*, there was only one occasion within the entire corpus of interviews when they were talked about as *aesthetic* practices. To state this very crudely: men are making radical transformations to the appearance of their bodies, but seem to have few resources other than individualism available to them to account for this. A prime concern seems to be to avoid any accusation of vanity.

### Against Obsession: The 'Well-balanced' Self

The fourth meta-discourse or interpretive repertoire did not have the prevalence or salience of those discussed so far. Not all the men drew upon this discourse, but for those who did it appeared to be a significant part of their self-definition and their construction of others. At its heart was injunction not to take things too seriously, not to become obsessive, and to 'take people as they are'. Many aspects of life were 'covered' by this repertoire, including work, body training and health. There was a shared rejection of obsessiveness, with several men saying that what they disliked about the gym was the obsessiveness of the people who used it. This kind of talk also spilled over into discussions of surgical body

modification, with phrases like 'perfectionism' or 'hyper-perfectionism' standing in for obsession.

As in our consideration of vanity, an implicit norm about obsession was deployed. The term was used almost exclusively to characterize *others*' behaviour – only occasionally being applied to one's own behaviour so long as it was safely in the past. I used to be obsessional, our Geordie gym instructor confessed, but I'm alright now! Generally, those who went to gym three times a week would be seen by non-gym users as obsessional, and they in turn would regard their own behaviour as reasonable and well-balanced, with the men who trained six or seven days a week earning the 'obsessive' tag. It is, then, a flexible category, but one that most men agreed was a Bad Thing. One area of talk that we have not yet been able to analyse in detail concerned diet and health practices, and it appears that constructions of obsession are rife here, especially in relation to 'healthy eating' choices.

While men agreed that obsessiveness was something to be condemned, in contrast the value of not taking yourself too seriously was widely championed. Several men praised the young men's magazines *FHM* and *Loaded* for having this quality, and for giving them the ability to laugh at themselves. Perhaps not surprisingly this was most highly valued by the younger heterosexual men who came closest to contemporary definitions of the 'lad'. The elevation of 'having a laugh' and 'not taking yourself too seriously' fits in with contemporary ideas about postmodernism in popular culture, in which an ironic distance is said to characterize representations and offers an 'ideal' for people to aspire to. There was a powerful sense in some of the interviews with young heterosexual men that being seen to take yourself seriously contravened some unwritten rule. Men were keen to distance themselves from being seen as too serious, too committed, too earnest – things that were likely to attract a comment about obsession. Being cool seemed to involve a stance of distance or disinterest. This was also evident in the dynamics of the focus groups, in which almost any comment which might be perceived as either serious or revealing of what an individual man thinks and feels would be quickly ironized, usually by the speaker himself (unless it was about football or sex, which – our evidence suggests – were deemed legitimate obsessions)! This was a fascinating pattern and requires further analysis to fully understand its implications for our understanding of the way that youthful masculinities are regulated in such group dynamics.

*Self-respect and the Morally Responsible Body*
The final discourse was organized around the notion that you should take care of yourself. This was (again) a highly individualistic discourse in which men were

constructed as the individual managers of their own bodies. Some of the talk using this repertoire was absolutely fascinating for what it revealed about men's feelings about the embodied self. Many men employed a form of speech which relied upon a bifurcation between the body and the self. Several men were quite explicit about this. One told us:

> *George*: I smoke when I want to, and I don't when I don't. I've got an excuse. I've got an agreement with my body and I can, I don't need to, but I do when I want to.

This young heterosexual student clearly understood his body as a quasi-autonomous entity with which he could enter into an agreement. Such constructions emerged most clearly in talk about food choices and dieting and were also found by Jonathan Watson (2000) in his study of men's health practices. Few men were as explicit as this in constructing a boundary between self and body; but most men saw their body as something that was their responsibility to discipline. Here it becomes clear that men had to tread a delicate path between an appropriate level of care and attention to one's body, and the twin pitfalls of vanity or obsession. If they appeared too concerned about their body or their looks they laid themselves open to accusations of vanity or obsession; if they seemed unconcerned they were at risk of being accused of 'letting themselves go'. Men tended to handle this delicate discursive and psychological problem or 'ideological dilemma' (Billig et al., 1988) through the notion of 'self-respect'.

> *Sean*: Well, you still make the same effort don't you, every morning? It's self-respect.

As well as being an individualistic discourse, this repertoire is a highly moralistic one. Interestingly, although the men in our sample appeared to reject moralism strongly and championed individual bodily autonomy, in fact the autonomous body is only allowed to make certain choices: not caring for one's physical appearance is not one of them. Parenthetically, it does not seem as though the same moral reprobation is attached to health choices, with many men reporting various kinds of harmful bodily practices without criticism. However, attending to one's appearance (without becoming vain) is critical for young men (cf. Watson, 2000 on middle-aged and older men). This discourse sets up the individual to discipline their own body, and finds them morally culpable if they fail. They are deemed not simply to look unattractive, but to be moral failures, and are censured for their transgression: they let themselves go. This was seen most clearly in relation to getting fat, which attracted great disapproval. As writers in a Foucauldian tradition have argued, increasingly the body is becoming read as an indicator of self-control and self-discipline. In this way, fat represents not simply excessive flesh, but an inability to control oneself (Bordo, 1993).

The men in this study bore witness to this. They reported the fact that they would be teased or policed by their friends about their appearance, and that the beginnings of a paunch, in particular, would attract playful, but nevertheless critical, comments. They argued for the need to 'take care' of their bodies. In the final extract below, the link between taking care of one's body and one's self and the elision of fat with lack of interest in life as well as a conformist lifestyle is made very clear:

> *Dominic*: I just don't want to, I would like to look after myself and I, I mean, the really important thing is still to be fit and healthy as you get older, and take care of your body and your mind, and. I don't want to end up like some people I know. Some people in my, even in my family and people I see around, you know. They just sort of let them go. Themselves go, get fat and lose interest in everything, don't they. Do their 9 to 5 job, sit in front of the TV, and that's their life. That's not for me.

Here the look of the body is made to stand for the entire identity and assumed lifestyle, with fat symbolizing a variety of negative characteristics with no direct relevance to body weight.

## Conclusion

This article has been concerned with young men's talk about a variety of body modifying practices including working out, weight training, body piercing, tattooing and cosmetic surgery. Based on interviews with 140 British men of different socio-economic, 'racial' and ethnic backgrounds, with various sexual orientations, from different regional locations, and spanning 20 years in terms of their age (from 15 to 35) perhaps the most striking finding was the extraordinary *homogeneity* of the men's talk. Approaching the interviews with an interest in the differences between boys and men of different class, ethnic and regional locations, we found instead significant overlaps in the men's talk about body modification, and a *widely shared* set of discourses or repertoires for talking about the body. Indeed, just five discourses seemed to structure men's talk about body modification, and these appeared in interview after interview. They were focused on the themes of individualism and 'being different'; libertarianism and the 'autonomous body'; unselfconsciousness and the rejection of vanity; a notion of the 'well-balanced' and non-obsessional self; and self-respect and the morally accountable body.

These discourses operated as structuring sets of ideas and behavioural injunctions which worked together to construct the meaning of attempts to modify the appearance of the body. More than this, they revealed how men's bodies are inserted in a complex web of norms and social relations.

The notion of the body as a project has become a popular way of thinking about the 'identity functions' performed by the body as a canvas for expressing the self, and a source of 'capital' for the individual. Although the notion of body projects is, in our opinion, overly voluntaristic, and also fails to recognize that bodily 'reconstruction' is not equally open to all (in particular to disabled and racialized bodies) it does usefully grasp parts of the experiences of the young men discussed here. When the men talked about their bodies they talked less about muscle and flesh and skin than about their own selves located within particular social, cultural and moral universes. For them, the body was a key vehicle for establishing a sense of individuality and for claiming a place in contemporary society. Those who chose to tattoo or pierce their bodies or to build muscle accounted for it as an expression of their 'difference' and 'individuality', rather than in terms of class or subcultural belonging or affiliation. Those who did not modify the appearance of their bodies in these ways nevertheless shared precisely the same discourses for talking about embodied experience.

A key finding of this research concerns the *individualism* of men's accounts of their body modification practices and those of other men. It is not simply – as the notion of body projects suggests – that the body was a site for individual expression, but, more significantly, that the men's talk about their embodied identities is saturated by the assumptions of individualism. In fact, so pervasive was this that the men's body/identity talk might be thought of as structured by a *grammar of individualism*. It was evident in the men's shared conviction that they were different from other men; in their refusal to value choices or decisions that were not deemed entirely independent (e.g. because of influence from peers or the media); and in their shared belief about the right to bodily autonomy. Equally, the individualism could be felt in the systematic silences and absences in most of the men's talk. The autonomous individual, in these accounts, appears to be entirely socially isolated or dislocated. There is little or no sense of a self-in-interaction or a self as part of a wider set of collectivities. This may in part be an artefact of the interviews' focus on embodiment, which predisposed participants to think in individualistic terms. Nevertheless it is surprising that, even when talking about topics such as cosmetic surgery – where, as we have seen, the notion of autonomous individualism was under most stress – there was no mention of the social, political or cultural context in which decisions such as that to alter an 'ugly', 'abnormal' or 'undesirable' feature of the appearance are made. This is all the more remarkable in the context of interviews in which a central focus concerns the existence of 'new' pressures on men, for example, in relation to images of the exemplary body (Gill et al., 2000).

The grammar of individualism was accompanied by a powerful *libertarianism*,

organized around the assertion of the right to 'do what you want with your own body'. As we indicated in the analysis, we were struck by the defiant tone of such assertions, which seemed to indicate that the men felt they were responding to a weighty authoritarian counter-position. There are a number of possible ways of reading this. One productive direction might be to regard such assertions as part of the practice and performance of masculinity, that is, as involved in '*doing*' being a man, drawing on ideas that have been developed both by post-structuralist thinkers like Judith Butler (1990) and by ethnomethodologists (Kessler and McKenna, 1985; West and Fenstermaker, 2002). Studying masculinities and health, Saltonstall (1993) and Courtenay (2000) have each profitably employed the notion that 'doing health' is 'doing gender'. Courtenay shows that a range of health-promoting behaviours such as applying sunscreen, avoiding unnecessary risk, asking for help, or seeing a doctor when sick involve the flouting of hegemonic ideals of masculinity. Not doing these things is the way of 'doing masculinity': demonstrating strength, lack of vulnerability, independence and so on.

The same argument could be applied here, with the suggestion that the vehement protestations of individualism, independence and bodily autonomy were not simply expressions of masculinity, but enactments of hegemonic ideals.

It is interesting that, despite the repeated emphasis on independence and autonomy, there were clear, normative limits to individualism and libertarianism – although they were not understood reflexively as such by the men themselves, and instead operated as 'obvious', taken-for-granted norms. We considered three in this article – the injunctions not to be vain, not to become obsessional and not to 'let yourself go'. The analysis presented in the article showed how tenaciously notions of appropriate masculine behaviour in relation to the body are regulated and policed. Scathing censure greeted anyone thought to have transgressed these norms – deemed vain, a 'follower', 'clone', 'fake' or 'sheep' – and anyone thought 'obsessional' or, alternately, to have lost 'self-respect' and 'let themself go'. In line with the position outlined above, it is evident that the body is a site not only for the performance or enactment of masculinity, but also for its profound and intimate regulation.

Normative standards of masculinity were maintained in a variety of different ways. The discourse analytic approach used here showed that implicit and explicit contrasts with other men were a powerful and persuasive means of upholding norms of masculinity like independence or lack of susceptibility to influence. They were also an important means for men to articulate what they did not want to become, for example, fat, boring, conformist or vain. Indeed, it was striking how much more readily the men articulated what they did not want, than they professed their aspirations or desires. This has resonances with

Monaghan's study of bodybuilding culture, which highlighted the desire of bodybuilders to avoid looking, or ageing, like many of the people they saw around them (Monaghan, 2001; see also Featherstone, 2000 on the 'heroes of ageing').

Another way in which normative masculinity was regulated was through the conduct of the interviews themselves – particularly the focus groups. The 'humour' and banter in these groups frequently operated as an 'in your face' way of policing acceptable or 'normal' masculinity, at least in the groups where all or most of the men identified as heterosexual. For example, when the men were shown photographs taken from contemporary adverts or magazines of the muscular torsos of men, it was not uncommon for one of the heterosexual-identified men to say to another: 'You fancy him, don't you!' or something along these lines. This would be the opening statement in a series of homophobic exchanges, designed to disavow any homoerotic desire in the speaker and to cast aspersions on the others' (heterosexual) manhood. Similarly, as we noted earlier, many men practised a kind of cool distance in the focus groups, and there were frequent occasions when speakers would quickly and deliberately ironize or distance themselves from a comment that might be heard as too serious or too revealing.

In this respect, both the conduct and content of the focus groups bore a strong resemblance to aspects of the wider culture of 'new laddism'. The phenomenon of the 'new lad' has been understood in a variety of ways: as a backlash against feminism (Faludi, 1991; Franks, 1999; Whelehan, 2000); as a hedonistic reaction against the constraints of the male adult role (Jackson et al., 2001); and as a reassertion of 'permissive heterosexual masculine scripts' (Nixon, 2001) against the alleged inauthenticity of the 'new man' (see Gill, 2003 for detailed analysis). The image of the 'new lad' to be found in magazines like *Loaded* or *FHM* mirrors the assertions of masculinity espoused by many of the heterosexual men we interviewed: anti-aspirational and anti-obsessional (except where beer, football and 'shagging' are concerned), hostile to the 'narcissism' of the 'new man' ('grooming is for horses' opined a lad-mag editor); individualistic, hedonistic and sexually predatory, the discourses we identified fit James Brown's vision of *Loaded* as being 'for the man who believes he can do anything if only he wasn't hungover' (*Loaded*, 1994). To date, 'new lad' has mostly been studied as a media construction. This finding suggests the need for more empirical research to analyse the diffusion, uptake and resistance to this model of masculinity among young men.

In sum, the men in this study did regard their bodies as projects, charged with expressing their identity and difference from everyone else, in a social and

emotional landscape in which this difference was highly prized. The look of the body was read as an indicator of a whole range of lifestyle and identity choices. The absence of any discourses other than individualism for talking about embodied identity was a key finding of this research. However, the men's bodies were also implicated in another kind of project: that of regulating normative masculinity. Despite the emphasis on individual freedom and autonomy, the men rigorously disciplined and policed their own and other men's bodies and identities

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