Looking at Bodywork: Women and Three Physical Activities

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LOOKING AT BODYWORK

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The concepts of the subject-at-work and the subject-in-discourse form the basis for an examination of the implications that appearance has for physically active women and their self-presentation. Excerpts from interviews with three physically active groups (ballet dancers, bodybuilders, and weightlifters) of Australian women are used to illustrate the ensuing discussion of the "gaze." When the subject-at-work becomes the subject-in-discourse, as a result of the presentation of the body to an audience, differences in the extent to which each group exercised ownership of their physical mastery became evident. Activities that invite others to look and to judge the appearance of women's bodies appeared to disempower through the effect of the "gaze," which a more instrumental approach seemed to resist. The implication is that to transcend the status of being an object, women may benefit from pursuing their bodywork instrumentally, not on the basis of appearance.

Discussions of the body rely on concepts such as embodiment, corporeality, and physicality and the connections these have to subjectivity. Although examination of the links between mind and body, or intellectual reasoning and physical existence, is important, it does not address the influence of images of bodies. Connections between body image and subjectivity assume that cultural signs and representations play a role in the creation of an ideal social subject. There is a cultural hierarchy of approved or appropriate body shapes, and these are often aligned to activities, or physicalities, such as fashion models or Olympic athletes. For Western metropolitan societies, the symbolic value of athletic bodies is most often about heroism, excellence, hard work, and self-discipline. Although there is increasing interest in the active and somewhat muscled body for women, cultural representations of women and exemplary feminine beauty currently remain fixed on slender and nubile (MacNeill, 1994; Spitzack, 1988; Wolf, 1991). Fashion models are exemplars of the slender feminine beauty that is intended to be highly desirable in Western culture, regardless of race or socioeconomic level. These models are used in advertisements in all media including television, billboards, and women's magazines and so are readily available and very visible. Although hard work and self-discipline may be conveyed by images of women models, final positive judgments are based on the potential heterosexual desirability and not on objective, instrumental, or measurable abilities associated with successful athletes. The

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importance of these interpretive processes between individuals and the socially created meanings of objects, images, and physicalities is recognized by symbolic interactionists (Becker, 1963; Blumer, 1969; Goffman, 1959/1990).

The symbolic meanings conveyed by bodies are very important because people cannot be in the world without bodies. The demeanor, the presentation, the look, the size, and the physicality of bodies is automatically and deeply perceived and read like a text at an automatic and deep level of perception (Bartky, 1988; Grosz, 1994). Physicality refers to the way an embodied subjectivity can have motility and physically act and present itself in the social world. An active physicality has experiences of the body in movements, though it can be experienced through immobility (Seymour, 1989, 1998). Sexuality, as it ultimately relates to physical acts, is intricately connected to physicality and is a determining factor in the kinds of body expressions that are of interest to an individual's body style or body image. Physicality, as a physical, interactive understanding of the body/mind Mobius strip (Grosz, 1994), is crucially connected to personal empowerment (Connell, 1987, 1995) and is the body speaking the body language of an interactive subjectivity.

Bodywork is the effort put in to create a specific physicality and draws on the notion of an individual actively and consciously making an effort to create a kind of physicality (Brace-Govan, 1997). Bodywork can involve a range of activities including decoration, such as hairstyling or body piercing, as well as relatively active pursuits to train the body in particular physical movements, such as muscle building or dancing. This broad concept of bodywork extends beyond the basic self-presentation of fashion to encompass the motility of the body and so recognizes the impact that movement and gesture have on the ways people understand themselves and each other in the social world (Brace-Govan, 1997). The combined concepts of physicality and bodywork convey the idea that the body is an image or text and an active, lived, embodied personal self-projection. Thus, the physical body is a message in social communication and a personal creation.

Not all physicalities are equal. Feminist work in sport sociology suggests that male sport and masculine images of athleticism are highly valued (Bryson, 1983; Cahn, 1994, Hargreaves, 1994; Wearing, 1996). Feminist work in sociology and cultural studies analyzes the meanings of beauty and the way these meanings are implicated in the subordination of women (Chapkis, 1986; Wolf, 1991). Appearance and (re)presentations of women's bodies are key determinants of feminine identity and cultural acceptability. As the objects of others' evaluations, women are tempted to use their looks to gain approval. A linked concept, also derived from cultural studies, is "gaze" (Berger, 1972; Mulvey, 1984) and the impact of presenting oneself to be looked on. The act of referring to another to confer meaning on the way that one looks can be disempowering in two ways. First, it decreases the confident sense of self that derives from mastery of physical activity (Gilroy, 1989; Whitson, 1994). Second, the woman loses the power to define what is

acceptable and appropriate femininity: "Appearance may be controlled by a woman but its intended meaning is established by discursive texts outside her control" (Smith, 1990a, p. 182). It could be argued that women, who are constantly objects to be gazed on, cannot escape the effect of the dominant culture, especially that culture's image of femininity.

This article focuses on the "gaze" as a concept that was particularly useful in analyzing the stories women told about their bodywork. In the larger study on which this article relies, in-depth interviews were used to explore the experience of three groups of women whose amount and type of physical activity made them different from most women: bodybuilders, weightlifters, and ballet dancers. The women who took part in the research were all very successful in their chosen physical activity, either through high-level recognition in their art or through international and national competitions. By relating their experiences, they give insight into the symbolism and meanings associated with their bodies. The thickly descriptive material provides a detailed picture of what is like to be a woman living a particular physicality and doing the bodywork required to be successful. The women were asked to give a history and description of their bodywork including their perceptions of the meanings both they and others attributed to their bodywork. The way in which the women wanted their bodies to be viewed was crucial to the symbolic meaning of their bodies and the lived reality of their physicalities.

This article discusses how the gaze can differentially affect women and their access to a sense of personal empowerment, even women who are extremely successful in their chosen physicality, and this is then illustrated with relevant material from the women's stories. To give some background to the material on which this piece draws, I begin with a discussion of the concepts that establish the parameters for the larger study and point to the illustrative significance of the nexus between women, physical activity, and social power. Then the rationale for the sample groups is explained: their type of bodywork and the physicality that entails; their level of excellence; and the comparison this selection enables. After a brief synopsis of the method and sample, the main analytical thrust of the article is taken up: first, by asking whether these physically active women experience empowerment, and second, by examining the role of appearance for each type of bodywork. It is through their differing concern for appearance that a role for the gaze becomes evident.

PHYSICALITY, BODYWORK, AND SEXED IDENTITY

In Western contemporary society, it is crucially important to determine the sex and the intended gender of the body that is being read. If shoulders are large and broad, then it is central to the social interpretation whether they are part of a male or of a female body. Sometimes, visual gender identity cues are manipulated by the person or misread by others (Devor, 1989, pp. 47-49), but the way in which a sexed body's physicality is used is always subject to social interpretation and often to judgment. Thus, a

woman who is seen as graceful (interpretation) is deemed to be feminine (judgment), but a man with this characteristic may be judged as effeminate. The feminist philosopher Moira Gatens (1983, p. 144) was quite clear in her dismissal of the alleged neutrality of the body and proposed a fundamental sexed difference in bodies:

> The very same behaviours (whether they be masculine or feminine) have quite different personal and social significances when acted out by the male subject on the one hand, and the female subject on the other. . . . That the male body and the female body have quite different social value and significances cannot help but have a marked effect on male and female consciousness. (p. 148)

Another feminist philosopher, Elizabeth Grosz (1994), argued that the body be conceived of as a "Mobius strip" where the inside, or psychology-driven aspects, crucially inform the outside, or physical form of the body, and vice versa in a constantly changing and relational identity (p. 209). This conceptualization, while firmly joining the mind and body, also allows for the separated discussion of the embodied physical understanding of self as a learned phenomenon that, importantly, is sexed. Taken together, this clearly points to the lived reality of a body being a crucial element in a person's identity and the meanings they can convey about themselves. It also suggests that bodywork done to create a particular physicality has an indelible effect on subjectivity.

Connell's (1983) sociological discussion, although it was focused on men's bodies, arrived at a similar conclusion. He asserted that masculine physicality learned through schoolboy sport has important implications for what he termed hegemonic masculinity (Connell, 1983, 1987, 1995). Arguing for the existence of multiple masculinities, Connell (1987) considered mastery of the physical body to be a crucial element in a dominant adult male subjectivity in Western democracies and that it is strongly implicated in the balance of power between the genders (p. 85). The body is social (pp. 66-77) and "the body, without ceasing to be the body, is taken in hand and transformed in social practice" (p. 83). Sport enters the picture as a social practice that provides the opportunity for boys (men) to learn a particular physicality, one in which "the institutional organization of sport embeds definite social relations: competition and hierarchy among men, exclusion or domination of women. These social relations of gender are both realized and symbolized in the bodily performances" (Connell, 1995, p. 54).

He pointed to the social importance of different male cults of physicality such as football or surfing, first, for boys learning how to be men (Connell, 1987, p. 85), and second, as a repertoire of images of ideal, hegemonic masculinity (Connell, 1995, p. 37). These cults are where boys learn that "to be an adult male is distinctly to occupy space, to have a physical presence in the world" (Connell, 1983, p. 19). This understanding resonates well with feminist commentaries on the restricted way women occupy space (Bartky, 1988; Young, 1989) and Grosz's (1994) concept of the social body. If

men's social dominance is associated with active physicality and a cultural valuing of physical strength and size, then it seems that the existence of women who were at least as strong as most men would certainly challenge conventional perceptions of femininity. However, it is not only the social organization of physical activity that is important here, as Bryson (1983) noted, it is also the highly visible, ritual display of strength and ability in male sport.

Other discussions of the appearance of the body have two underlying, and for women, related themes that are pertinent. First, a widely accepted position in contemporary Western society is that the body is crucial as a symbol of the self. In other words, the outward appearance of the body is a clear indication of the worth and morality of its owner (Glassner, 1990, p. 222; Lupton, 1996, p. 137). A second theme is especially evident in feminist work that examines eating disorders, weight control, and the implications that the discourse of fashion and beauty has for women, their subjectivity, and their relationship to their body/self. These feminist eating-disorder theories imply women are responsible for their disorders and are victims of social forces; they do not investigate how women experience and negotiate their bodies in living contexts. If the body is crucial to how one is judged and therefore a significant element in human interaction, a preoccupation with one's body could be argued to be an essential element of survival rather than something for which one should be pitied or reprimanded. An alternative and perhaps more positive interpretation of women's embodiment can be found in feminist sport sociology, where it is suggested that women become empowered through physical activities (Gilroy, 1989; MacKinnon, 1987; Young, 1989). Davis (1995, pp. 39-58) sought to recast women as agents by questioning feminist accounts of cosmetic surgery for their lack of embodied subjects with active agency and suggested that these accounts ignore the moral contradictions with which some women must engage. However, neither of these discussions fully interrogates the heterosexist assumptions that underlie concepts of feminine beauty or desirability and, it must be acknowledged, nor is it an endeavor of the discussion here. Rather, the focus here is to note that some women make an active effort to create a particular physical appearance.

The importance of physicality and bodywork to identity, to social meanings, and to symbolism, all with gender dimensions, is clear. However, so too is the sex of the body. The biological is overlaid and interlinked with the social, and the sexed differences of male and female are transmuted to social meanings that often valorize male and masculinity at the expense of female and femininity, especially when the physicality is active and the bodywork aims to build strength. A focus on physical strength for women could expose interesting female characteristics if the sex of a body is crucial bedrock in the process of identity formation (Gatens, 1983; Grosz, 1994) and if physical prowess is crucial to masculinity (Connell, 1983, 1987, 1995). Differences between women tend to be overlooked in most literature about women's bodies, and an investigation of possible differences would be useful

in examining the extent to which the gaze affects the symbolic meanings attached to women's physicalities and bodywork.

THE SUBJECT-AT-WORK AND THE SUBJECT-IN-DISCOURSE

Dorothy Smith's (1990a, 1990b) investigations of active women's physicalities is particularly useful when thinking about an investigation of active women's physicalities as a feminine/female counterpoint of Connell's analysis. Smith argued that the "lived experience" of women, the experience or standpoint of women, presented from a feminist perspective, is crucial to exposing the "relations of ruling" and, provocatively, ending sociology's complicity in power relations. She drew attention to the significance of femininity as an embedded discourse and social practice. Reworking the potentially contradictory positions of Marxist materialism and Foucault's exploration of discourse, Smith (1990a) identified the interconnectedness of the relations of ruling and our reliance on the masculine voices of the text to organize society. She used a concept of ideology to identify significant and commonly used messages and argued that these messages are distorted in favor of those who hold power. To reverse sociology's participation in the relations of ruling, Smith insisted that research return to the actual social practices of individuals, in particular those of women who, she said, are invisible and ignored by the "abstraction from the local" in texts. Smith (p. 162) argued that texts should not displace social practices as the subject of analysis, but that texts are part of social structure, social action, and discourse in what she termed "textually mediated discourses" (p. 163). This "locates the social relations of a 'symbolic' terrain and the material practices which bring it into being and sustain it" (p. 163).

The example that Smith (1990a) worked through is the text of fashion magazines, and she used these to argue that "doctrines and images of femininity are inextricable from the outset" (p. 171), and in the everyday world of women, fashion magazines are like instruction manuals. It is through this textually mediated discourse of fashion that girls learn to be women (p. 179) and understand what is, or is not, feminine (pp. 182-183). The gap between the real and the ideal generates work for women and a "distinctive relation to self arises: not as sex object so much as body to be transformed, an object of work, even of craft" (pp. 186-187).

The body itself becomes a text when reflected back as an image in the mirror. The body, for the feminine subject, is the object of the subject-at-work (p. 189), and "there is always work to be done" (p. 187). This structures the relationship of the feminine subject is a "secret agent" (p. 191) as only fully an agent when producing the body she presents to be looked at. The subject-in-discourse, the feminine subject at large in a society dominated by heterosexuality, is created in the discourse of femininity, the discourse of heterosexual men's desire (p. 191). "The local realization of the ideality of the images of models, TV and movie actresses, ballet dancers, is the project of women's work" (p. 195).

Smith drew attention to the very different ways in which women, as compared to men, must understand their bodies, the concept of work, the effort of discipline, and the project of self. She also opened up a conceptual crack in the discourse of femininity to allow some scope for women to be agents in their bodywork, even if the final presentation to be looked at is absorbed by the discourse of heterosexual desire no matter what an individual woman's intention might be. Smith also made the case for combining recent developments in the textual analysis of cultural representations with the qualitative methods of microsociological study such as the in-depth interview. Denzin (1993), a leading exponent of symbolic interactionism, drew together the threads of symbolic interactionism, feminism and postmodernism.

Denzin's (1993) position echoes Smith's focus on the "local," everyday experience of women's lives. He offered a way to organize the symbolically significant issues of femininity in a way that takes postmodern concerns about dispersed power and embodiment into consideration by drawing the concept of interactions into the processes of formation and change in gendered behavior. Simultaneously, his acknowledgment of sex/gender differences made room for a consideration of the inherent power imbalance of gendered behavior and social relations. This conceptualization also allows for diversity both within and between subjects and provides for the impact of dominant discourse on individuals without denying agency. The potential for agency in appearance-orientated bodywork is significant for women because of the distinctive relationship between being looked at and women's bodies. However, if strength is a source of empowerment for men, does being physically strong make a difference to the disempowering nature of the gaze for women?

BODYBUILDERS, WEIGHTLIFTERS, AND BALLET DANCERS

The physical strength of interest in this study is the strength that moves visibly heavy objects. This is the strength that is at the basis of men's physical, and social domination, and it has unique implications for women who appropriate such physicalities, so valuable to masculinities and men in general (Connell, 1995). The cultural symbolism of men tossing the caber or throwing the hammer has a durable social significance. What might it feel like to be a woman of comparable strength and capabilities? Physical activities for women who produce this kind of strength include weightlifting, powerlifting, and bodybuilding. A comparison between women of strength and women who represent an ideal femininity, often found in media representations of women, but who also do regular, demanding physical work on their bodies, would be enlightening. Ballet is a highly regarded art form that has been dominated by women performers for some time. It represents a culturally valuable physicality for women, a physicality evolved to also provide images of currently sought after femininity.

It was also important to find women who were visible exponents, potentially alternative cultural symbols, and so the chosen women to be interviewed were elite or very successful in their activity. Aiming for international standards of success meant the women expended a lot of time and energy working on and with their bodies, and their physical work schedules were grueling by ordinary standards. Each group has a distinctive character to offer the research that provides a point of comparison and contrast. Weightlifters are women who have built strength but whose physical appearance is irrelevant for their competition. Bodybuilders are women who have built visible signs of strength and whose appearance is centrally significant to their competition but this appearance is not typically acceptable for women. Ballet dancers are women who have built strength that is mostly disguised and whose body shape is widely used in a cultural representation of ideal femininity.

Before interviewing participants, all procedures were approved by the Monash University Standing Committee on Ethics in Research Involving Humans. Participants were assured that their responses would be confidential and anonymous. The interviewer and participants were residents of Victoria, Australia, a state of approximately 4 million residents. A total of 48 women participated, 16 in each group (ballet dancers, bodybuilders, and weightlifters). The groups were analyzed both separately and comparatively based on information categories established in the interview schedule. To draw out any distinctions within the groups, each group was divided into two categories: company (or permanently employed) dancers and freelance dancers; figure bodybuilders and physique bodybuilders; and weight trainers and weightlifters.[1]

The groups in the study are too small for any differences on the basis of race, ethnicity, class, or income to be reliable, and this was compounded by a snowball sampling method. However, some general points can be made. As a group, the women are remarkably homogenous, which is not unusual for elite physically active women (McKay, 1990, p. 139). They tended to be Anglo-Celtic, from middle-class families but were not themselves particularly well-qualified and living on relatively low incomes, if they were financially independent. Their ages ranged from 15 to 43 years old and 27 out of 48 were in a long-standing relationships (2 engaged and 6 married) and only 4 women had children. In comparison to the other two groups, weightlifters tended to be better qualified, earn more money, and be single. Generally, the women had spent several years in their chosen activity (3 to 18 years), had achieved a recognized level of excellence, such as international competition, and spent many hours a week training. Dancers could spend more than 65 hours a week dancing, and 8 hours was considered a bare minimum for an out-of-work dancer. Bodybuilders and weightlifters usually lifted heavy weights for 10 hours a week with a further 8 hours of aerobic exercise. Just over half the bodybuilders (9) and weightlifters (10) could lift at least their own body weight and four women could lift more than twice their own body weight.

DO SUCCESSFUL PHYSICALLY ACTIVE WOMEN FEEL EMPOWERED?

The body is a significant site for the creation and ongoing maintenance of identity, and the sex of the body has an indelible effect on the meanings that can be transmitted by it. The seemingly disempowering nature of beauty work for women has been noted and contrasts with the potential for empowerment that men experience through their physical activity. However, Smith's (1990a) analysis of the subject-at-work suggests that women could find some space to experience agency and feelings of empowerment through their bodywork. This was explored through interviews with women in the three chosen groups.

Dance has only rarely been subject to sociological analysis. One exception is Adair (1992), who analyzed women and dance from a broad feminist cultural studies stance. In general, her point is that classical ballet is a visual physical expression of dominant phallocentric culture that valorizes the male perspective at the expense of the female and that there is a link between the "look" of the dancer (p. 72), the power position of the gaze, and the way this is replicated in the mirror (p. 77). Smith (1990a) suggested that women can be empowered until they take the body produced by the subject-at-work and present it for viewing as the subject-in-discourse. Dancers' commitment to their bodywork is demonstrated by the effort it requires in terms of the hours spent perfecting and rehearsing and the pain and discomfort endured. Although the dancers expressed a fairly restrained appreciation of their own attractiveness, they were very aware of the high esteem in which they were held by other people and that their very recognizable posture and body presentation becomes a permanent, naturalized feature of their appearance.

> You get a lot people say "Are you a ballet dancer?" and you say "Yes. Why?" "Oh, you just look like one." A lot of people say that just out of the blue. . . . They tend to think it is really glamorous. (Sandra, cd 4)[2]

> Most people say that they can pick a dancer because of the way that they hold themselves, and that's through your training. You have to stand a certain way doing your exercises. It becomes natural. (Karen, fd 12)

However, having achieved a glamorous, visible, and admirable physicality, dancers then relinquish control over the expression of their bodywork to the choreographer.

> As a professional, you are not required to assert yourself. You are a body for a choreographer to work with, and occasionally you get this rare [classical] choreographer where they will feed off the body they are working with. Very few dancers will give input because they have never been asked to. They have never been asked to think. (Carla, fd 10)

> That's why ballet is your appearance. It's all an art form. Your body is the instrument. (Carmel, cd 6)

The bodybuilders were also generally very pleased with the way that they looked and felt, even in the face of social contradictions. Although other people were not initially enthusiastic about their appearance and activities, the bodybuilders worked hard to persuade people who were important to them about the attractiveness of the body they were creating. And herein lies the important difference. The ballet dancers relinquished control over the expression of their bodywork, but the bodybuilders owned their bodies, their body was their creation, molded to their specifications.

> You can change the whole shape of your body if you want to. (Anne, pb 5)

They learned to listen to their bodies and to organize their training schedules around prompts from their bodies. This was different from dancers who learned to obey, without question or comment, the orders of other people.

> There are few bodies that are desirable. The perfect body is the body that can do anything a choreographer requires. (Carla, fd 10)
>
> It [your body] is your instrument. It's your tool. That's your saleable good. (Helen, cd 7)

The dancers' bodies were tools for the expert use of a choreographer and dance company director. Their bodies were instruments that they were obliged to manipulate and tune up but not necessarily tune into for their own benefit, unlike the bodybuilder. Both kinds of bodywork led participants to describe their publicly judged performance on stage as an "illusion." This was curious considering the huge effort each physicality required. One interpretation of this lies in how both body disciplines literally use the mirror as a part of their bodywork to gaze on their progress. Here, the actual process of the bodywork engaged in by the dancers and the bodybuilders incorporates the shift of subject-at-work to subject-in-discourse through the use of the mirror. The inherent voyeurism and the constant referral to another as judge via the presence of the mirror evokes in the women a recognition of the ephemeral quality of empowerment in their physicality. It is as if both groups of women know about their own strength, but when they gaze on their mirror image, they also know how their bodywork will be viewed. However, the crucial point of ownership, not simply alienation, marks the difference between bodybuilder and dancer.

> It's a challenge for me. Me being the creator. The main thing is because it is different. I sound a bit bold and a bit vain but, that's the way it is. (Myra, pb 1)
>
> I like to be in control of myself all the time and now I feel in control of my body. I feel in control of what I'm doing to it and what I put into it, and that's great. (Laura, pb 4)

Dancers relinquished control over the presentation of their physicality as an integral part of their art form, whereas the bodybuilders claimed

control and ownership. Some of the women who were extremely large challenged perceptions of femininity and masculinity and took charge of the way they presented themselves.

> You look like a man from the back. If you took your clothes off and you're in leotards, you look wonderful, but you can't walk around the rest of your life in your leotards. You have to exaggerate your femininity as a bodybuilder, more than if you were just toning up. . . . A lot of people feel you are trying to be manly and not looking at it as if you are just trying to reshape your body. Because of the look, it can make you look more masculine than feminine, so you have really got to watch how you look all the time. (Sophia, pb 6)

Although the label *victim* may be an overstatement, it seems that the empowerment dancers feel is illusory. A comparison with bodybuilders suggests that the muscle-building physicality has more to offer in terms of control and management of self-presentation. However, the mirror is still a crucial tool in this muscular bodywork, and the gaze is further invited by body displays in competition.

WHAT IS THE EFFECT OF THE GAZE?

Bodybuilding has been explored quite extensively in cultural studies and sport sociology as women challenging, symbolically at least, the male monopoly of physicalities and bodywork of strength. However, the extent to which this challenge is successful depends on the much broader social context in which bodybuilding women find themselves. Ndalianis (1995) analyzed the cultural representation rather than individual experience of bodybuilding for women, through the visual image of competition winners in magazines. She asserted that even the largest women bodybuilders have not managed to escape the "recuperation" effect and are the object of a fairly aggressive male desire (pp. 18-19). MacNeill (1994) examined the representation of active women on television and noted that although bodybuilding women are more controversial than women who pursue aerobics, nonetheless women's bodybuilding

> is not counterhegemonic in the fullest sense because bodybuilders reaffirm their femininity through the dance-like posing and the degree of controlled muscle development. (p. 282)

Like Ndalianis (1995), MacNeill suggested that the resistance initially present in women's bodybuilding is being recuperated in the media, through the marketing of the champion women, through the feminizing of the posing, and by sexualizing the images of these strong women. This is the contradiction that emerges from the cultural context and in which the individual woman bodybuilder finds herself: She may well have meanings beyond erotic male desire for her endeavors, but the gender order has a way of reasserting itself. Once more, Smith's (1990a) subject-at-work is enveloped by the discourse of femininity and by inviting others to look and judge

becomes the subject-in-discourse. Erotic display in bodybuilding competition was a problem specifically mentioned by the women in the current study. It was clear from their commentary that they wanted to reject the erotic image and embrace the athletic, strong meaning for their performance. This was demonstrated in their derisory comments about the figure bodybuilding competition being for "beach girls," which also supports the assertion that such women struggle with meanings and try to "distance themselves from the predatory male gaze" (Miller & Penz, 1991, p. 158).

> I don't dislike the figure event, but, to me, it's a bodybuilding competition, so to me there has got to be a bit of muscle development there. The bikini show [figure contest] is just more or less a show for the guys. Up on stage, really good-looking women with good-looking figures in really nice little outfits doing a routine. They have got no muscles to display, so their routine is entertaining. Bodybuilding to me is to see some development in the muscle. (Nadia, pb 2)

Although resisting this unpleasant aspect, bodybuilding women went to some lengths to ensure that femininity markers were clearly present in their appearance and this was important in setting them apart from the weightlifters.

> I get a lot of looks. You have got to learn how to dress to look good. I have always been really conscious about dress. . . . So you learn what to disguise and how to emphasize what's good about you. So I always take a great deal of time to work out what to wear, and now because you are muscular and you have got a more defined shape, different parts are bigger and you have got to really concentrate on what to wear to look good. (Enid, pb 8)

Overall, bodybuilders were enthusiastic about being different from other women and could identify ways in which they felt more in control and empowered by their activity. However, the inherent voyeurism of bodybuilding competitions is a point of difficulty, even for the women themselves. Ever the subject of a particular way of looking, as objects that are gazed on, women's bodies presented for viewing in any context in phallocentric culture cannot escape the effect of the dominant culture. In other words, until some kind of political feminism is effective in changing the gender order to something more equitable, viewable women who present their bodies publicly will ultimately be constituted and contained by the prevailing (though shifting) dominant definitions of femininity. This will happen however the women themselves perceive their bodywork and however challenging to social norms this might be initially.

IS THERE A PHYSICALITY THAT RESISTS THE GAZE?

A central difference between the women who weightlift and the other two groups is the lack of focus on appearance. Even when directly prompted during interviews, weightlifting women found little to say about their appearance. However, this does not mean that these women were entirely

uninterested in how they looked or presented to other people. They often expressed concern that they continued to look feminine as well as strong.

> People think of me as being strong. They have never seen me lift a weight, but they think of me as being strong. I like people to think of me as being strong because that's different and also it's good because they can think of you as being strong but they don't see a hulk. You can be strong and be feminine. (Merril, wl 16)

> I don't like the idea of being a nonfemale female, but I also don't want to be a dolly girl who is just incredibly vulnerable. (Judy, wt 8)

A few weightlifters altered their training programs to contain their bodies' development, whereas others selected particular gyms or specific kinds of equipment. But despite a general desire to maintain a feminine presentation, weightlifting women invested little in their appearance and had no specific aspirations for how their bodies should look. In contrast, bodybuilders often remarked that powerlifters might look quite good if only they would diet. An important implication here is that beauty, the voyeurism of the gaze, seems to affect and to be responded to differently by the women in the weightlifting group compared with the ballet dancers and bodybuilders.

The weightlifters' focus was not on their appearance but on the challenge of how much weight they could lift, which determined their progress and their performance in competition. Being strong was central to their sense of self (Brace-Govan, 1998). When asked why they committed themselves to weightlifting, they answered that it was to compete and to win.

> The challenge . . . to make the most, to be the best, to bring out the best in me that I could, in all aspects. There was no finish line. I always felt I could do more. And there was always someone out there that was better than me, and I wanted to beat them. (Jenny, wl 11)

For weightlifters, feeling good was a by-product of success in their sport and of workouts that went well. Positive feelings were linked to instrumental active processes of actually doing something and not so closely tied to how they appeared.

> People say I am big, but it doesn't worry me 'coz I know I am going to achieve something. They [my shoulders] have gone down a lot since May. I have lost about 7 kg. So long as I keep me [sic] strength. I have lost muscle round my shoulders. Me [sic] dead lift has gone down seven and a half kilo and me [sic] squat has gone down three and a half and me bench has gone down two and a half. But I am looking good. In May, I was 91 kg when I lifted and I lifted double body weigh plus 30 kg with my squat, and yesterday I weighed 86 and I lifted double body weight plus 35 kg. So I have really improved. (Ruth, wl 9)

> To me, that physical strength is admirable and something to go after. It reflects their ability to look after themselves and that they respect themselves. (Jenny, wl 11)

> It feels good to be strong. . . . If I have time off and I lose my strength, I get a bit depressed about it all because I know I've been strong. It's a bit hard to describe what you feel like. (Eva, wl 15)

These comments reflect a different approach to their bodywork that brought about an alternative subjective position that is centered more on instrumental effect and far less on appearance. This is consistent with MacKinnon (1987), who argued that athletics in a general sense can "give us a sense of an actuality of our bodies as our own rather than primarily as an instrument to communicate sexual availability" (p. 122). Where the practice of bodybuilding inherently draws a woman back toward the tenets of beauty and appearance, albeit somewhat altered from the hegemonic forms, weightlifting offers women a different view of themselves. The practices of weightlifting draw women into the lived experience of an instrumentally orientated, quantifiable physicality and presents women with another way to engage as the subject-at-work. Bodywork of this kind is not as reliant on aesthetic judgments of heterosexual attractiveness; instead, it relies on quantifiable, objective measures of success. This is the physicality that Connell (1983, 1987, 1995) suggested was the basis of boys learning to be men, to be dominant and in possession of themselves. To be in possession of oneself is to become an individual, not simply be a recipient of the desires of another.

Weightlifting's difference from the other two groups rests crucially on the orientation that this physicality takes to both its purpose and to the body that performs it. This physicality offers the kind of physical presence that is "antithetical to femininity" (MacKinnon, 1987, p. 121) but that can be learned through athletic activity (Young, 1989). In sum, these women did not invite the gaze: Personal physicality concentrated on the activity, not the appearance the activity presented, and performance was not based on artifice. But this must beg the question as to whether this is sufficient to dislodge the connections Smith (1990a) identified between the subject-at-work, the subject-in-discourse and the mirror, or reflected judgmental gaze? Do weightlifting women represent a physicality that is symbolic of independence from the gaze for women? Even though it is suggested that weightlifting women can resist the disempowering pull of the gaze, it is difficult to argue that they are sufficiently visible and able therefore to act as any kind of symbol of an alternative femininity.

For example, weightlifting in this study included two competitive variations, and despite Australia competing well in both, it is not an exaggeration to say these champions go unnoticed. In addition, weightlifting is generally ignored by discussions of women's physically active bodies. It is interesting that there is virtually no literature to draw on dealing with women in this particularly male-dominated, instrumentally orientated strength sport and noteworthy that most discussion focuses on the voyeuristic appearance, based activity of bodybuilding. Women's weightlifting was a

competitive event at the 2000 Olympics for the first time. Perhaps the moment for recuperation through the gaze is at hand.

CONCLUDING COMMENTS

This study focused on the diverse experiences of three groups of women who were dedicated to particular physicalities and the bodywork these entailed. Part of a larger study, the issue of the gaze was singled out for attention. It was anticipated that the way each group of women responded to the gaze would illuminate some of the processes involved in what feminists identified as the position of victim. Smith's (1990a) conceptualization of the subject-in-discourse and the links to the more actively positioned subject-at-work was useful in separating parts of the process of gaze.

The ballet dancers showed that, even though they were visible and recognizable symbols of beauty, the empowerment they felt through their disciplined bodywork was limited at best. An instrument or tool for the choreographer's use, these women were also exemplars of the subject-at-work becoming the subject-in-discourse and being subjected to the scrutiny of the gaze. Bodybuilders were women who worked hard on and with their bodies to develop a muscularity that is more usually linked to masculinity. In spite of intense feelings of control and resistance, for this group, the gaze acted to recuperate their efforts, and ultimately these women were judged within the limitations of heterosexual desirability. The centrality of voyeurism, and the mirror, in both ballet and bodybuilding holds the key to the ineffectiveness of any sustained challenge in either of these physicalities. Finally, the weightlifters helped address the question, Is there a physicality for women that can resist the gaze? Not especially concerned about their appearance but driven by more instrumental objectives, the weightlifters seemed to have forged a subjective position that reduced the impact of being gazed on, or judged by others, and were the most empowered of the three groups. In contrast, visible women are either defined by the gaze, as in the case of ballet dancers, or appear to be recuperated by the gaze, as in the case of the bodybuilders.

Perhaps empowered women, like the weightlifters, remain empowered because they are less visible and less open to scrutiny. Women in some social contexts avoid presenting themselves to the gaze by following the current social convention. An example is the hajib, or veil, used by Muslim women (Bouma & Brace-Govan, 2000). Some suggest that the disembodied presence of electronic communication overcomes various difficulties, including those of being identified as a woman (Turkle, 1995). Although cyberspace offers a different environment, it is not entirely unproblematic, particularly in settings in which interaction is required (Brace-Govan & Clulow, 2000). The crucial hub of shared meanings that form the basis of social interaction necessarily entails that the subject-at-work must become the subject-in-discourse for communication to take place. Clearly, there is diversity of experience for women who work on their bodies through active physicalities. These variations need to be taken into account in discussions

of women's embodied experiences to overcome generalizations that unnecessarily relegate women to the position of victim. When a woman is only an object to be gazed on, she seeks empowerment from the whims of the current social culture. It is suggested here that women who avoid the gaze, such as weightlifters, can also avoid some of its disempowering effects. If women are to transcend the status of simply being objects, they would benefit from pursuing their bodywork in a more instrumental manner and fashioning for themselves more quantifiable, objective measures of success than their appearance than presently exists.

NOTE

1. Each group comprised 16 women in all, and each group was divided evenly across two categories, with 8 in each. The division of the respondents arose because there were two sources of interviewees for each group. Bodybuilders comprised physique body builders (pb), who pursued the most muscular shape, and figure bodybuilders (fb), who developed less muscularity (and for which there is no equivalent competition for men). The focus of competition here is on the proportions of the body measured against ideals established through previous competitions. Weightlifters included weight trainers (wt), who lifted to train for another sport, and weightlifters (wl), who were competitive in either powerlifting or Olympic weightlifting. Competition lifting styles vary but the focus is on amount of weight lifted as a ratio of the lifter's body weight. Dancers consisted of company dancers (cd), who worked or studied ballet full-time, and freelance dancers (fd), who worked under contract to a variety of small companies.
2. Pseudonyms used throughout with interview numbers assigned at analysis stage.

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