The female bodybuilder as a gender outlaw

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

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

Introduction
It is Disgusting! These are not women anymore. They are beyond the point of no return. Whoever would do that is sick! You have to be sick to do this to yourself! There is no need to look like that! It is disgusting! Male bodybuilders who overdo it look horrible too but seeing a woman mutilate their body in this way is Sick! Ugly Ugly Ugly.

This paper examines the female bodybuilder as a 'gender outlaw' (Bornstein), a figure who is stigmatised not because she has broken formal laws, but because she has disregarded so flagrantly dominant understandings of what is aesthetically, kinaesthetically and phenomenologically acceptable within the gendered order of social interaction. As Ferrell and Sanders argue, the stigmatisation of marginal groups made visible by their 'deviant aesthetic' of dress, speech and bearing has a long history, and is related to their outsider status and their undermining of 'the stylistic certainty and aesthetic precision associated with the 'functioning of legal authority and social control'. However, the fact that the appearances, actions and desires of female bodybuilders may threaten not only institutional norms, but the gendered foundations of social interaction itself, separates them from many other deviant groups within society. This is reflected in typically hysterical media coverage that portrays these women as 'scary monsters', 'at war' with society and their own bodies, looking and sounding like men and rejecting what is culturally tolerable If, as Cohen suggests, we 'only know what is saintly by being told just what the shape of the devil is, the media are clear that the shape of this particular devil is muscular and is a woman. The moral gravity of these women's offences against gender is such that all 'decent' citizens, even family and friends feel entitled to police, judge and sentence them.

In establishing firmer foundations on which to analyse female bodybuilders as multiply transgressive gender outlaws, we begin with Goffman's identification of the 'interaction order' as the ritualised, constraining domain of face-to-face relations integral to the presentational context in which identities are forged. While some of the demands of this sphere stem from the universal pre-conditions of human life, including the irreducible bodily components of co-presence, the interaction order also produces and reinforces gendered values. As Kessler and McKenna argue, dominant Western norms admit of two sexes and genders - and two only - and the status of being male and masculine or female and feminine is one of the first things individuals attribute to each other in an encounter and is central to the normative
though disrespecting this order can have serious consequences, men and women to present themselves in particular ways, this gendered interaction order does not physically compel the manner of such displays has become increasingly. dominance, as a counterpart to their social dominance, even if expected to display at least their capacity for physical Contemporarily, albeit with context-based exceptions, the female and feminine, appearance and behaviour. That there exist normal modes of male and masculine and apprenticeship into adulthood and stratification on the basis of male/female identification systems of exchange, taboo, and shame. These attributions is, therefore, more than nominal: they inform judgments about the acceptability of the interacting self. Indeed, societies have historically constructed on this male/female identification systems of exchange, taboo, apprenticeship into adulthood and stratification on the basis that there exist normal modes of male and masculine and feminine, appearance and behaviour. Contemporarily, albeit with context-based exceptions, the gendered interaction order remains the place that men are expected to display at least their capacity for physical dominance, as a counterpart to their social dominance, even if the manner of such displays has become increasingly. This gendered interaction order does not physically compel men and women to present themselves in particular ways, though disrespecting this order can have serious consequences, but provides strong incentives to conform. For Goffman and these derive from the fact that our ability to experience ourselves positively is strongly affected by the responses of others. If we transgress gendered norms in our actions or appearances, stigmatising feedback makes it difficult for us to cognitively or affectively evaluate our self-identity in anything other than negative terms. Transgressors also stand to be excluded from the 'order' of respectful interaction as morally culpable individuals facing ‘an unaccepting world’. Female bodybuilders are not, of course, alone in transgressing the gendered interaction order. Men seen as fat, at least in Western culture, risk emasculation given the negative meanings ascribed to their corporeality. Trans-gendered individuals are also deemed unacceptable on the basis of their erasure of 'natural' identities, while female boxers, bouncers and soldiers have also been analysed as deviant by virtue of crossing gender boundaries and becoming 'symbolic men'.

Researching female bodybuilders

Quantitative and interview methods may still dominate the field of sports studies, but there exists a strong and growing tradition of ethnographic studies across a range of sports and leisure activities. Ethnographic methods, moreover, appear particularly suited to revealing the 'ways of life' pursued by the marginalised group that is female bodybuilders. They enable the researcher to avoid the suspicions that may be raised by a one-off or occasional interloper to a culture that is frequently derided by outsiders, and facilitate embodied experience to be gained of an activity that remains under-investigated (Sparkes). While a number of studies have focused on the textual meanings and symbolic representations of women's muscle, however, they have frequently neglected the actual practices and daily lifestyle of female bodybuilders. In particular, there is a dearth of investigation into those phenomenological issues involving either the lived experience of how the female bodybuilder's physique is constructed or how their 'assault' on conventional norms of feminine appearance is received both inside and outside of the gym.

The outrages of female bodybuilding

Female bodybuilders are united by the choice they have made to prioritise the pursuit of muscularity. Whatever else divides them, the aim of achieving maximum muscular size and definition is key to these women's identities. This choice, in itself, is highly transgressive of gendered norms (Bartky), as reflected in the comments of friends, family and work colleagues remembered by female bodybuilders when they first embarked upon or even expressed interest in bodybuilding. The following examples illustrate this point: Why are you doing this? What are you trying to prove? (Asked of Lucie, bodybuilder of eight years, by her mother) I'm concerned about you; I'm worried about your health. I don't understand why you're doing this to yourself. (Asked of Sascha, bodybuilder of three months, by her father) What's wrong with you? Don't you want a boyfriend? (Asked of Pat, bodybuilder of seven months, by her mother) Such remarks suggest that any woman interested in building muscle must be psychologically deviant or deliberately trying to offend others. Girls are meant to learn that female strength.

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

Durkheim's argument that deviance exists not because people engage in acts that are inherently deviant, but because their actions 'shock the collective conscience' seems particularly applicable to female bodybuilders. Their transgressive behaviours and appearances offend the cultural sensibilities of those who view as natural the social distinctions that separate men and women, and masculinity and femininity. There are consequences associated with these transgressions furthermore, and these are not merely symbolic, expressed in disapproving but remote comments and stares of casual gym users or members of the public, but are manifest in a series of concrete penalties. In terms of their personal lives, the partners and friends of female bodybuilders were not simply critical, but initiated an inter-personal coldness or distance that sometimes resulted in relationship breakdown. Pauline (bodybuilder for six months), for example, reports how

Restitution and reform

How do female bodybuilders respond to these sanctions? Is there any sense in which they are moved to reform and resume their place as respectable gendered interactants within society? There are three points to make here. Firstly, there is little doubt that female bodybuilders are widely aware of and have personally experienced the forms of criticism and sanctions listed above. The findings of our study are confirmed by other research suggesting this negativity is a regular occurrence for these women. Second, irrespective of their verbal responses to these criticisms, it is common for female bodybuilders to make limited compromises with conventional notions of femininity.
in their make-up, dress and posture. While only one of those in this study worked out in an ostentatiously feminine combination of hot pants and crop top lycra set, half these women involved themselves in such activities as dyeing their hair blond, acquiring hair extensions and breast augmentation. Such actions involved these women in undertaking what Grogan et al. describe as a ‘balancing act’ between the competing demands of femininity and masculinity, and were frequently undertaken in response to the effects that training regularly with heavy weights and taking steroids and oestrogen blockers had, in increasing the distance of their bodies from gendered norms. Regular exercise increases muscle, drug regimes and pre-competition dieting result in the loss of fat and breast tissue, while steroid use often results in hair loss. Additional consequences of steroid use, such as acne and facial hair, prompted women to other make-up measures and laser treatment. One female bodybuilder, initially adamant she would not compromise, decided after two years to undergo breast augmentation when she became tired of being mistaken for a man. Female body builders would also sometimes alter their demeanour and carriage in crafting a non-masculine presentational self-outside the gym. As Charlie (bodybuilder for four years) noted, ‘occasionally when I have trained my upper body, I’ll be pumped up and have to stop myself walking like a man and also you know, take my hair down’.

Feminising actions are encouraged by bodybuilding competitions, sites described as submitting to ‘the femininity project in terms of the almost hyper-feminine ornamentation, posture and demeanour required for competition’. While these expectations encourage a veneer of femininity to be placed over the project of muscularity (competitions have been viewed as a context in which ‘lipstick and blonde locks are as necessary for the woman bodybuilder as they are for the female impersonator’, this is no wholesale recuperation of conventional gender ideals. These women remain ‘outlaws’ in relation to the gendered interaction order and prevailing conceptions of ‘real’ women.

Thirdly, whatever compromises female bodybuilders make, none was prepared to revise their primary aim of developing a muscular body. There is for these women a pleasure intrinsic to building muscle that overrode the costs associated with breaking social taboos, a finding consistent with Grogan et al. suggestion that the development of female muscularity can be used positively to help resist certain gendered norms. Furthermore, irrespective of the consequences of their decision, these women felt they had no option but to continue with a lifestyle that provided them with an alternative to that they found intolerable. Like other sub-cultural groups, female bodybuilders are excluded from mainstream society and pursue social relationships among like-minded and like-bodied individuals.

The muscular order of female bodybuilding

Having examined the revulsion and condemnation provoked among ‘normals’ by the transgressions of female bodybuilders, it is important to understand what motivates these women. This raises the important subject of ‘the lived reality of transgression’ and helps explain the commitment of female bodybuilders to an interaction order based upon the pursuit of muscle rather than the cultivation and reflection of gendered ideals.

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

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

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

I became interested in bodybuilding when I was 17. I was exceptionally tall for a woman and very thin, weighing under nine stone. People used to tease me. One day I saw a picture of a female bodybuilder and decided that I wanted my body to look like that. I wanted to be big and strong. (Emma, bodybuilder for 19 years)

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

Conclusion

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

Bodybuilding holds out the promise for women of developing a different relationship with their bodies, selves and social surroundings. While Bordo suggests that women's bodybuilding merely produces differently feminised bodies imprinted with the gendered meanings of culture, women's motivations and the vitalistic satisfactions they gain from this activity suggests it would be wrong to treat it merely as a site of 'femininity's recuperation'. If this recuperation occurred, how do we explain the continued hostility female bodybuilders experience in the interaction order? Instead, the choices, appearances, experiences and actions/consumption behaviours of these women place them firmly outside the bounds of respectable interaction.

References