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Learning Body-work:
Women, Gyms and Fitness Magazines

By

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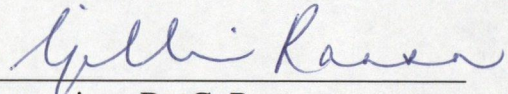
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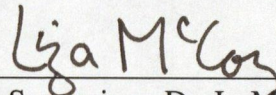
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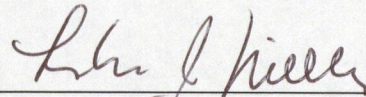
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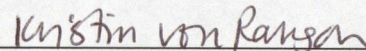
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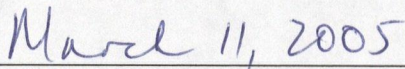
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Abstract

This research makes a small exploration into the inter-connectedness of the different institutional levels of the fitness industry by focusing on women and the gym. In particular it looks at women who go to the gym on a regular basis and who structure their workouts independently. It is concerned with issues related to the singularity of the ‘ideal’ female body and examines how dominant discourses of gender influence, and impact upon, women’s experiences of the gym. It also investigates women’s use of fitness magazines to guide their workouts and explores the work involved in selecting and interpreting the information in the magazines. The research involved carrying out in-depth interviews with fifteen women who went to a number of different gyms in the same city in Western Canada. It also included an analysis of a selection of fitness magazines (*Shape*, *Muscle and Fitness Hers*, *Oxygen* and *Men’s Fitness*). The research was guided by the methodology of institutional ethnography and aimed to explore the broader ‘ruling’ and ‘extended’ relations of the fitness industry. On account of this methodological approach, it was also concerned with making visible, the invisible work involved with being a woman at the gym. The findings suggest that although gym-going women are included in this traditionally male-dominated terrain, their participation is underscored by gendered stereotypes.

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This thesis is dedicated to the memory of Dr. Alex Baird – friend, father and scholar.

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Chapter One: Introduction

Personal perspectives

This discussion begins with my story as an international student, and an athlete, experiencing a Canadian winter for the first time. In New Zealand I was always involved in various sports that required a lot of training, but for one reason or another the gym never played much of a role in my training. This was perhaps in part related to the kinds of sports I was involved in. I first started off my sporting 'career' as a competitive swimmer, which at that time involved mostly pool-training, with the occasional 'dry-land' practice of callisthenics and the irregular run. However, before I came to Canada my main sport was long-distance running. Due to New Zealand's temperate climate all my training, both winter and summer, took place outdoors. In fact most runners frowned upon running on a treadmill; and those who did were considered 'soft' and therefore not 'real' runners.

So, at the start of winter I was understandably a little reluctant to succumb to the cold and go to the gym to run on the treadmill. However, as the temperatures dropped to a freezing cold that I had never experienced previously, it became painfully obvious that if I had any hopes of maintaining my running fitness I was going to have to swallow my pride and develop a close relationship with the gym, and more specifically with the treadmill.

Soon I became a regular 'member' of the early-morning gym crowd, and from the vantage point of the treadmill noticed many aspects of the gym environment that tweaked my interest as a sociologist of sport and gender. I noticed that there were women at the gym who, despite not being athletes in the traditional sense of the term, were just as

dedicated to their workouts as I was. I therefore became interested in how these women, in the absence of a coach, managed to design their own exercise programmes.

As I spent more time at the gym it also dawned on me that the gym was a place designed specifically to sculpt the body. I also noticed that there were different ways to do so. Some women seemed interested in building muscle by lifting weights, and others exercised only on the treadmills or bicycles. I therefore became interested in discovering what different fitness goals the women were trying to achieve, and why they were doing the exercises they were doing. I also wondered whether those women who obviously worked out to develop muscles operated in an environment very similar to my running environment, in which a slim woman was explicitly favoured over a muscled woman. I myself have had to learn to deal with comments about my muscled body: not only does it not fit the traditionally tall, lean runner's build (thus raising questions about my running ability); it also does not fit (on account of muscular swimmers' shoulders) the traditional feminine 'ideal'.¹ I therefore not only wanted to understand how women learned to work on their bodies in different ways, I also wanted to understand how (or indeed whether) they dealt with comments about their gendered bodies.

Intellectual perspectives

My intellectual interest in gender and the body began with my Masters program. In my first semester I took a course in the sociology of gender relations. In this course I explored the relationship between the body, gender, sexuality and sport and examined researchers' calls for the recognition of multiple bodies in sport. In particular I examined

¹ Much of my discussion focuses on the 'ideal' female body. At times it might appear that I am suggesting that there is only *one* 'ideal', however this is not the case. In reality the 'ideal' female body is a fluid concept that is not fixed, or static, so its exact configuration can change depending on the individual who is invoking the ideal and/or the context in which the 'ideal' is being referred to.

research on women's experiences in 'male-dominated' sports and compared those experiences to those of women who participated in more 'gender-appropriate' sports. I also investigated the complexities and controversies surrounding the inclusion of 'other' sexualities in sport.

The following semester I took a course in qualitative methods. In this course we examined a variety of qualitative methodological approaches, one of which was institutional ethnography. As part of our exploration of qualitative methods we carried out some naturalistic observation, analyzed some text-mediated discourse, and carried out an institutional ethnographic interview. All these exercises led me to this research project. For my naturalistic observation I chose the gym. I recorded what I observed at the gym and made an attempt at some preliminary analyses of my observations. Then, for my institutional ethnographic interview I decided to interview one of the women at the gym. This interview essentially served as a pilot interview for this research project, and it was from this interview that I became aware of the use of fitness magazines as instructional tools to guide women's workouts. So when I did my text-analysis I chose to analyze a section from a fitness magazine. This project therefore emerged from the combined knowledge I gained in my both my gender and qualitative methods classes. It also clearly represents the coming together of both my intellectual, and my personal, interests.

The meeting of the personal and intellectual perspectives

It was through my experiences as both a sociologist and an athlete that I came to realize that most women are aware of, and can describe in minute detail, exactly what the 'ideal' female is supposed to look like. I also came to realize that most women know that

it takes a lot of work to obtain this 'ideal', and that they know that even if they work really hard on their bodies, they will never obtain that ideal. However, I also came to realize that despite this knowledge, many women still go off to the gym and work on their bodies so that they can achieve their own best possible 'ideal'. As the website for the fitness magazine *Muscle and Fitness Hers* states:

If you are at your best, not only physically but also mentally and emotionally, people will admire you for the effort you put into improving your whole life, including your training and diet. It is always a beautiful thing when you can improve your body to the potential you are genetically programmed for

(Weider, 2005. <http://www.getbig.com/magazine/mfhers/mfher.htm>)

In my research I look at gym-going women who take up this discourse; they go to the gym to be the best they can be. However, it is worth noting that making this choice is not an easy one. They are entering male-dominated terrain, and need to acquire the kind of expertise on this terrain that men have been able to accumulate. The following passage from *Oxygen* fitness magazine is an interesting example of the way women are discursively positioned as inexperienced newcomers to the world of the gym.

It's common knowledge that most women are shy about entering the free-weight room. Full of well-built bodies, mostly men, this area can be intimidating for first-time users. Maybe you're not in the greatest shape of your life and you're afraid people will stop what they're doing and stare....Maybe you're unsure of how to use all the equipment. Why not try asking one of the body-builders. Unless he appears totally engrossed

in performing his sets, chances are he'll be delighted to show off his knowledge and help you out (Kennedy, 2003:14)

When I first went to the gym I admit that I was nervous. In part these nerves stemmed from the fact that I didn't know how to use the equipment, and also because I was intimidated by the number of muscled men that I imagined to be there. Also, strangely it was because even though I was in great shape, I knew I wasn't the 'ideal'. Further, a lot of my trepidation stemmed from the fact that although I had been 'working out' all my life (so I had the physical appearance of someone who should know what they were doing), I had barely ever stepped inside a 'real' gym.

In this thesis I discuss the work involved in being a woman at the gym. I examine how women learn to do what they do at the gym and I investigate how they learn to navigate its gendered space. In particular I explore the different ways in which women (re)construct gender in the gym. In this thesis I also investigate women's use of fitness magazines, and examine how women use these magazines to guide their activities at the gym.

The research process involved in producing this thesis consisted of two parts. The first involved carrying out open-ended interviews with women who went to the gym. In these interviews, I explored how women learned to use the gym, and also asked about their use of fitness magazines. The second part of the research process involved an analysis of fitness magazines. In this analysis I not only wanted to provide a more conventional academic take on the magazines; I also wanted to show how the women I spoke to read the magazines, and how the magazines influenced their everyday gym-going experiences.

The next chapter discusses the literature that has influenced my research. In particular I discuss the development of theories on the female body and look at how Foucault's work has been used to understand the social construction of the female body. I examine research that has investigated women's inclusion in both female and male-dominated sporting environments. I also examine research on the representation of the female body in fitness texts, and discuss the work of researchers who have used an institutional ethnographic approach. In Chapter Three I outline the methods used to gather, analyze and interpret data. More specifically I discuss how I have drawn upon institutional ethnography as a methodological approach, and I explain how I have used the work of other researchers, such as Radway (1991) and Currie (1999) to guide my examination of the women's use of fitness magazines. Chapters Four and Five contain the empirical analyses. Chapter Four, based on my interviews with fifteen gym-going women, contains a discussion of the 'work' women do in the gym, as well as the 'work' involved in managing the male-dominated area of the gym. Chapter Five moves to an examination of fitness magazines. It explores women's use of these magazines and highlights the 'work' they do in order to select and interpret magazine information. Finally, Chapter Six brings together the discussions of the two previous chapters and highlights some of the implications of the findings. In this chapter I also note the limitations of the research and make some suggestions for future research.

Chapter Two: Review of the literature

This chapter discusses previous research that has influenced and shaped my own research project. I will begin with a brief examination of theorizing on the female body in general, before moving on to a more specific discussion of the female body in a sporting context, and in the gym. Following this I will discuss the research that has been done on the female body in fitness texts, and explain how other researchers have approached the portrayal of the female body in fitness magazines. I will also discuss how institutional ethnography influences my inclusion and analysis of fitness magazines, and will give examples of how other researchers have used an institutional ethnographic approach in similar research projects.

The development of theorizing on the female body

Early research saw bodies as either ‘womanly’ or ‘manly’. Underpinning this view were biological assumptions about men’s and women’s bodies that assumed that men’s bodies were strong and muscular, whereas women’s bodies were delicate, weak and fragile (Frye, 1983; Kessler and McKenna, 1978). More recently there has been a move away from such categorical thinking of bodies as either manly or womanly, and instead a call for the diversity of bodies to be recognized (Kane, 1995; Cox and Thompson, 2000). The idea that there is a ‘natural’ female body that is soft and slim, and a ‘natural’ male body that is muscular and strong has been called into question, as more and more active women challenge this notion. Women who participate in sports that require strength for example directly challenge the assumption that only men are strong and muscular. Furthermore they defy the stereotype that suggests that women should be inactive (Talbot, 1986; Hargreaves, 1987; McCrone, 1987; Perkin, 1993).

Many researchers are critical of the biological essentialism that underpins such dualistic thinking (Young, 1997; Cox and Thompson, 2000). These researchers contend that there are ‘multiple’ bodies, which are in part determined by social circumstances. Further, they argue that it is misleading to suggest that femininity is fixed; rather differences and contradictions are the norm. They point to the importance of agency – the ways in which individuals actively play a part in conforming to or resisting gender stereotypes.

Most researchers agree that the female ‘ideal’ is socially constructed, rather than actual (Cox and Thompson, 2000; Young, 1997; Obel, 1996; Davis & Delano, 1992; Miller and Penz, 1991; Theberge, 1991; Epstein, 1990; Haraway, 1978). They argue that the ‘ideal’ female body is firmly embedded in social relations and that bodies are manipulated and socially constituted so that “gender is seen not as the natural outcome of a biological imperative but as the product of a patriarchal social construction” (Kane, 1995; 191). However, despite this understanding, the narrow definition of the ‘ideal’ female body continues to be seen in society as *the* ‘ideal’ to strive for.

Underpinning much of the research on the female body is the work of Michel Foucault. Researchers have drawn heavily upon Foucault’s notion of power and the ‘panopticon’ (Duncan, 1994; Eskes et al, 1998; Markula, 2001). Foucault views power as based on social relations, and co-existing in a relationship that simultaneously involves both power and resistance (Gordon, 1972; Hartsock, 1990). According to Foucault power is repetitious, self-producing and permanent, and rather than being a ‘thing’ that is acquired, Foucault argues that power exists in its exercise (Gordon, 1972; Hartsock, 1990). This notion of power is applied to Foucault’s discussion of Bentham’s

architectural creation of the panopticon, which is a tower that is placed in the centre of a prison. The idea is that a guard in the tower can observe the prisoners, but the prisoners cannot see the guard. Therefore a guard does not even need to be present, since simply the possibility of being observed encourages prisoners to conform to prison rules. As a result, power in the form of observation works to encourage self-surveillance and compliance amongst prisoners (Foucault, 1977; Duncan, 1994).

Researchers like Bordo (1989); Duncan (1994) and Markula (1995) use this image to argue that the notion of the 'ideal' female body is kept alive in society through various methods of surveillance. They claim that in society, women's bodies are constantly under surveillance. Surveillance is pervasive because it comes from many different direct and indirect sources, such as advertising, peers, and socialization. They argue that women internalize an 'ideal' image of what their bodies should look like (which most often conforms to society's notion of the 'ideal' female body) and in doing so learn to continually police their bodies in relation to the ideal (Bordo, 1989; Markula, 1995; Maguire and Mansfield, 1998; Currie, 1999).

Power and the post-modern Foucauldian perspective

Some researchers have taken a post-modern Foucauldian perspective to show how this 'ideal' female body is socially constructed through power relations (Markula, 1995; Currie, 1999). This perspective shows how discourses concerning women's body images are couched within a complex web of power relations, which can serve to oppress women (Markula, 1995; Currie, 1999). For example, Markula (1995) argues that media representations, which put forward only one female body as the 'ideal', subtly influence women's personal perceptions of their bodies. This singularity of the 'ideal type' serves

to exclude a large number of women who 'fail' to conform to this ideal. More importantly this 'ideal type' is for the vast majority of women unobtainable (Markula, 1995). So, as a result, women who do not 'match up' are often left feeling dissatisfied with their bodies, and may turn to sport or exercise as a way to 'control' their bodies.

Bordo (1989) also argues that power relations shape the female body, but she argues that power is not something that is levelled against women from one easily identifiable group or place. Rather, power comes from a variety of social networks and is both direct and indirect. She argues that within the context of sport, power relations shape and constrain the social construction and conception of what is 'normal' and what is 'deviant'. Moreover, power can be used to subvert rebellion, by discursively drawing women into collusion and thereby ultimately reinforcing rather than reducing their oppression. Bodies therefore can be seen to represent both an individual and group identity in that they come to reflect the gender and power relations in society (Bordo, 1989; Maguire and Mansfield, 1998).

Discourse

Other researchers focus explicitly on how discourses surrounding the female body influence and perpetuate the social construction of the 'ideal' female body (Whitson, 1994; Castelnovo & Guthrie, 1998; Maguire and Mansfield, 1998). Maguire and Mansfield (1998) argue that women engage in bodily practices informed by specific discourses, which enable them to shape their bodies so that they conform to the socially constructed 'feminine' ideal. Whitson (1994) argues that, from a young age, discourses of femininity and masculinity shape both our intellectual conceptions of our bodies and our physical appearances. According to Whitson, the gendered nature of play teaches

boys and girls to experience their bodies in markedly different ways. Boys are encouraged to use their bodies and develop their strength, whereas girls are taught to be restrained and limit the range of movements they put their bodies through (Whitson, 1994; see also Maguire and Mansfield, 1998). According to Castelnuevo & Guthrie (1998) women are oppressed not only through their perceptions and attitudes, but also through their bodies. Girls and women learn through dominant discourse that they are physically inferior to boys: hence the saying 'throws like a girl'. As a result, according to the authors, girls can grow up with a psychological disposition, which may translate into a physical 'disability', which then acts as both a mental and physical barrier to their equal participation in physical activity.

Markula (2001), Duncan (1994) and Eskes et al (1998) look at the discourse surrounding the *attainment* of the ideal female body. They argue that women are encouraged to strive for the 'ideal' through a discourse that suggests that losing weight will make them not only happier, but also more beautiful. They argue that, ironically, women are encouraged to pursue a healthy lifestyle not for the health benefits (although these are often used to legitimize the pursuit); rather they are encouraged to be active because then others will then see them as more beautiful and sexually attractive. Therefore, by 'logical' extension, they will also be more successful, since a woman's worth is socially constructed as being directly related to her physical beauty (Duncan, 1994; Eskes, Duncan and Miller, 1998; Hargreaves, 1994; Bordo, 1993; Leath and Lumpkin, 1992; Spitzpack, 1990). In fact, Spitzpack (1990) argues that the emphasis on physical beauty is so important in society that at times health may be sidelined to beauty to the detriment of the individual's overall well-being.

The female body in the gym

Because my research focuses on the female body in the gym, it is important also to have an understanding of the research that has been done on the active female body, and in particular the female body in the gym environment. The active female body provides a different and perhaps more complex understanding of how a woman's body should be presented in public. Sport and fitness arenas like the gym have traditionally been a male preserve, and when it comes to physical activity, the socially constructed concepts of masculine and feminine have prevented, and continue to prevent women from being as active as men (Talbot, 1986). Over time the place of the female body in sport and fitness has shifted from being non-existent, to now uneasily incorporated into the world of sports and fitness (Hargreaves, 1987; McCrone, 1987; Perkin, 1993).

Some researchers have investigated women's bodies in the gym environment. For example, women's body-building has been a popular area of research. Researchers have argued that women who participate in this hyper-masculine sport challenge gender stereotypes about femininity and the 'ideal' female body, and in doing so must learn to deal with the controversy they create (Miller and Penz, 1991; Obel, 1996; St Martin & Gavey, 1996; Holmund, 1994). A muscled female body challenges the dichotomous thinking that sets bodies up as either male or female. Muscled females therefore have to learn how to deal with the suspicion that may be cast either on their sexuality, or on whether or not they are 'real' women.

For example, the female bodybuilders in Miller and Penz's (1991) study used the inconsistency of a woman developing a 'masculine' body to their advantage. They chose to emphasize the 'female' aspect of the sport, which the authors term 'bodywork' (i.e.

appearance maintenance). In doing this, the female bodybuilders redefined bodybuilding as a sport more suited to women than men. These bodybuilders argued that bodywork was 'women's work', and since bodybuilding essentially boiled down to bodywork, bodybuilding, according to these women should be redefined as a female domain. Underpinning the female bodybuilders' argument was their socialization, which was influenced by the social emphasis on women's self-presentation (Miller and Penz, 1991). Women are taught at an early age the importance of managing appearances, and accordingly are 'naturally' more suited to that aspect of bodybuilding than men. The authors point out that "the ability to organize one's appearance responsibly has become a virtual passport to full social citizenship for Western women of all social classes" (Miller and Penz, 1991:151). It is clear from this example how it is not just notions of the 'ideal' female body that carry over into the gym environment, but also notions about what behaviours are considered feminine.

Other researchers have also investigated the ways women are integrated into male-dominated sporting domains, such as boxing (Halbert, 1997), snowboarding (Anderson, 1999) and skateboarding (Beal 1996). These researchers found that the women involved in these sports learned to navigate the 'male turf', and over time gained acceptance from the men – often by emphasising their femininity through hyper-sexualizing their appearance, or by developing an entourage of males who would support them and push for their advancement (Halbert, 1997).

Aerobics on the other hand is a sport in which women, rather than men, dominate, and as a result it is considered 'safe' for women to do in that it does not pose a threat to a woman's femininity. However, in spite of this apparent 'safety' researchers have argued

that the women involved in aerobics experience similar anxieties to those experienced by women involved in traditionally male sports like body-building and boxing. The aerobics body presents a compromise between the highly muscled body-builder, and the stereotypical slim female 'ideal'. In effect it is a hybrid. It is slim (read: feminine) but strong (read: masculine), fit (read masculine) but still sexy (read: feminine), so although the aerobics body challenges the ideal somewhat it remains fairly unthreatening (Markula, 1995; Maguire and Mansfield, 1998).

Bordo (1989) argues that pursuing the aerobics body is just as oppressive for women as pursuing the ultra-slim ideal female body. She points out that the paradox of achieving this 'ideal' female body is that it requires a type of self-mastery and control more in line with traditionally masculine virtues of rationality, determination and discipline, than 'feminine' virtues of other-orientation and nurturing. In conforming to this body type, women perpetuate the discourse of heterosexuality, which suggests that a tight, toned, slim body is not only aesthetically pleasing, but also increases heterosexual appeal. But paradoxically, according to Bordo (1989), rather than gaining control over the body, through engaging in dieting (a conventional feminine practice) and exercise, the women who subscribe to this feminine 'ideal' are in reality further repressed, because according to her such 'control' is merely an *illusion*. The feminine ideal body type is achieved through exercising 'masculine' qualities; this not only results in an almost androgynous ideal, but also creates a tension between traditionally 'masculine' and 'feminine' traits. Markula (1995) points out the inherent contradictions of the ideal female body: women are required to have muscle (but not too much), and to also be thin and delicately feminine.

The studies mentioned so far looked at women who went to the gym as part of a structured group (aerobics), or for a specific sport (body-building). As yet, no studies to my knowledge have looked at the group on which I focus my research: women who go to the gym to work out independently. Smith- Maguire (2001) notes that this is a group that it is getting larger, since the gym in Western society is fast becoming a popular place for women to go and shape their bodies. She argues that women in particular are attracted to the gym, because in comparison to jogging city streets at night, it provides a safe environment in which to work out.

Because this group of women are not part of a structured group they have to learn independently how to exercise in a way that both gets results, and is enjoyable to them, otherwise they might stop going. Obviously working out in this way requires a certain amount of knowledge about the body and exercise. From my interviews I discovered that most of the women I spoke to got at least some of their information from fitness magazines. It was plain therefore that fitness magazines were directly informing the kinds of activities women did in the gym. It is therefore useful to have an understanding of previous research that has been done on representations of the female body in fitness texts.

The female body in fitness texts

The women I spoke to used fitness magazines to get information on which exercises to do, what to eat, and how to keep motivated. But although these magazines provided them with useful information, at the same time they also reinforced stereotypes through the representation of images that conform to the ideal female body. Many researchers have looked at how fitness magazines reinforce these ideals.

The portrayal of the female body in fitness magazines

The Foucauldian feminist perspective, mentioned earlier in reference to theorizing on the female body, is also used by researchers who have looked at the portrayal of the female body in fitness magazines (Duncan, 1994; Spitzpack, 1990; Eskes et al, 1998; Markula, 2001). For example, Duncan (1994) looked at two issues of *Shape* fitness magazine and demonstrated how texts like these encourage women to practise self-conscious body monitoring, that in effect works as a ‘panoptic’ mechanism to inspire an unrealistic body ideal in women. Markula’s (2001) research on women’s fitness magazines looked at the contradiction between women being counselled on body distortion issues, but at the same time, confronted by images that conform *only* to the narrow definition of the female body ideal. She is critical of how medical discourse treats body distortion issues as an individual ‘problem’, when in reality, she argues, they are part of the broader social context.

Duncan (1994) argues that the ‘panoptic’ gaze is evident in the success stories published in magazines. Readers are encouraged to analyze the statistics provided detailing weight and inches lost. They are encouraged to assume that a decrease in waistline results in improved health and happiness. In addition, the ‘before’ and ‘after’ pictures invite readers to scrutinize the before pictures, and note the defects in comparison to the after pictures. The message is that fat is unhealthy and not glamorous. She argues that this kind of comparison is a form of panopticonism, since measuring and weighing oneself in relation to an ‘ideal’ functions as an enforcer of the ideal.

Duncan (1994) argues that through these various types of surveillance women become conscious of whether or not they match up to the ideal. Further, by internalizing

the 'public' notion of what the female body should look like, the 'problem' of not 'matching up' to the ideal becomes a 'private' problem. For example she cites the story of a woman featured in a *Shape* magazine article who was told by a man when she weighed 155 pounds that she had "such a pretty face" and that it was "really too bad" that she was so large (Duncan, 1994:59). She claims that this is an example "how the [panoptic] gaze can work in practice: men who imply that weighing 155 pounds is public, social tragedy, particularly when one has a pretty face" (ibid).

McCracken (1993) and Currie (1999) argue that various texts on body improvement encourage women to read themselves into the texts and suggest if other women can change their bodies so can they. Discourses of 'shame and confession' are used to show how other women who were previously overweight felt 'ashamed' about their weight, but through dedication and hard work managed to transform their bodies. Often these 'successful' women will 'confess' their excesses and bad habits, thus encouraging other women to relate to them and see how they too are going 'astray' (Duncan, 1994; Eskes, Duncan and Miller, 1998; Spitzpack, 1990).

Approaches to reading magazines

My analysis of fitness magazines drew upon the research that was discussed above. However because I was trying to make a connection between the information in the fitness magazines and how the women reading the magazines used this information, I also drew upon the work of Janice Radway (1991). Radway's work explored women's reading of romance novels, and although the subject matter is not the same, I was interested in how she approached the act of reading a text. She spoke with women who read romance novels and was concerned with how different communities (in this case

romance novel readers) read texts. In essence she did an 'ethnography of reading' and found that the women's reading was:

multiply determined and internally contradictory, and that to get at its complexity, it would be helpful to distinguish analytically between the significance of the *event* of reading and the meaning of the *text* constructed as its consequence (Radway, 1991:7).

Radway's analysis therefore was less of an interpretation of romances as texts and more of an account of how romance reading operated as a form of social behaviour that was interwoven in the lives of the women as social actors. She found that the women readers' construction of the act of reading a romance novel was viewed as a declaration of independence from their roles as mother, wives and girlfriends. Further, she noted that although the women readers acknowledged the traditionalism of gender stereotypes in the romances they were selective about which ones they would read. In general they chose to read romances "...with 'strong', fiery' heroines who are capable of 'defying the hero', softening him, and showing him the value of loving and caring for another" (Radway, 1991:54). Thus, the women were not being duped into reading romances that reinforce gender stereotypes; rather they were actively selecting which romances they would read, and interpreting them as stories of female triumph.

Currie's (1999) research draws upon Radway's, but rather than looking at romance readers, her research focused on teenagers' use of beauty magazines. She carried out unstructured interviews with teenage girls and discussed with them how they individually read beauty magazines. Currie was interested in how teenage girls identified with the women in the magazines, and in some cases how some girls constructed a sense

of self through the magazines. She argued that magazines assume that the body needs work in order to 'match up' with feminine ideals. Further she pointed out that magazines tend to portray women as 'superwomen', which sets women up to have unrealistic expectations of themselves. Her research question was very similar to mine in that she asked: "How do young women come to understand these images in relation to their everyday experiences of *being* a woman?" (Currie, 1999: 95).

However, Radway's approach was not the only approach that guided my analysis of the fitness texts. My analysis of fitness magazines was also heavily influenced by the work of institutional ethnographers like Smith (2002) and De Vault and McCoy (2002). However, I also drew upon institutional ethnography to guide the structure and analysis of my interviews. Since this methodological approach underpinned most of my research, I will now discuss the main concepts of institutional ethnography, and I will also discuss how other researchers have used an institutional ethnographic approach to guide their research.

Institutional Ethnography

Institutional ethnography is a method of inquiry, which makes use of various concepts that are used to guide the ways in which research is carried out. It emphasizes dialogue and seeks to establish a dialogue between members of a particular setting and the researcher. For example, G. Smith's (1998) research on gay students in schools aimed to create a reflexive dialogue between two gay individuals, himself, and an informant. As a crucial part of the interview process, Smith made it clear to each informant that schools (rather than himself) were the object of study. The informant was viewed as an 'expert' on what it was like to be gay in the school system, and as the

informant, it was his job to share his knowledge with Smith. In my research I tried to create a dialogue between myself, and the women I interviewed. So, in my case the women were the informants who were viewed as ‘experts’ on what it was like to be a woman in the gym.

Institutional ethnography is also organized around the concept of discourse, which includes printed materials that record social behaviours within any given institution (Smith, 2002). Previous researchers have looked at discourses like photographic texts (McCoy, 1995), graffiti (Smith, 1998), 9-1-1 recordings (Pence, 2001) and urban-planning proceedings (Turner, 2002). McCoy (1995) for example, looked at the how photographs are embedded in the social situations of their use. In her discussion, she examines people’s interpretations of different kinds of photographs, and suggests that photographs “are activated or drawn in to particular situations through distinct practices of looking” (McCoy, 1995: 191).

Institutional ethnographers are also interested in the everyday worlds of people within any given institution (Smith, 2002). They seek to make visible the work involved in people’s everyday lived experiences. For example, Pence’s (2001) research looked at practitioners in the police and court system, and sought to make visible the everyday work that these practitioners did, that although not readily observable, was nonetheless influential in producing institutional accounts of women’s experiences of abuse in intimate relationships. I was interested in women’s everyday lived experiences of going to the gym and the ‘work’ that was done on an almost daily basis, to organize a routine, manage gender relations in the gym, and to keep motivated to go to the gym.

Another key element of institutional ethnographic work is the notion of ‘ruling relations’. Smith (2002:45) argues that ‘ruling relations’ are the “relations that coordinate people’s activities across and beyond local sites of everyday experience”. These include, but are not limited to, bureaucracy, professions and varieties of text-mediated discourse. Smith (2002:19) argues that ruling relations are also the “concepts, beliefs, theory [and] ideology” that influence the way things are done in any given social organization. The institutional ethnographic approach seeks to locate the individual within this milieu of ‘ruling relations’. The individual acts as a point of entry into the exploration of the broader ‘institution’, and provides insight into how these ruling relations are implicated in the way activities are coordinated. For example, Turner’s (2002) research on municipal and government planning in land development looked at local residents’ position in relation to the broader ‘ruling relations’ that included local government, professional staff, clerks, lawyers, private developers, consultants, provincial government, staff in several ministries and publicly elected officials. Turner’s research focused on the text-based organization of these broader relations, and showed how the local residents were part of the creation of their everyday world, but how their everyday world was also influenced by, and maintained by the various institutional processes associated with these broader ‘ruling relations’.

Also, underpinning the work of institutional ethnography is the emphasis on ‘extended’ or ‘social’ relations, and how these institutionally unrecognized connections work to coordinate what people do across settings. Institutional ethnography recognises that a lot of what people do is shaped by what people did in the past, and also by ‘extended relations’ to other ‘members’ within the broader sphere of the environment

being studied. It works explicitly with the idea that the social ‘happens’, and that it is an on-going process with definite links between settings. The goal of institutional ethnography is to make visible the often invisible social processes that go on in an institution, and show how these processes coordinate activities within an institution (De Vault & McCoy, 2002; Smith, 2002).

In my research I was interested in discovering how the broader ‘ruling relations’ and ‘extended relations’ of the ‘institution’ of the ‘fitness industry’ worked to coordinate the activities of women in the gym. The ‘fitness industry’ was therefore the ‘institution’ I was studying. Technically the ‘fitness industry’ includes sectors like the health-food industry, supplement providers, doctors, physical therapists and many others. These participants are part of the broader ‘ruling relations’ of the fitness industry. However, in my research I did not focus on all of these components. I focused only on a very *small* selection of these ‘ruling relations’, such as the gym, the fitness magazine industry and, to a lesser extent, personal trainers. In my analysis of the fitness industry I also included an examination of the ‘extended relations’ which for the purposes of my study, I have limited to other ‘members’ of the gym, like the men in the gym, other women in the gym, and the women themselves.

Another key element of institutional ethnography (and one that is central to my analysis) is the concept of ‘work’ (Smith, 2002). The concept of ‘work’ provided a starting point for my investigation, and guided most of my analysis. I was interested in examining the ‘work’ practices the women did in their everyday experiences of the gym. I wanted to collect a detailed account of what the women were doing at the gym, and the work that went into deciding what to do at the gym. So, for example, part of the ‘work’ I

was interested in exploring was actual ‘workout’ women did at the gym as well as the ‘work’ that went into planning the workouts.

However, in my interviews I did not refer to the women’s gym-going as ‘work’ because, as Smith argues: “Getting people to continue to talk about the details of their “work” can be a challenge” (2002:759), especially when the participants do not consider what they do as ‘work’. In my research project this was definitely the case, since going to the gym is conventionally viewed as something that is done outside of paid employment – the normative definition of ‘work’.

So, it should be made clear that the kind of ‘work’ institutional ethnographers investigate is not always conventionally recognized as work. For example, G. Smith (1998) suggests that gossip and surveillance are part of the ‘work’ practices done by students to uphold a heterosexist regime in schools. He suggests that the gay students’ accounts of their efforts to ‘pass’ or ‘fit in’ could be seen as part of the ‘work’ they did as students that in turn affected their everyday experiences of school.

In this chapter I mentioned how previous research has successfully addressed women’s participation in the gym as part of an organized group (body-building and aerobics). However, I also noted that as yet, no research has attempted to explore the experience of women who go to the gym to work out independently – the group I chose to focus my study on. I showed how my research draws upon an institutional ethnographic approach, and noted how my interviews were influenced by this approach in that they were designed to create a dialogue between myself, and the women I interviewed. I discussed the principles of institutional ethnography and showed how

other researchers have successfully used an institutional ethnographic approach to study a variety of social organizations and texts. I suggested that magazines were one part of the broader 'ruling relations' of the fitness industry, and I noted how I would use an institutional ethnographic approach in conjunction with an approach similar to Radway's (1991) to research how women's use of fitness magazines fits into the broader sphere of the 'fitness industry'.

The next chapter outlines the methods used to gather, analyze and interpret the data. In particular it looks at how I recruited the participants, addressed issues of anonymity and confidentiality, and how institutional ethnography influenced the way I structured and carried out my interviews. I also explain how I selected the magazines to include in my study, and discuss the methods I used to analyze them.

Chapter Three: Methods

The target group for this research was women who went to the gym regularly. For the purposes of this study ‘regularly’ was defined as going to the gym five times a week or more for an hour or more at a time. My research included two parts. As noted in the previous chapter, I was interested in exploring how women learned to use the gym and how they dealt with gender stereotypes in the gym environment. Also, as mentioned previously, I was interested in how the broader institutional frameworks of the fitness industry influenced women’s activities at the gym. This broader exploration led to the development of the second part to my project – the analysis of women’s use of fitness magazines. The method (that in many ways is also a theory) underpinning many of my methodological decisions was institutional ethnography. The principles of institutional ethnography and some examples of researchers who have used institutional ethnography were outlined briefly in the previous chapter. In this chapter I will outline my methodological approach and explain in more detail how institutional ethnography guided my research. This chapter is loosely organized into two sections; the first addresses the interviews and research project as a whole, and then the second speaks more specifically to how the analysis of fitness magazines fits into the broader research project.

Sampling

Women were recruited to participate in the study from various gyms within the same city in Western Canada. They were recruited through posters that were put up around six different gyms (see Appendix A). Three of these gyms were purely co-ed, two gyms were co-ed but with women-only sections, and one was a women’s only gym.

These gyms were located in different suburbs throughout the city; by including different geographic locations I hoped to attract participants from a variety of backgrounds. The posters specifically stated that I was recruiting women who went to the gym at least five times a week for an hour or more. So as a group the women who ended up participating in my study were towards the more dedicated end of the spectrum in terms of gym-going women in general. Although these women are not rare amongst the sub-group of women who go to the gym, they are most definitely unique compared to women in general. I chose this group of women because I thought that given their level of dedication to working out, they would be the most likely of the female gym-going population, to be drawing on magazines to guide their workouts.

The posters generated a slow response, but in total nine women came forward from a number of the different gyms at which I had posted notices. Acquaintance referrals from friends and contacts who were also gym-users generated the remaining six participants. I tried to keep the network as broad as possible by using different contact points to solicit new participants. For example, I recruited some women from my contacts at the gym I went to, but also used contacts at two other gyms in the city. In this way I avoided having a sample that was dominated by participants from the same gym, or who were too similar to each other in terms of demographics such as age. Out of the fifteen women I interviewed five participants went to women-only gyms and the remaining 11 went to co-ed gyms, but out of those 11 there were two who preferred to use the women's only section of the co-ed gym.

Participants ranged in age from 19 to 61 years old at the time of the interviews. As a group they were exclusively white and well educated: one had high school

education; six had some post-secondary education; two were pursuing university degrees at the time of the interviews, and six were university graduates. Therefore as a group they were relatively homogenous. But for the type of research I was doing this homogeneity was not a problem since I was not aiming to generate a statistically representative sample of regular gym-going women in general. Also as institutional ethnographers argue: “The researcher’s purpose in IE investigation is not to generalize about the group of people interviewed, but to find and describe social processes that have generalizing effects” (De Vault and McCoy, 2002: 753).

However, the homogeneity within the group could in part be explained by the fact that these women were highly educated. As educated women they may have been more willing to participate in the research, since they may have already been familiar with social science research like this. In fact, many volunteers acknowledged (without prompting) that they were very aware of the difficulties some researchers had trying to recruit participants for their studies. Some women mentioned that their knowledge of recruitment difficulties led them to contact me in the first place. In addition many were willing to offer me further contacts should I need them.

The homogeneity within the group was also in some ways expected, since belonging to a gym costs a substantial amount of money and therefore only those who can afford this sum are able to go to the gym. As a result, women who come from lower socio-economic groups are generally excluded due to financial constraints. Bordo’s (1989) findings actually support this suggestion. She argues that working out and controlling the body through exercise is predominantly a middle-class pursuit. I was

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therefore not too surprised by the fact that the women I interviewed were all white middle class women.

The University of Calgary Ethics Review Board granted approval for participants to be recruited in the way described above. The process of gaining approval required me to address issues of anonymity, confidentiality, and informed consent. These are outlined in more detail in the consent form given to participants (see Appendix B).

Interviews

Carrying out the interviews

I interviewed each participant separately except for two women whom I interviewed together. These two participants were a mother and a daughter who worked out together. They asked to be interviewed together, since it would be easier for them. I did not see this as being a problem, since the topics being discussed were not of a highly personal nature and previous researchers have used this technique in similar projects with substantial benefits. For example, Cox and Thompson (2000) interviewed female soccer players in pairs. They argued that interviewing the participants in pairs meant that they could ‘spark off’ each other, but that interviewing in pairs also worked to ‘keep them honest’.

The interviews were held at a time and place that was most convenient for the participants. I asked them to choose a location at which they felt would provide a private and uninterrupted environment for the interview. The reason for this decision was two-fold. I wanted to create an environment in which the participants felt at ease, so that they would feel comfortable talking freely and openly about their gym-going. Further, the participants were doing me a favour by participating in my research; their participation

was entirely voluntary, therefore it seemed only fair that their schedule and needs came before my own. Most often the women chose to be interviewed either at their home or their place of work. The interviews lasted from approximately 45 minutes to almost two hours.

The interviews were in-depth semi-structured interviews, which took on a conversational style that centred on each woman's individual experience of the gym. The interviews included several topic areas, such as entry into the gym; being a woman at the gym; the routine of the gym; presenting the body; friends and family; and text resources. These topics had been developed from earlier observations and research I had done on this topic area. These topic areas were designed to work as what qualitative researchers often term 'sensitizing concepts' (De Vault & McCoy, 2002; Smith, 2002; Mason, 2002). I used these 'sensitizing concepts' to focus the interview on the specific activities the women were doing at the gym rather than on any preconceived theoretical concepts or generalities I might have had about going to the gym. The goal of the interviews was to encourage the women I interviewed to explain their everyday activities at the gym in detail. Smith (2002) however, points out that such detail can sometimes be difficult to obtain, since participants might not consider some of the details of their everyday lives as relevant to the study. However, she suggests that this problem can be overcome by asking for specific examples. This was a technique I employed throughout the interviewing process. For example, when a participant told me that sometimes she felt intimidated by the men in the gym, I would ask her to describe to me a specific incident when this was the case.

To ensure that I remembered to discuss all relevant topic areas with each participant, I prepared a set of prompt questions related to the areas in advance of the interview, which I used as an 'interview guide' (see Appendix C). These questions were used just in case the women I interviewed required extra prompting. But it is important to note that although I had these questions for each topic heading I didn't follow them precisely, as if they were script, since I thought that this might prevent me from having the conversational type of interview that I was aiming for. I did of course familiarize myself with the 'prompt' questions prior to the interview so I had a clear sense of what they were and was able to draw on them from memory during the interview without needing to look at a script. I also decided not to take notes during the interviews because I thought note-taking might make the women feel awkward and could also further prevent them from speaking openly.

The interview guide was modified slightly over the course of the study. Initially I asked demographic questions as part of the interview, but realized after two interviews that it was more appropriate to hand participants a sheet to fill out at the end of the interview that had demographic questions such as year of birth, occupation, length of marriage, and number of siblings and/or children (see Appendix D). A research memo was completed after each interview that included information on the context of the interview, any observations I made during the course of the interview or any potentially important issues.

De Vault & McCoy's (2002) discussion of the institutional ethnographic interviewing process supports my decision to conduct un-structured interviews. They suggest that institutional ethnographic interviews need not be standardized since the

purpose of the interviews is to build up an understanding of ‘how things work’ in multiple sites. Each interview is a way to piece together an understanding of the extended relations of ruling within the institution. Therefore each interview builds on the one before it as it becomes apparent which avenues need to be explored. “You have a sense of what you’re after, although sometimes you don’t know what you’re after until you hear people telling you things...Discovering what you don’t know – and don’t know you don’t know – is an important aspect of the process” (Interview with Smith, September 1999, cited in DeVault & McCoy, 2002:757).

Perspectives on Interviews and methodological decisions

My choice to use interviews as a methodological approach is supported by the claims of many researchers who argue that interviews are a good way to learn about individual experience (Lofland, 1995; Babbie, 1998; De Vault & McCoy, 2002; Mason, 2002). Mason for example claims that interviews are particular useful when investigating social activity. She argues that “interview methodology begins from the assumption that it is possible to investigate elements of the social by asking people to talk, and to gather or construct knowledge by listening to and interpreting what they say and how they say it” (Mason, 2002: 225).

Using interviews to collect my data also made sense because institutional ethnography emphasizes the importance of dialogue and discourse. Interviews can be structured so that they create a dialogue between two people (G. Smith, 1998; Smith, 2002). In my interviews I sought to create a dialogue between myself, and the women I interviewed, and true to the institutional ethnographic approach I viewed the women as ‘experts’ on what it was like to be a woman at the gym.

Institutional ethnographic interviewing also focuses on gaining a broad understanding of the ‘work’ that is involved in sustaining any given activity, workplace or institution. De Vault & McCoy (2002:759) suggest that the “interviewer approaches these conversations as explorations of work practices in everyday life”. However, they point out that the interviewees may not consider or define what they do as ‘work’. In my research, I did not explicitly state to the interviewees that I was interested in the work they did in shaping their bodies, or the work that went into learning how to use the gym. However the women themselves readily identified for me that what they did at the gym was ‘work’. They spoke about ‘working out’, referred to their gym-going as ‘hard work’ and spoke in great detail about the areas of their body that they needed to ‘work’ on.

Institutional ethnographic work is often organized around a key ideology or dominant discourse. For example, Smith’s (1998) exploration of the social production of ‘fag’ as social object in schools was organized around the ideology of ‘fag’. Smith argued that the ideology of fag was central to the “organization of the heterosexist/homophobic dimensions of the school regime” (ibid: 309). He looked at how various members of the school environment were implicated. For example he claimed that the teachers were “complicit by their silence if not actively participating in the ideology” (ibid). Throughout my interview and analysis I focused on dominant discourses of gender. I wanted to explore how such discourses influenced not only women’s gym-going experience but also how they took up information on how to use the gym. I was concerned with how the discourse of the ‘ideal’ female body influenced (overtly and covertly) the ways in which the women learned to use the gym. For instance, how did those women who chose to build up their bodies in a more masculine

way (and in doing so resist the dominant discourse) manage the implications of this decision within the gym environment?

Analyzing the interviews

All the interviews were taped and transcribed. Institutional ethnographers encourage researchers to tape their interviews because “[t]aping allows [the researcher] to go back and forth and have things make sense in a way they did not initially...It’s a very complex enterprise, and there’s no time to go back and redo interviews” (focus group, August 1999; cited in De Vault and McCoy, 2002: 762).

Once the interviews were transcribed they were entered into the Hyper-research qualitative analysis programme. Key themes from the interviews were developed based on the common patterns that emerged during the interviewing process. Interview material related to each topic was taken from each interview and brought together under each theme heading. This material was then read together and the accumulated information from the different interviews was pieced together to give an overall picture of what it was like to be a woman at the gym.

Some researchers are critical of this approach because they argue that rearranging the interviews into themes takes away from the context of the interview (Holstein and Gubrium, 1997; Flick, 1998). They suggest an approach like narrative analysis is more appropriate because it takes the context into consideration. However, even though I rearranged the interviews into themes in my analysis I still tried to take into consideration the context in which a statement was said. For example, one woman was employed as a personal trainer, and many of her statements were made in light of her position as a personal trainer. However, when these statements were rearranged into categories this

relationship was not always clear. So, when I came to interpret her statements I was careful to make sure that I paid attention to when and how she was evoking her role as a personal trainer. I wanted to be true to the women's statements and provide an analysis that gave voice to their everyday lived experiences as women at the gym. So although statements were arranged in themes, when I interpreted them I tried to interpret them in a holistic manner by recognizing other aspects of the women's lives were not immediately obvious in the extracted statement, but influenced their statement all the same.

Methodological concerns of the interviews

The choice to aim for a more conversational dialogue between the participants, and myself, at times required me to disclose details of my own gym-going experience. Some researchers have noted that this type of self-disclosure changes the dynamics of the interview, since through self-disclosure the interviewer is recognized as a participant rather than an outsider (Emerson, Fretz and Shaw, 1995; De Vault, 1999). I believe however that this sort of self-disclosure worked in my favour since it gave the participants the freedom to ask questions of me and in doing so changed the dynamics of the interview to become more equal. I believe my self-disclosure made them feel more comfortable to disclose more personal accounts of their own experiences.

Some researchers have suggested that self-disclosure is beneficial because it minimizes the power imbalance that is often part of the interviewing process (De Vault, 1999; Hertz, 1995). Through self-disclosure the interview becomes more of an exchange of ideas, where both parties are able to take something away from the experience. In fact, many of the participants commented that they really appreciated having the opportunity

to discuss their gym-going, as it gave them a chance to really think about their gym-going in a way that they had not thought about it before.

Lofland (1995) argues that it is worthwhile for researchers to be close to what they are studying, and not to pretend that they are detached from what they are observing. Babbie (1998:282) for example, suggests that it is useful to develop a ‘deep familiarity’ with those whom you wish to study and “to the extent possible place yourself in the position of those you wish to understand”.

However, there are some researchers who although supportive of this sort of approach, also caution that being part of the research can be problematic. Emerson, Fretz and Shaw (1995) argue that while being a ‘member’ of the group being researched can be useful, it also has its drawbacks because the researcher can be so familiar with the routines and behaviour of a group that they may be tempted to view behaviour as ‘natural’, when to an outsider it is decidedly ‘unusual’.

However, feminist researchers argue that self-reflexivity – the recognition of the position of the researcher in relation to the participants – plays an important part in feminist methodology (De Vault, 1999; Hertz, 1995). It is important that the researcher is aware of his or her own standpoint during the research process, since it will undoubtedly affect the questions being asked, and will also shape the observations, the interpretations and the representation of data. I fully acknowledge that my own position as a white, middle-class, gym-going woman has influenced many of my methodological decisions.

As a regular gym-goer at one of the gyms from which I recruited, I was very much a part of the research. As a result, I was already acquainted with some of the

participants. In some ways this made the research easier since we both had an understanding of what was going on and could converse easily using language that was very specific to the gym environment. However, it could be argued that this familiarity could also pose a problem, since some discussion is based on assumed knowledge. However, I was very conscious of this fact, and at times would get participants to describe to me in more detail a concept or an activity that I already knew. I did this for two reasons: first, to check that my assumption was correct, and second, to ensure that my data were able to provide an accurate account of the women's gym-going.

Magazines

Selecting the magazines

The second part of my research project involved an analysis of magazines. The magazines I chose to analyse were: *Shape*, *Muscle and Fitness Hers*, *Oxygen* and *Men's Fitness*. These magazines will be described in more detail in Chapter Five. My choices of magazines were based on information I received in my interviews in that they were the four most popular magazines used by the women I spoke to. For my analysis I selected four different issues from four different months of the year: January 2003, May 2004, June/July 2004 and January 2004. I chose January based on the fact that it is a popular month to start exercising, since it is the month when people make New Year's resolutions, and losing weight and starting to exercise are very common ones. I also chose January because it comes at the end of the festive season, so for those who are already committed exercisers, January is often a time to recommit after being a little less vigilant with dieting and exercise. I therefore anticipated that January's edition would

give me a sense of what sort of body and what sort of exercises each magazine was trying to encourage readers to strive for.

I chose the May and June/July issues based on the fact that they are summer months and I thought that having issues from different times of the year might give me a more representative picture of what each different magazine was all about. I thought it might be that the magazines would emphasize different aspects of fitness based on the time of year. As it turned out I was right. For example, the cover-pages of the magazines in the summer months, in general, tended to focus on getting the body into shape for summer and the bikini, whereas the cover-pages of the winter months on the whole tended focused on trimming the fat, providing beginners' guides and giving advice on diets that would help readers lose weight.

Analyzing the magazines.

A number of textual analysis approaches, such as Radway's (1991), Potter's (1997), and of course, institutional ethnography influenced the way I chose to analyze the fitness magazines. Radway's (1991) work influenced my approach in that my selection of material to analyze was guided by what the women told me they selected from the magazines. In my analysis I tried to honour the way the women read the magazines, by analysing them in a way that paid attention to what they chose to read (Radway, 1991). So, for example, my analysis of the magazines focused on the dietary advice in the magazines, advice on routines, and the motivational advice, since these were the three things in the magazines that the women paid most attention to. Like Radway, my main concern was how the women were reading the magazines and what they were choosing to take from them.

I was also interested, as Radway was, in the internal contradictions the women faced while reading the magazines. That is, I was interested in how the women's act of reading was influenced by the broader social context of gender relations. I wanted to discover how the women dealt with the images of models in the magazines that appeared to have the 'ideal' body, and I wanted to discover how the women I spoke to placed themselves and their situations in relation to these 'ideal' women.

Although I was mostly interested in the women's interpretation of the magazines, in my discussion of my findings I also give some academic analysis of the magazines. This was really done to provide a point of reference to the sort of information contained within the magazines and how it was presented. However, like Radway (1991), I tried to differentiate clearly between my academic observations, and analysis from the participants' remarks and observations.

In my academic analysis of the magazines I drew upon Potter's (1997) textual analysis techniques that seek to reveal how texts are constructed to appear credible. Potter looks at texts and the spoken language. His techniques show how texts work to construct a certain type of 'truth'. I drew upon this work to show how language was used in fitness magazines to construct a certain kind of 'truth' that fits with gender stereotypes, and how information in magazines is constructed in such a way that it comes across as fact.

As noted earlier, my work also drew on institutional ethnography. I will now discuss in more detail how it led me to an analysis of fitness magazines, and how it methodologically shaped my analysis of fitness magazines.

Magazines and institutional ethnography

Institutional ethnography and the centrality of text-based resources

Text-based forms of knowledge are an integral part of institutional ethnography, and as a result institutional ethnography often includes an investigation into the textual practices within an organization. De Vault and McCoy (2002: 765) argue that “textual processes in institutional relations are like a central nervous system running through and coordinating different sites. To find out how things work and how they happen the way they do, a researcher needs to find the texts and text-based knowledge forms in operation”. For my research this naturally involved looking at the textual practices of fitness magazines and how they co-ordinated the activities of women in the gym.

An important criterion for text-based resources in institutional ethnographic inquiry is that these texts are fixed and replicable so that they can be duplicated and activated by different people at different times (De Vault and McCoy, 2002). Through mass-distribution texts can work to standardize activities and ways of knowing within an institution. Most often institutional ethnographic research has focused on standardized texts within a professional or bureaucratic setting, such as Turner’s (1995) exploration of developers’ maps used in land-use planning. My research is a little different in that it looks at fitness magazines and how they standardize ways of knowing and activities within the gym. Fitness magazines match the criterion of being fixed and replicable in that multiple copies are made each month and these are widely available for purchase at most convenience stores across North America.

However, institutional ethnographers note that it is not always clear at the outset which textual processes are relevant to the organization (De Vault and McCoy, 2002).

This may only become clear after exploratory interviews have been done. This was indeed the case with my research. I became aware of the importance of fitness magazines after carrying out an earlier interview on this topic area in which the participant spoke about her use of fitness magazines to guide her workouts.

Interviewing on fitness magazine use

An institutional ethnographic framework of interviewing influenced my interviewing about the magazines as well as the analysis. Consistent with an institutional ethnographic approach, a large part of my interviewing on women's use of fitness magazines focused on the 'work' the women did when reading them. In particular I was interested in the 'work' involved in activating the texts. For example, I was interested in the selection process women went through in order to decide which magazines and articles they were going to use, and then how they were then going to use this information to guide their every-day 'work' in the gym.

I wanted to discover the 'work' involved in selecting and interpreting the information in the texts; which parts of the magazines did the women pay attention to and what parts did they ignore? Furthermore, I was interested in the extent to which the women's selection of magazines and articles was influenced by dominant discourses of gender and how representations of gender stereotypes influenced the 'work' women did at the gym. For example, did they see the models in the magazines as models to aspire to? If so, in what ways did they act upon this desire in the gym?

Institutional ethnographers are therefore interested in the knowledge the informant needs in order to activate the text. It became clear that obtaining a working knowledge of exercise and health was part of the 'work' involved in being a woman at

the gym. I therefore became interested in the 'work' women did researching different aspects of working out at the gym, such as diet and programme design. However, this was where my own position in relation to the participants became relevant. I already had an in-depth working knowledge of fitness, health and the language of fitness magazines, so it was not always immediately obvious to me what 'special' knowledge was needed in order to activate the texts. To me most of the women's knowledge seemed to be common-sense. This was where my supervisors were particularly helpful. Because they were not as close to the research topic they were able to point out certain ways of knowing and associated linguistic practices that were specific to the gym environment.

Institutional ethnographers are also interested in looking at the conceptual schema that organizes the text and its competent reading (De Vault and McCoy, 2002). I was interested in how different aspects of the conceptual schema of working on the body were incorporated into the magazines, and how women took up and worked with these different conceptual schemas. I wanted to discover how women coordinated their own knowledge about working with the information provided in magazines.

Another part of the 'work' institutional ethnographers are interested in discovering are what actions the informant does on account of reading the text (De Vault and McCoy, 2002). As noted earlier I already knew before I started interviewing that fitness magazines worked to coordinate the activities of women in the gym in some way. It was clear from the outset that a large part of the 'work' women did on account of reading the magazines was the designing of their fitness programmes. Furthermore, it was obvious that this 'work' that they did outside the gym directly influenced the 'work'

they did inside the gym. My interviewing on the women's use of fitness magazines therefore sought to explore this relationship in more details.

Another aspect institutional ethnographers are interested in discovering is how the text intersects with other texts (McCoy and De Vault, 2002). Although there was evidence in the interviews that the women drew on other texts such as fitness books and videos I did not explore this intersection, since these other forms of texts seemed to serve as more of a supplement to the fitness magazines and so did not appear to affect the ways in which the magazines were read.

In this chapter I have explained how I recruited participants for my study, and how I tried to address any potential issues that might have arisen from my chosen methodological approach. I showed how the structure of my interviews was underpinned by institutional ethnography, and how institutional ethnography's emphasis on the broader 'ruling relations' led me to an inclusion and analysis of fitness magazines. In my discussion of my analysis of the fitness magazines, I noted how I drew on Radway's (1991) and Potter's (1997) approaches as well as institutional ethnography.

In the next chapter, the first of two based on my empirical analyses, I will discuss the 'work' women do at the gym. In this chapter I look at how dominant discourses of gender underpin women's gym-going experiences. In addition I examine how the broader relations of the fitness industry, such as men as 'members', influence women's everyday experience of the gym. The over-riding theme of this chapter is the ways in which the women I spoke to, at different times, and in different ways, both resisted and conformed to dominant discourses of gender.

Chapter Four: Women's work in the gym.

Being a woman in the gym involves a lot of work. I use the term work broadly to refer to the many different kinds of work women do both inside and outside the gym. It includes, but is not limited to, the work involved in learning how to navigate the male-dominated environment of the gym, the work involved in conforming to or resisting gender stereotypes, as well as the work women do researching and the preparing their workouts.

My analysis centres on the broader extended and ruling relations of the fitness industry (these terms were discussed and defined in the previous chapter). I begin my discussion with some background information on the way gyms are organized. Next I discuss why the women I interviewed went to the gym, and then I demonstrate how gender stereotypes and broader relations of the fitness industry influence the process of learning to use the gym. The discussion then focuses on how men influence the women's gym-going, as I examine the work women do in navigating the male-dominated environment of the gym. I discuss how women at times work to conform to gender stereotypes, and at other times resist them. The final section of this chapter focuses on the female body. It touches on how dominant discourses of gender influence the ways women work on their bodies in the gym, and also how they present them.

Entering the gym

Geography of the gym

In order to discuss gym-going it is important to get a sense of the way gyms are laid out, since some researchers have argued that the layout of the gym often works to reflect cultural ideologies of gender and status (Spielvogel, 2002). In general the spatial

layout of gyms is more or less the same across the board. Most gyms are organized into at least two if not three distinct 'sections'. In one section (the 'cardio' area) there are machines that are designed to improve cardiovascular fitness through continuous, steady exercise. They include treadmills, bicycles, rowing machines and elliptical trainers (a stationary machine with footpads and long 'poles' that mimics a cross-country skiing motion). This area is often dominated by women, and usually, but not always, set up so that it is spatially separate from the weights area.

The area in the gym that contains the weights (machines, barbells and dumbbells) is generally separate from the cardio area, and is made up of 'machine' weights and 'free' weights. Machine weights are designed to target specific muscles, and are set up so that only one exercise can be performed on the machine. Generally there are diagrams on the different machines, showing the user how to use the equipment, and highlighting which muscles are targeted. Resistance can be adjusted by moving a pin up or down a stack of weights. Free weights differ from machine weights in that the exercise is not prescribed so precisely; rather it is up to the individual to decide how they will use the weight to exercise any given muscle. Free weights therefore require a better working knowledge of how to work the muscles in the body. In general men tend to use the free weights, while if women choose to lift weights they usually (but not always) opt for the machine weights. Further, free weights are usually organized so that they are separate from machine weights, but often the boundary between the two sections (especially in gyms with limited space) is not as clearly marked as the one between the cardio machines and the weights.

Designing a programme

Most people who go to the gym follow some sort of exercise programme. Generally these programmes involve a combination of 'cardio' (continuous physical activity, such as running on the treadmill) and weights. There are many different ways of combining the two. The cardio section of the programme usually involves running on the treadmill or biking on the stationary bicycle for 20 minutes or more. The weights part of the programme generally consists of a number of different exercises designed to target different muscles. Each exercise is usually done in sets and repetitions. A set involves repeating the exercise a given number of times, and then resting for a certain amount of time before repeating the set. Each individual performance of the exercise within the set is known as a repetition, and each group of repetitions is known as a set. There are different ways to combine sets and repetitions to reach different goals. For example, a body-building programme, which is traditionally used by men to bulk up, involves doing heavy weights and a low number of repetitions. By contrast, a woman's weights programme, which is usually designed to 'tone' the muscles and slim down, involves doing a higher number of repetitions at a low weight.

Reasons for going to the gym

Discourses of health and fitness, informed by gender stereotypes, suggest that women should go to the gym to control their bodies, so that they bring them more into line with the slim and toned feminine 'ideal'. Perhaps not surprisingly then, the main reason most of the women I spoke to started going to gym was because in their eyes their bodies did not match up to what they believed their 'ideal' body should look like. These

were some of the women's responses to my question of how they first got interested in going to the gym:

A: Probably just a desire to get in shape and to become more healthier and then also to have a certain body image, to obtain a certain look probably.

E: And where do you think your ideas about body image came from?

A: Magazines, yup, friends, um, my Mom...yah my Mom was really into fitness when I was younger, like hardcore into training and going to the gym lots. (Amy)

L: [I]t was coming up graduation, like in the next year and...my two best friends are like poker thin, so I just wanted with grad coming up in a year...to make myself feel better so I got involved in the gym. (Lynette)

From the above comments it is clear that both Amy and Lynette take up the dominant gendered discourse that suggests women should 'have a certain look', or more specifically in Lynette's case, that they should be thin.

Both Lynette's and Amy's comments point to the influence of the broader 'relations of ruling' in affecting women's decisions to go to the gym. Their notions of what women's bodies should look like come from many different sources within the institution of the broader sphere of the fitness industry. For example, Amy points out how magazines influence her perception of her body and in doing so demonstrates how texts can work to encourage women to work for the 'ideal' female body. In addition,

both women compared themselves to other women around them and used these other women's 'better' bodies as motivation to work on their own bodies.

However, it is also worth noting that both Lynette and Amy are in their early twenties. So, as young women dominant discourses of gender speak directly to their experiences as women in the gym, since images of this 'ideal' almost always portray young women. Interestingly the older women's experiences were not so directly influenced by this same discourse. As older women they acknowledged an awareness of this discourse (by refusing to place so much importance on working out to achieve the slim toned 'ideal') and instead they emphasized the health benefits of working out.

K: I don't think my focus was ever on losing weight, fortunately I've always been the way I am [very slim] but that was never my focus, I never weigh myself, I just take care of myself. (Kirsten)

S: About six or seven years ago, I became ill due to a whole lot of things that were going on...when I started doing the workout at the gym a lot of it was for me, mental stuff, mind stuff. (Susan)

These older women therefore resisted gender stereotypes by choosing to go to the gym primarily for reasons other than working to achieving the feminine 'ideal'.

The work involved in learning to use the gym.

Once the women had decided that they needed to go to the gym (be it to lose weight or to stay healthy) they needed to learn how to use the gym. It was clear from my discussion with the women that the work involved in learning to use the gym was not as readily observable, and therefore not as obvious, as the work involved in carrying out

their exercise routines. For example, there was a certain amount of work, in terms of decision-making and seeking out advice, that went into developing a workout that enabled them either to work for the body they wanted, or improve their health. Also, once the women had learned to use the gym there was a lot of ongoing work involved in changing the programme frequently so that it continued to provide a physical challenge for them.

Personal trainers

Some women chose to learn to use the gym by taking up the introductory session offered in most gyms throughout the province. This session is basically the same at any gym, and in effect is an example of how the broader ruling relations of the fitness industry work to coordinate people's initial experience of the gym. When people come to the gym for the first time they are usually shown around the gym by a trainer who is certified by the Alberta Fitness and Lifestyle Centre Association (AFLCA) to design and prescribe exercises. Most often these introduction sessions are included as part of the sign-up package, and usually include only one session. Interestingly (but not surprisingly) gendered notions of working out tend to underpin the way these programmes are designed. Most often the women I interviewed who went to personal trainers were advised to do a 'traditional' women's workout that included a higher proportion of cardio in relation to weights. In addition, the weights they were instructed to do were light with high repetitions.

As mentioned earlier, once this initial introduction to the gym is over, fitness training discourse suggest that a programme needs to be changed on a regular basis in order to ensure it continues to challenge the body. Although many women I interviewed

took up the initial offer of personal training, most of them did not continue to work one-on-one with a trainer. In some cases this was because hiring a trainer was too expensive, and in others because they thought the trainers lacked expertise. In fact most of the women I spoke to who had had experience at a women's only gym commented that the trainers there didn't know what they were doing.

The ladies at [the women's only gym] are really nice, but I don't trust them any farther than I can throw them. I don't. I go through the gym and I watch women do um, a lat pull down like this [rapid jerky demonstration of a pull-down] and with a bunch of fast motions and stuff, so I don't [go the to the trainers], I read a lot of magazines. (Teri)

So although many of the women I interviewed were introduced to the gym by trainers, like Teri, after their initial introduction they mostly went off on their own and did their own research on fitness training so that they could modify their own programmes to suit their individual needs.

Learning by watching

This on-going modification of the fitness programme mostly involved reading texts such as magazines (which will be discussed in depth in the following chapter) as well as observing and actively seeking out advice from other 'members' of the gym. For example, Helena just "kind of figured out the machines" on her own. Other women I spoke to chose to learn new things to do with their workouts by watching what other people were doing. Victoria, for example would see someone doing something that she 'liked the look of' and would copy the move and incorporate it into her own routine.

Learning by watching other people, however, was more common at the co-ed gyms than the women-only gyms. For example, Teri who went to a women's only gym most certainly did not look to other gym goers for ideas or advice:

E: And where do you get your ideas for what to do at the gym?

T: From the magazines.

E: What about watching people at the gym?

T: Not at that gym, honestly it's brutal, it pains me that the trainers at [the gym] don't stop people from doing things they shouldn't do. You look at them and you're, you're so going to hurt yourself, or you're going to wake up tomorrow and pull something and not know what it is from. (Teri)

Clearly Teri chose not to learn new things to do from watching other women in her gym, mainly because of a lack of appropriate role models. However, most women who went to co-ed gyms did learn new exercises by watching what other people were doing.

Part of the work that was involved in learning from people at the gym was the work that went into selecting which people to watch. Women had to have enough knowledge about working out to know what they were looking for, and be able to recognize when someone was doing an exercise 'incorrectly' (as was the case with Teri). Also, when women were deciding whether or not someone was an appropriate model to learn from they looked at their bodies. Amy for example assumed that women who were 'ripped' knew what they were doing, since a well-toned body indicated someone who not only worked out a lot, but someone who also knew *how* to work out. Amy also made her

selection based on gender. She chose only women to learn from because she said she “wanted a woman’s body, not a man’s body”. Melissa on the other hand chose to learn from ‘bigger’ well-muscled people as well, but because there were relatively few women lifting weights at the gym she went to, she had to watch men, rather than women.

Magazines

As noted earlier, another way women learned to use the gym was by reading fitness magazines. Every woman I talked to (except for one who used magazine-sponsored websites instead) drew heavily upon magazines to guide their gym-going. Most women did a lot of work outside the gym, reading and selecting information from magazines. Because magazines were so influential in shaping the work women did at the gym I will outline only briefly the women’s use of magazines here, and will follow up this outline with a more in depth discussion in the next chapter.

Some of the preparation-work women did involved selecting and collecting articles from the fitness magazines on how to work out. Often women put these articles in binders so they could go through them at a later date and select different exercises to do when they were making up a new programme. Amy for example, used the information she collected to design eight- to twelve-week exercise programmes, which included exercise cards that had the daily exercises written on them. She would take these cards to the gym and record how accurately she followed the programme, such as which weights she lifted and how many reps and sets she managed.

Not all women however used magazines as heavily, or in the same way as Amy. For example, some women used magazines in conjunction with other things like books, videos or the internet. Robyn for example, used a combination of men’s muscle

magazines and books. Her favourite book was a muscle- building book written by Arnold Schwarzenegger, which she referred to as her 'bible'.

This use of magazines and other fitness texts demonstrates how the broader 'relations of ruling' of the fitness industry directly influence women's use of the gym. In addition, although these women were learning how to work out independently from personal trainers, arguably the knowledge they received was still influenced by dominant fitness discourse, since the fitness magazines industry is still very much a part of the broader 'relations of ruling' of the fitness industry.

The influence of men

Learning from men

As mentioned earlier, men were part of the extended relations of the fitness industry, and aside from fitness magazines they were perhaps the most influential in shaping the work the women I spoke to did at the gym. Perhaps this is not surprising because, as many previous researchers have pointed out, the gym is still very much a male domain (Miller and Penz, 1991; Obel, 1996). Further, dominant discourse on fitness suggests that lifting weights and building muscles is 'men's business'. As a result, there seems to be an automatic assumption that men know more about how to work out than women (Miller and Penz, 1991). Thus, many of the women I interviewed looked to men for guidance when lifting weights. For example, for the most part (but not in every case) it was male personal trainers who introduced the women to the gym, and if the women did not use the introductory session offered by personal trainers, they tended to enlist the help of their male friends or family. Lynette for example, was introduced to the gym by her brothers.

E: And who would you say was influential in starting that initial involvement?

L: My brothers. We had a very small gym in my home town, like you kind of went in on your own, it was open 24 hours a day. Nobody was there, you just had a key to open and close it, so there was nobody really there to help. So my brothers would come in, they would kind of push me, get me into routines, and they would come with me and help out.

E: And what did they teach you to do?

L: They mostly, since I was a little bit heavier they told me to do a lot of cardio. They would show me how to properly use the cardio machines, how to properly, you know slouching on the machines does nothing and techniques on the machines, and then they would show me a few weights. Just, they're like "don't focus on the weights because you don't want complete muscle, like you want to burn fat before muscle". So it was pretty much them who taught me exactly, like I got to learn some weights but I really focussed more on the cardio machines and getting the heart-rate up in the fat-burning stage.

It is clear from Lynette's account that her introduction and the initial work she did at the gym was heavily influenced by her brother's views on what was appropriate for women to do at the gym. Further, her brothers' proposed workout followed precisely the gendered expectations of how women should work out – they suggested she should lose weight and not lift too much weight because she should be lightly (not heavily) muscled.

Some women however resisted the privileging of men's knowledge. These women preferred to seek advice from other women.

L: I would rather have a woman show me, because it makes sense to me that women need a different workout regime to men. I don't know if that is true, but it's what I think because we have different areas of our body that are stronger, or weaker, or need more work, or you know attention.

(Laura)

Here Laura juxtaposes men's and women's bodies and uses this as a reason for why women need a different workout from men. But she also suggests that women, by virtue of being women, understand in a way men can't, the unique areas of the body that women need to focus on. In doing this she constructs women's working out as something that is separate from men's working out, and challenges the notion that men know how more about working out than women.

Navigating 'male' space

As one might expect, given the influence of men on women's work in the gym, being a woman at the gym was often a very challenging experience, since most of the women I interviewed had to learn how to navigate the male-dominated space of the gym, while still retaining a sense of their own femininity. As mentioned in Chapter Two, women who go to the gym provide a challenge to traditional conceptualizations of gender and the 'ideal' body since the exertions women perform at the gym run counter to traditional gender images of women as graceful and passive.

However, most of the women I spoke to wanted to be able to exercise in the same way as the men did, but at the same time they still wanted to retain their 'femininity'. As

a result there was a certain amount of work that went into managing this situation. For example, when the women were at the gym they had to learn how to manage their behaviour and appearance so that, first they looked like they knew what they are doing (so they were accepted as 'serious' by men), second that they exerted themselves, but not too much (so that their *behaviour* was feminine, but not too feminine) and that they were muscled, but not too muscled (so they *looked* feminine, but not too feminine). However, in saying that all these aspects tended to change in relative importance depending on whether a woman was at a woman's only gym, or a co-ed gym. This supports Young's (1997) and Cox and Thompson's (2000) assertion that femininity is not fixed; rather it is determined by social circumstances and differences and contradictions are the norm.

Men checking out women

According to the women I spoke to, one aspect of being a woman in a co-ed gym is that almost without exception women have to learn how to deal with the fact that they will be checked out. There were two types of checking out that went on in the co-ed gyms. The first type was a relatively sexualized checking out (presumably underpinned by dominant discourses of masculinity and femininity) in which men looked at the women and assessed them on their feminine heterosexual attractiveness. The second type of checking out (non-sexual), was also highly gendered and involved men looking to see what the women were lifting, and based on their observations determining whether they were 'worthy' to be included in the weights room. It is worth noting however, that the women participated in this sort of checking out too, since they not only checked out how they themselves measured up to the men, but also how the men measured up to them.

Therefore, part of the work the women did at the gym was managing the degree to which they would 'allow' themselves to be checked out by the men. Robyn was one woman who refused to allow the men's checking out to affect how and where she worked out. Rather than opting to go to a women's workout area she chose to work out with the men in the free-weights area. Although she admitted that the checking out annoyed her, (because she was offended by the assumption on the part of the men that she couldn't lift as much as them) she chose to see the men's checking out as a positive thing because it provided her with a challenge.

E: And what are the rewards of going to the gym?

R: Being able to beat the guys and uh, asking, this last, actually happened a couple of days ago. I was doing easy-bar curls and there was a guy doing, using the weight that I needed for the easy-bar curl, and so I went over, and he went to put it back and I'm like "can I have that", and I'm 120 five-one and he's you know 180 6 foot, and he hands me the bar and he's looking at me and I did my curls and put it back...then he had the 50, 55 pound bar, and he was using it and I walked over afterwards and I'm like "can I borrow that just for one set" and he's looking like looking at me and I did my curls and go to walk away and he's like "you know, I'm going to have to keep lifting heavier and heavier if you keep doing this to me!" and I'm like "sorry!" [laughing]

By lifting as much as the men Robyn refuses to conform to gender stereotypes, and while she knows that she is threatening the man's sense of masculinity by showing him up, she is not threatening her own sense of femininity. By making mention of her height and

weight in comparison to the man's, she effectively constructs herself as very small and 'feminine' in comparison to the big 'masculine' man. In doing this Robyn discursively claims her femininity (as a small woman), but at the same time highlights the contradiction – that she is strong. Thus, Robyn's example demonstrates how women discursively work to place themselves within the restrictive definition of femininity and at the same time she highlights the real diversity that exists within definitions of femininity.

The other interesting thing that comes out of her example is the man's response. After Robyn has shown him up not once but twice by lifting the same weights, he feels it necessary to defend, or rather protect his masculinity by claiming that he will have to keep "lifting heavier and heavier" if she keeps going at the same pace. Once again, underpinning his response are dominant discourses of gender that dictate what constitutes masculinity as opposed to femininity.

However, not all women shared Robyn's view. There were some women who did not see the checking out as challenge, or as a positive experience. One woman, who normally went to a women's only gym, gave me her account of what it was like to be a woman at a co-ed gym.

C: There's some exercises I don't do in a co-ed gym because people will make fun of me. Like if I'm doing like bench press, like free weight, I can only do the bar, right? And I don't do that at [that gym] because there's a guy next to me with 50 pounds on each side you know. And, like sometimes even, like I'll put 5 pounds on each side you know. And, it's

embarrassing for me to ask for a spotter¹ when I'm only having 10 pounds compared to the guy next to me. Like stuff like that has affected me negatively like there are exercises I won't do there. (Chantel)

Chantel therefore manages the men's checking out by changing the work she does when she is in a co-ed gym. She demonstrates how images of femininity and masculinity shape our emotional responses to our bodies and their abilities. Her example suggests that in a gym setting men are accorded more status and power, because of their ability (on the whole) to lift more weight than women. For example, the man lifting 50 pounds on either side is in a sense given more 'right' to be there than Chantel, because he is lifting a heavier weight. Chantel, in comparison to him, feels embarrassed because she needs a spotter when she is lifting only five pounds either side. She therefore chooses not to do that exercise at that gym anymore.

Chantel was not alone in her approach. Many women I spoke to told me that they would manage the presence of men by changing their behaviour and/or their appearance if they went to a co-ed gym. This demonstrates how acutely aware of 'gender appropriate' behaviour these women were, and how skilled they were at not only managing their appearance, but also at judging the appropriate gendered behaviour for the different settings. For example, some women said they would take more care about what they were wearing, how they did their hair, and in some cases how hard they worked out when they went to a co-ed gym.

¹ A spotter is someone who watches a person while they lift and towards the end of the set will relieve the lifter of some of the weight by lifting a small amount of the weight themselves. This allows the lifter to lift a heavier weight than he or she could safely lift alone.

E: What about, you were saying how you don't feel like you can work out as hard as you can, as when you're in a woman's only gym?

M: Like you're like, well you have to, like oh well how does my hair look? Or like gotta not go so purple in my face and like sweat like a pig and all that kind of stuff, it's just even though you're there for your own personal reasons you're still self-conscious about how you look around everybody else.

E: Like you feel like you need to be more feminine?

M: Exactly! You have to be all prim and proper, but when you go to an all ladies gym like I couldn't care less, what a girl, you know they look at me and see me working out if anything they're going to say that's cool that's great I want to do that too. (Marie)

Here Marie points out that women who transgress gender norms by working out hard at women's gyms provide great role models for other women. However, she also neatly articulates the dilemma of being a woman who likes to work out hard. Even though she wants to work out hard at a co-ed gym she doesn't feel comfortable doing so because she realizes that at a co-ed gym she needs to come across as a little more 'feminine' than she does at the women's only gym. So the idea is to work out hard enough so that she feels like she still gets a work out, but not so hard that she threatens her perceived femininity.

The 'serious' woman

Other work the women I interviewed did in order to navigate their way around the male dominated environment of the gym was by actively constructing themselves as 'serious' gym-goers. By establishing themselves as serious about their gym-going and

adopting a similar attitude towards their working out as the men, they effectively managed to assert a right of place at the gym, and make it plain to everyone that they belonged there just as much as the men. It is worth noting that once more dominant discourses of gender underpinned the women's need to define their participation as 'serious', since traditionally men's working out is viewed as serious, whereas women's working out is trivialized. One of the ways the women established themselves as 'serious' was by explicitly contrasting their own behaviour at the gym with those women who conformed to gender stereotypes. In doing this they made it very clear that *they* were there to work on their bodies. In fact, a lot of the women I spoke to expressed frustration towards those women whom they saw as not being as serious as they were with their workouts.

Victoria for example, discursively separated herself from the 'girls' who came in and didn't train hard. Her frustration stemmed not only from the fact that, in her eyes she could be making better use of the equipment, but also because she saw these women as just being there at the gym to 'watch what the boys are doing'. She also noted that they were there with 'full make-up on', and in doing so were displaying an appearance that she believed to be inappropriate at the gym.

Many other women I spoke to expressed similar views. Often they constructed their training as much more serious than these 'other women's'. They emphasized how *they* were 'there to do their thing and get out, and not there to stand around chatting. Although none of the women could express exactly why such women frustrated them it could be argued that the women who go to the gym to 'look at the boys' provide a challenge to the women who go to the gym to workout seriously. The women who 'go to

watch the boys' reinforce the notion that women for the most part should abide by the stereotypes and restrict their bodily movements to minimize sweat and other signs of exertion, thus leaving them fresh and free to be spectators of men's physical activity. From the women's accounts there therefore seemed to be two markedly different groups of women who went the gym: the women who saw themselves as 'serious' gym-goers; and those who went to the gym to 'watch the boys'.

Clearly, being a 'serious' gym-going woman is therefore not always easy. Besides expressing frustration with some of the women at the gym, many of the women I spoke to also articulated their annoyance with some of the men in the gym who also adopted gendered and stereotypical attitudes to women's working out, and who, despite the women's efforts, obviously did not take them, or their workouts, seriously. Victoria for example, complained that a lot of men would take over equipment she was using without asking (when they would never do the same thing to a man) and would incorrectly assume that because she was a woman she didn't know what she was doing.

Turning it around

But another way in which the women I interviewed navigated the male-environment was by playing on gendered assumptions about women, and actually using the men's checking out to work to their own advantage. For example, initially Sonya said she felt very uncomfortable at the gym with all the men there, mainly because she wasn't happy with her body, and was therefore not as confident. But, as she worked on her body and became more satisfied with it she took pleasure in the men checking her

out. Although she admitted that it still annoyed her a bit, she nevertheless managed to turn it around so that it actually boosted her self-esteem rather than deflated it.

S: Like you do get checked out and stuff like that, like when I'm walking over to fill up my water bottle, you see the guys sometimes sitting out there [and as you walk by] you see their heads kind of turning and you know that they're looking at your legs and I feel good, I feel good you know? Yup, like these are my legs that I've worked so hard for and they look good you know! (Sonya)

Sonya therefore was particularly skilled at managing the men's checking out; although she allowed it, she also controlled when she *would* allow it. In this way she quite successfully managed to get the 'best of both worlds': she worked out in the comfort and privacy of the women's only section, but at the same time, she did not forego the positive reinforcement she got from the men in the co-ed section.

Another way many women worked the situation to their advantage was when they needed a spot. Sonya, along with many other women, noted that as a woman in the gym it was easy to get a 'spotter'.

S: I think people [are] more willing to help you spot. If you needed the help from a guy, I don't know, right, I just feel sometimes if I need a spot, I sometimes feel like it's easier for me to ask...I think guys are more willing to help. I don't know, maybe everyone's willing to help, but I think it might be a slight advantage that I'm a girl, you know? (Sonya)

In this example Sonya plays on the idea that women should go to men to ask advice on how to work out. But rather than responding as some men would like her to, by

encouraging further discussion (since most women explained to me that these sorts of encounters are often viewed by both sexes as a way to ‘pick up’) she just uses the ‘service’ and moves on.

However, it should be made clear that sexualized gender stereotypes do not always underpin interactions between men and women at the gym. Some women commented that they had met some good friends at the gym, with whom they had developed good friendships, and with whom they socialized on the weekends. Chantel commented that “co-ed gyms are a lot more social than women only gyms, and that’s a good thing in some ways, like you, if you work in an office all day and then all of a sudden you go to the gym for two hours you want to talk to people, you don’t want to be in your cubicle!” So although most women I spoke to at some time experienced unwanted advances from men at the gym, not all encounters were negative or unwanted.

Women’s work

Working for a ‘female’ body

Although dominant discourses of gender suggests that men are more knowledgeable about working the body than women, it was plain that all of the women I spoke to had a deep, and arguably unique understanding not only of how to work their own bodies, but also how their gendered bodies were placed within the broader social context of gender relations.

As mention earlier, most women I spoke to had done a lot of work outside of the gym to improve their knowledge of working out. As a result, they had a very thorough understanding of the various terms that were used when referring to working on their bodies, and exactly what sort of body they as women were working towards. For

example, most women talked about wanting to be more ‘toned’, because they knew that as a woman it wasn’t enough to be slim. But, what exactly does toned mean? For Victoria toning meant being muscled, but not so muscled that she was bulky. For Sonya it meant being able to see the definition of her muscles while she was working out. And, for most (but not all) women there was a general consensus that big muscles on women were unfeminine and not something that they would want for themselves. Thus, they demonstrated their understanding of the physical differences (both socially constructed and actual) between men’s and women’s bodies. This feeling was neatly captured in this discussion between Kirsten and Helena:

H: It doesn’t look right for women to look that way [highly muscled]. Do you remember that girl at the [gym]. I think she was on steroids or something. Her body was literally like a man.

K: If you didn’t see her face she was just like a man, and she didn’t have any bust, she was just like a man.

H: Her whole body was built like a man.

K: It’s not feminine to me at all, it’s masculine and that part the men can keep! It comes easily to them, so that is not us. (Kirsten and Helena)

Although the above comments might suggest that the distinction between a man’s body and a woman’s is clear-cut, this is not the case. In reality, as noted earlier, there is a lot of diversity both amongst women’s bodies, and amongst men’s bodies. In fact many of the women I spoke to actively resisted such categorical thinking by working to develop at least a slightly muscled physique. However, as previously mentioned research has

indicated, their resistance to gender stereotypes was, at the same time, restricted. The women who resisted had to learn how to work their bodies in a way that struck a balance between the slim, 'toned' feminine 'ideal' and the 'ripped', 'bulky' masculine 'ideal'.

L: What I really want to do now is be more toned, I don't like my bum, my bum's a bit wobbly, so I want that to be a little firmer, but I don't, I have no desire for six-pack or any of these rippling muscles, I just want to be, I don't mind being a little soft, but just no bits sticking out or anything.

E: what do you mean?

L: My bum! I don't want any saddle bags or anything if I can help it. I just want to be a little more svelte, I think, but still the shape I am.

E: Like firm but soft.

L: Yah, I don't know how to explain it, like that's what I mean, like still feminine. (Laura)

Laura's comment neatly captures the conflicting ideal women try to achieve when deciding on how to work on their bodies: they must work out in a way that achieves a body that is muscled and without excess fat, but at the same time still soft and feminine.

Presenting the body in the gym

Dominant discourses of gender place great importance on women's appearance; women are encouraged to present themselves in 'feminine' ways at all times. So, another conflicting issue women had to learn to deal with, in regards to the physical appearance of their bodies, was how they presented themselves in the gym. Some women told me that they put a lot of work into selecting what they would wear to the gym each day,

while others told me they explicitly refused to do so. Nevertheless, whether they chose conformity or resistance to gender stereotypes, most of them were aware of the effect clothing had on their experience at the gym.

There was an interesting trend amongst the women I interviewed: most of them started off wearing baggy clothing to hide their bodies, but as they gradually became more confident with their bodies they moved into tighter fitting clothing.

H: When I started off I used to wear baggy.

K: Yah, the baggier the better when you were starting off as a student.

H: So all I wore were t-shirts and shorts, and gradually you start liking your body more and you start wearing tighter things. I was a bit shy//

K: And I think it is shyness, I'm amazed how many people don't care, or at least I don't think they care.

H: Some people don't care, they're overweight and they'll wear the least of anyone. (Kirsten and Helena)

Underpinning Kirsten and Helena's discussion is the implicit notion that the work you do at the gym earns you the 'right' to wear more revealing clothes. This was an idea that was also shared by some of the other women I spoke.

L: Okay, um, like I told you before I started off with my brother's old stuff, which was dragging on the ground and billowing out like M.C. Hammer pants so they were just awful and everyone was getting into the Lululemon craze, and I never went in because I always felt as though nothing would fit me, and I thought oh my god, there's no way I'm

wearing Spandex, or anything that's tight to body because I want to hide everything, but as I gradually became more comfortable with my body I thought that's it, damn it I'm going to Lululemon and I'm buying two outfits, and I did. I didn't feel totally comfortable at first, but now I do and I've, my philosophy now is, you know okay so I'm not going to look incredibly nice when I'm all sweaty and gross, but at least I can dress nicely and feel a little bit better about things...

E: And what made you make that switch?

L: Well number one someone told me that I looked terrible in my brother's workout clothes.

E: Who told you that a friend, a girl-friend?

L: A friend, said to me [Laura], come on I think it's time that you know, that you bit the bullet and bought some workout clothes.. You know you belong in the gym now, come on, look the part! If you look the part and feel the part then you are the part!

After going to the gym and working to re-shape her body to a more 'acceptable' form Laura felt that she could now justify going into Lululemon and buying an outfit; she had earned the right to wear the uniform of a bona fide gym-goer.

However, as I mentioned earlier not all women I spoke to put as much work into presenting themselves in feminine ways at the gym. Some women resisted pressure to be 'feminine' and just wore what was comfortable and functional. In some cases they said

that they chose to wear pants that covered up the parts of their bodies they were not happy with, but for the most part they emphasised comfort and function.

It also became apparent that dress was for some of the women I spoke to a further way to establish themselves as 'serious' gym goers. Some of them consciously opted out of the 'cutesy' outfits and instead chose to wear clothing that was purely functional and not at all about an outward display of femininity. Chantel for example liked her clothing to be "loose fitting and stretchy", and for her fashion most definitely was *not* a criterion.

That said, Amy's discussion clearly highlights the fine line between being functional and being feminine:

A: There's some women, and they look really good when they go to the gym and they're all done up, yah make-up hair and you're just like wow, okay. And then there are some women that just don't care that are like big baggy t-shirts and baggy pants and have just kind of thrown themselves together, which is fine. It's hard to find a balance because you can be all frumpy and do your own thing and no-one really pays attention to you, and then you can be somewhat done-up and then you get more access to stuff, like people will move out of your way...Um, so there's that kind of component, but then at the same time you don't want people checking you out like you're not there to get picked up. You're there to work out, but then there's people that do want to get picked up so it's just a funny environment, yah, so that can be frustrating as a woman, like trying to figure out, because guys they don't care what they wear, they don't care about anything, but I don't know, I think you're more judged as a woman

and you're compared more, um physically, or you just become more aware of it. (Amy)

Here Amy neatly articulates the contradiction most of the women I spoke to faced when selecting what to wear to the gym each day. If the women wanted their workouts to be taken seriously they had to learn to dress so that they didn't look too 'feminine', but at the same time, they didn't want to look too frumpy either, because then they would be overlooked and possibly lose access to equipment. In matters of clothing and self-presentation also, there was a juggling act to perform.

This chapter brought to light the many contradictions, underpinned by gender stereotypes, that affected the gym-going experiences of the women I interviewed. It highlighted the different kinds of work done by these women, both inside and outside the gym that influenced the way they navigated their way around the gym. In this chapter I noted how the women's involvement in the gym was influenced by many of the broader 'relations of ruling' of the fitness industry, such as the magazine industry, personal trainers and other members of the gym. I also examined how the extended relations of fitness industry, in particular the men at the gym, influenced the women's experiences of the gym. In addition I brought to light the contradictions the women faced in the gym and the work involved in learning how to navigate the male dominated environment of the gym in a way that earned them respect and acceptance, but at the same time did not compromise their femininity. I suggested that although many women enjoyed the challenge of competing with the men, there was a strong sense that they did not want to *be* one of the men; rather almost all of the women I spoke to wanted to be recognized as

‘serious’ gym-going *women*, who were working out just as hard and as seriously as the men. The final contradiction I discussed was the pressure that most women I spoke to felt, to be feminine and to look attractive, but at the same time to not to look so attractive, or be so feminine that they invited unwanted attention, or were not taken seriously. In this chapter it was made clear that being a woman at the gym involved continually working out how to confront and challenge gender stereotypes about men and women. From the accounts of the women I spoke to it was clear that being a gym-going women involved conforming to stereotypes in *some* ways, but not *all* ways, and necessitated being feminine *sometimes*, but not at *all* times. The women I spoke to had to learn how to manage being fit not fat, toned not muscular, fashion-conscious not frumpy, and feminine but not too feminine.

This chapter has therefore made visible the work involved in being a woman in the gym and it has brought to light the many contradictions that the women I interviewed faced as gym-going women. It has also examined the work the women did to either conform to or resist dominant discourses of gender. However, it has not discussed where the women learned how to be ‘masculine’ or ‘feminine’ in the gym. The next chapter discusses one such source of information – fitness magazines. In this chapter I discuss the work involved in reading fitness magazines and I look at how women use fitness magazines to direct their gym workouts. I also highlight some of the invisible work women do when reading these magazines.

Chapter Five: Women's use of fitness magazines.

Most of the women I spoke to used fitness magazines to guide their gym going in some way, such as getting advice on nutrition, learning how to do new exercises, or seeking out motivation to keep going the gym. As I noted earlier, I looked at magazines because they are part of the broader 'ruling relations' of the 'fitness industry', and as institutional ethnographers suggest, text-based resources can give insight into how and why things happen in an organization (De Vault and McCoy, 2002; Smith, 1990). As I mentioned earlier, going to the gym is a relatively new phenomenon and in the traditional sense, it is not a 'sport' per se – there is no coach instructing women what to do (and as I noted earlier most of the women I spoke to did not rely on personal trainers, which some might argue fill the role of the coach). Fitness magazines therefore (in lieu of a coach) play a significant role in coordinating the development of this comparatively new trend. In effect fitness magazines act as common resources that are in part responsible for various generalizing processes in the gym.

Because of my choice to use an approach similar to Radway's (1991) in this chapter I am not so concerned with interpreting the stories and articles; rather my focus is on how women read the stories and articles, and how the magazines operate as part of the women's on-going participation at the gym. I am also interested in revealing the 'work' that is involved in selecting and interpreting the information in the magazines. In this chapter I make a connection between the women's accounts of their gym-going (discussed in the previous chapter) and their use of fitness magazines. I bring to light the contradictions in the fitness magazines, and although I realize that these contradictions

are not exactly the same as the ones women experience at the gym, they are nevertheless underpinned by similar discourses of femininity and the singular 'ideal' female body.

To begin this discussion I will first provide an overview of what is contained in each magazine before moving on to discussions of the three aspects of the magazines that the women paid most attention to: routine advice; motivation; and nutrition and dieting. Following this I will discuss the work the women did to manage and navigate the contradictions in the magazines.

Fitness Magazines

There are a number of women's fitness magazines available, but the most popular ones amongst the women I spoke to were *Shape*, *Oxygen*, and *Muscle and Fitness Hers*. Since Radway's (1991) approach advocates that those who are being studied should be the ones driving the analysis, these three women's fitness magazines were the ones I chose to include in my study. In addition some of the women I spoke to looked at men's fitness magazines (for reasons I will discuss shortly), so for the purposes of this project I chose to look at *Men's Fitness* magazine as well, since this was the most popular men's magazine amongst the women. Each of these magazines is issued on a monthly basis and costs around \$4.99 – \$5.99 per issue.

Most fitness magazines are fairly similar. All contain information on routines to do at the gym. This might be in the form of a suggestion of how best to mix up cardio with weights, or perhaps some advice on how to break up an exercise routine over the course of a week so that each area of the body is targeted effectively. Further, all fitness magazines give suggestions on different exercises to do and have pictures of models

doing the suggested exercises with a short description of what muscles the exercise targets, how many repetitions should be done and at what weight range.

All fitness magazines also provide information on nutrition, since it is widely accepted that in order to re-shape the body it is necessary to concentrate on diet as well as exercise. The type of advice that is given in the magazines differs from one to the next, but the general consensus is that diet is important.

Most magazines also work to give readers motivation by printing ‘makeover’ or ‘testimonial’ stories, in which a person has successfully re-shaped their body through diet and exercise. Usually these stories contain ‘before’ and ‘after’ pictures along with personal anecdotes. In addition, most magazines give advice on self-presentation, such as which clothes to wear, and for the women’s magazines, how to apply make-up.

Along with these common features, however, each of the magazines I examined was distinct in some way. *Shape* magazine is geared towards women who are interested in achieving a slim and slightly toned physique similar to the ‘aerobics body’ discussed by Markula (1995) and Maguire and Mansfield (1998). *Shape* encourages women to strive for a better body by doing a combination of aerobic activity and light weights. It generally focuses on losing weight, rather than developing muscles, and is aimed at the woman who prefers a gentle workout, and desires the slim toned physique of the ‘ideal’ female body type. Generally the weights recommended in *Shape* are very light (5-15 pounds) and the repetitions are usually around 15. In addition, the models in *Shape* magazine are usually very slim with slight muscle tone but not overly developed muscles.

Oxygen magazine is primarily aimed at women who want to develop a very muscular physique similar to the female body-builders in Miller and Penz’s (1991) study.

It tailors its advice to the competitive body-building woman and contains pictures of current top female body-builders. Like other magazines, it provides readers with success stories of women who have re-shaped their bodies and in many cases entered into competitions as a result of changing their bodies. The models in *Oxygen* are usually highly muscled, and the emphasis is on developing a 'hard' body with good definition. At the back of the magazine there are usually several pages showing pictures of the top competitors from the latest competition.

Muscle and Fitness Hers is essentially is a compromise between *Shape* and *Oxygen*. The type of body it promotes is a lean body (i.e. without excess body fat), but not as lean as the body promoted in *Shape* magazine. It encourages women to develop their muscles, but to not develop them quite as much as the women in *Oxygen*. Like the other magazines it has success stories, complete with before and after pictures of women who have successfully re-shaped their bodies.

The men's magazine I chose to look at (*Men's Fitness*) covers the same areas as the women's magazines, but it differs in that it has male models and explicitly addresses male readers. Its advice focuses on building muscle bulk and definition, rather than working on toning up and slimming down. The exercises it suggests are usually more challenging than the ones in the women's magazines; the suggested weights are generally heavier and repetitions lower than those suggested in the women's magazines. Further the nutritional advice is more about using food to build up lean muscle mass rather than how to use food or avoid food to slim down. Another distinct difference between the

men's magazine and the women's is the emphasis on relationships and sex, a focus which is absent in the women's magazines.¹

Given that each magazine is slightly different most women went through a selection process in order to choose which magazine they were going to look at. For example, some women chose a magazine based on the type of body they had.

E: So would you say that there is a difference between *Muscle and Fitness Hers* and *Shape* magazine?

T: Oh, absolutely, yes!

E: Which of those two do you chose to read?

T: Well, the way I work out, I think I'm going to end up looking more like the muscle women...so I get *Muscle and Fitness Hers*...I will get *Shape*, but I find the women in *Shape* are more like the model type, as opposed to the workout type, and I find lately that I've been getting more into men's magazines...I find *Shape* is too light (Teri)

Here Teri suggests that she chooses magazines that show models that have bodies more similar to her own. She also implies that some magazines are more 'serious' or advanced than others. Other women I spoke to share this view, and also based their magazine selection on whether or not they thought the magazine contained both accurate information and challenging exercises.

¹ It is also worth noting that the gender composition of the magazines' owners and chief editors may play into the gendered messages portrayed within the different magazines. For example, *Muscle and Fitness Hers* and *Oxygen* are founded by Joe Weider and Robert Kennedy respectively – men who have been, and still are, dominant forces in the male body-building scene. However, while I acknowledge this may be an issue, a further analysis of this was beyond the scope of this project.

A: I totally read all the fitness magazines, *Oxygen* I use because I like the testimony stories...but when it comes down to wanting actual information, I tend to pick a magazine that has a good reputation. *Muscle and Fitness* [men's] has been around a really long time and then *Hers* came out not too long ago...so I think it's pretty accredited. At least their exercises are the same as *Oxygen*'s. The others? Not so much.

E: What would you say is lacking with the others?

A: Um, it's not that [the magazines'] information is not so accredited – it's just so *basic*. I think I'm beyond that now, like wanting different exercises and more challenging exercises. *Shape* seems to be for women who are just thinking about getting into shape. Their exercises are very simple, simple concepts, whereas *Muscle and Fitness* magazines are more technical, a little more advanced with some of their ideas, and are reaching a target of women who are wanting to achieve that kind of body, or that level of competitiveness. (Amy)

Amy's and Teri's comments point to the fact that there is a sense amongst some 'serious' female gym-goers that magazines increase in seriousness, from *Shape* magazine, to *Muscle and Fitness* *Hers* and *Oxygen*, and then to the men's magazines. But this is not to say that those women with whom I spoke who chose to read *Shape* were not as serious as those who read the men's magazines. Rather I am suggesting that there was a *perception* amongst *some* women I spoke to that *Shape* was not as serious as the more muscle-focused magazines.

Now that I have discussed how the women selected from the different magazines and outlined the differences between the magazines, I will provide a description of the three main sections of the fitness magazines to which my interviewees paid most attention. In these descriptions I acknowledge that I myself am a reader of fitness magazines, so in effect I am providing my own interpretation of the information contained within the magazines. However I do not intend to suggest that my interpretations are any more accurate or insightful than those given by the women; rather these descriptions are provided to act as a point of reference for the later discussion when I examine how the women managed some of the contradictions in the magazines.

Routine Advice

As mentioned earlier, a lot of women used the fitness magazine to get advice on how to structure their routines. This was one of the most obvious ways in which the magazines had a generalizing effect on what women did at the gym. Most women designed their workouts from the magazines, and this designing and modifying of the fitness programmes was a major part of the ‘work’ women did outside of the gym in order to ensure they spent their time in the gym wisely. As mentioned in the previous chapter some of the women I spoke to collated routine-related articles in binders, so there was work involved in organizing all this information so that they could draw upon it when they needed to. However, unlike other sections of the magazines most women did not do a lot of interpretive work when reading advice on routines and exercises to do at the gym. As Melissa said, “there’s only so many ways you can do a bicep curl!” Not surprisingly then, most women did similar *exercises* in the gym, and only differed from each other in the sort of exercise *routine* they followed (i.e. a more cardio orientated

routine, or a more weights focused routine). However, even then, there was not a lot of variation amongst what the women did in the gym, since most of the women got their advice on what to do and how to structure their routines from the same magazines.

All magazines give very similar advice on which exercises to do and what routines to follow. I chose to analyze *Shape* magazine's June 2004 'target-training' section to discuss how advice on routines is presented (Whitman, 2004). Not only is this section typical of *Shape*, it contains many of the features that are common to the other magazines when it comes to giving advice on routine. It features a 'reader' model – a person who reads the magazine and has been called upon as a 'reader' to fill the position that is normally filled by a professional model. The idea is that the 'reader' model is more similar (in looks and background) to the magazine's target audience than any professional model might be. Thus women are encouraged to read themselves into the text (McCracken, 1993; Currie, 1999). However, not all magazines use a 'reader model'; some use an unidentified model or a well-known fitness competitor as a model to promote the activity. But choice of model aside, this article, like most other articles on routine, has pictures of the model demonstrating the different exercises, the implication being that doing these exercises will 'naturally' lead to a body similar to the model's.

The article legitimizes the pursuit of these exercises by invoking category entitlement. Category entitlement is Potter's (1997) term, and it is used to refer to members of a specific group, (for example doctors, personal trainers or gym-goers) who are accorded a certain amount of credibility through their association with the group. For example, category entitlement is used to introduce the model's trainer. Her trainer's credentials are listed as "Catherine Fiscella, M.S., a licensed physical therapist and

certified trainer” (Whitman, 2004: 144). By listing her qualifications and referring to her ‘licensed’ association with physical therapists her advice on effective methods of training is intended to come across as more credible.

Further, scientific credibility is given to the information in the article by the artistic representation of the physiology of the muscles and the use of the related scientific names: “rectus abdominus, external obliques” (Whitman, 2004: 144) and so on. By using scientific references and discourses of medicine and health (“use a high-cable pulley to *target the upper fibres of the rectus abdominis*”, *ibid*, emphasis added) the article is made even more credible. Further by invoking this discourse of health the pursuit of a sexually attractive body through exercise is seen as justifiable (Spitzpack, 1990).

Like many other articles on exercise routines in other magazines this article suggests to readers that they can get a mid-section like the model. All they have to do is follow the prescribed exercises and the weekly workout schedule. In a sense the text activates a desire within the reader to be like the model, and the discrepancy between the ideal presented in the text and the reader’s actual appearance motivates the reader to follow the prescribed exercises. The responsibility for attaining a mid-section like the model is placed firmly in the hands of the individual – it is up to them to follow the exercises and failure to do so is their own fault.

Further, like many other articles on routines a certain amount of ‘member’ competence (Potter, 1997) is required in order to understand and act upon the information that is provided. The workout is described in a way that assumes that the reader knows what a rep is, what a set is and what cardio is. Further, this article like most others,

instructs readers how to use equipment in the gym. It tells the reader exactly what equipment they need: “a multipurpose bench, a high-cable pulley with a rope attachment, a 65 centimetre stability ball and a 2-to-8 pound medicine ball” (Whitman, 2004: 144). The pictures and accompanying explanations illustrate how such equipment is to be used. So in the absence of a personal trainer readers are able to follow the programme. Clearly this is one of the most obvious ways that fitness magazines coordinate the activities of women at the gym.

Motivation

Keeping motivated to go to the gym is a challenge that most of the women I spoke to faced from time to time. Some of the women I interviewed read fitness magazines to keep them motivated. For example, they would look to the ‘testimonial’ or ‘make-over’ stories for motivation. Testimonial stories are stories about supposedly ‘average’ women who have successfully re-shaped their bodies. Amy was woman who regularly looked at the testimonial stories in *Oxygen* for motivation. She said she liked reading the stories because she felt she could relate to the women in the stories since they all seemed to have a similar lifestyle to her. Lynette also read the stories in the magazines to give her motivation to keep going. But along with getting motivation from them she also read the articles to get ideas about what she might do in order to shape her body more effectively:

There’s stories about people who’ve lost weight just by using different plans, I stop for those, just to see how they lost it, just to hear their story because sometimes people go to the gym all the time and don’t lose weight...like maybe I’m the same body-type as this person and they’ve lost all this weight by doing a completely different workout. It just gives

me ideas of different thing to try at the gym, or different things to look into. (Lynette).

For the purposes of this section I chose to analyze the *Oxygen* testimonial stories. *Oxygen* has two testimonial stories per issue. One is called a 'Work in Progress' and the other is called 'Total Package'. The 'work in progress' features a woman who was previously over-weight and is now in (usually) competition shape (which raises the question of why it is called a 'work in progress' rather than the 'finished product'). The trend is to feature a woman who has had to face some sort of trauma, such as a marriage break-up or the loss of a loved one. The stories are written to suggest that in spite of such hardships, the woman overcame them and ended up better off than she was before. Each 'work in progress' has a 'before' picture where the woman is pictured in a very unflattering pose, poorly dressed, usually without make-up and in bad lighting. The 'after' photo normally has the woman dressed in a bikini or similar revealing clothing, wearing make-up, in good lighting and posing in a way that shows her body in the best possible way. Towards the bottom of the article the woman's workout schedule is laid out, as is her typical daily diet, and her before and after 'stats', which include her height, weight, body fat, waist and dress size.

For example, the January 2004 *Oxygen* 'work in progress' features Bernadette Purpur who went to the gym to get in shape for a fitness competition after suffering the loss of her mother to cancer (Johnson, 2004). In the process of re-shaping her body she lost 20 pounds, three inches around her chest, four inches around the waist, three inches around her hips and dropped from a dress size 7/9 to a dress size 3/5. She also managed

to decrease her body fat percentage from 28 percent to 15 percent. By all accounts she is a success. At the top of the article there are three pictures of her side by side, which readers are implicitly encouraged to scrutinize for defects. The first, ‘before’ picture features her looking pale, unhappy and over-weight in a heavy duffle coat. In this picture her body is soft and lacks any sort of muscle definition – the message being that being fat is not glamorous. The second, ‘during’ picture shows Bernadette still looking pale, not *quite* as unhappy as she looked in the earlier picture, but definitely not radiating confidence either. She is pictured in an unflattering, front-on pose, without make-up and wearing ill-fitting lingerie. The final ‘after’ shot provides a stark contrast to the earlier two. It shows her in a flattering side-on position with her upper torso twisted slightly to the front. She is tanned, wearing make-up, and her previously lank brown hair is now a golden blonde. Her body is toned, taut and defined. She is smiling radiantly and wearing a sequined hot pink revealing bikini. She is virtually unrecognizable as the woman in the ‘before’ and ‘during’ pictures.

Not only do testimonial stories like these suggest that losing weight will increase a woman’s happiness and sexual attractiveness; they also put across a formula of femininity that guides women’s behaviours and attitudes towards a certain type of femininity or body image that is viewed as not only desirable, but possible (Ferguson, 1983). Before and after pictures provide visual evidence of a transformation from a previously wayward body to the slim-toned ideal and suddenly the ‘impossible’ seems achievable.

However, it is made clear that Bernadette’s transformation involved, and continues to involve, a lot of work, as well the kind of discipline and self-surveillance

discussed by researchers like Bordo (1989) Duncan (1994) Eskes et al., (1998) and Markula (2001). The article states that Bernadette has to train early in the morning or late at night to fit in her working out as well as her family and friends. She follows a weekly workout schedule of cardio, weight-training, gymnastics and sprint-training. Further, her daily eating plan, which she follows closely, consists of seven small protein-based meals eaten at regular intervals throughout the day. But, in keeping with textual discourses of shame and confession (Duncan, 1994; Eskes et al., 1998; Spitzpack, 1990) she admits to the occasional 'stray' moment when she indulges in Glossette raisins or a Krispy Kreme donut.

The other testimonial story regularly featured in *Oxygen* focuses on a woman who supposedly is the 'total package'. This woman works out regularly, has a fantastic body, and on top of this often manages to juggle being a mother, a wife and a successful business person. Usually there are at least two, if not three pictures of the featured woman. There is always a picture of her working out, usually one of her in her workplace, and often another with either her children, or her family. These pictures give a visual impression of all the different roles the woman fulfills, and is an example of the ways in which magazines set women up to have unrealistic 'superwomen' expectations of themselves. An example of a typical woman featured in a 'total package' article is Jodenne Townsend in the January 2004 issue of *Oxygen* (Naud, 2004). Jodenne not only manages to work out five to six days a week (a schedule she has stuck to right through her two pregnancies); she also has a masters degree in exercise science, and is an aerobics instructor and personal trainer. Furthermore, she has developed an exercise video for children so that they too can learn the benefits of exercise and healthy eating. And

“between marketing shipping, and selling Callie’s Club, training clients, and caring for her family and home Jodenne hosts seminars where she discusses lifestyle, wellness...”

(Naud, 2004: 48)

Stories like these are aimed to encourage women to keep striving to reach their fitness goals in spite of set-backs or because they lead busy lives. They ‘prove’ that if the featured women, who are ‘just like the readers’ can achieve all these things, then so can any other woman. But it is worth noting that neither the women in the ‘work in progress’, nor the women in the ‘total package’ are exactly ‘average women’; rather they are all very unusual women in terms of either their life-circumstance, or their ability to take on so much. For example, Patti Franklin of the May 2004 issue “gets up between 4:30a.m. and 5:00a.m. every morning to fit in an hour of aerobics before getting the kids ready for school” (Embrett, 2004: 48). This is definitely not something most ‘average’ women would do. Further, the women in these stories tend to have bodies are in ‘competition shape’. Their bodies are very defined and have very little fat – definitely not the kind of bodies most ‘average’ women achieve.

Interestingly these two examples (‘Work in Progress’ and ‘Total Package’) echo Ferguson’s (1983) observations about dominant discourses of gender in women’s weeklies. She argues that women’s weeklies have two directives that encourage women to look after themselves. The first emphasises continually striving towards self-improvement in order to achieve an even closer approximation of perfection (the ‘Total Package’ article). The second directive “holds out a carrot of hope that one’s material, physical or emotional disasters can be overcome through the application of sufficient

effort, courage and true grit” (Ferguson, 1983: 50). The ‘work in progress’ is an excellent example of this second directive.

Nutrition and dieting

As mentioned earlier, nutrition and dieting is one area of health and fitness that all magazines address in some way, and using magazines to learn about nutrition and dieting was part of the ‘work’ the women I spoke to did outside of the gym. A lot of this work involved researching different diets and learning about how different food affects the body. Most of the women I interviewed also followed the different recipes and diets that they found in the magazines. However, they also put a lot of ‘work’ into reading the dietary information critically, because many of them told me that a lot of the diets in the magazines were too difficult or impractical for them to follow precisely. As a result most women were very selective. The most common way the women took up the dietary advice was by using the recipes in the magazines, but ignoring the meal plans of which the recipes were often a part. In this way they learned how to prepare some healthy meals, but did not have to pay attention to the often difficult to follow meal plans, or confusing advice.

A common feature of women’s fitness magazines is that they present dietary information in a way that constructs food as something to be afraid of, and intimate that certain foods are almost dangerous in and of themselves. For example, *Oxygen* includes a four-page spread entitled “Tempted by Twizzlers” which focuses on beating sugar addiction (Vangerwen, 2004: 112-115). In this article sugar is constructed as a drug that could ruin even the best-made diet plan. It talks about being ‘stripped of temptation’ or ‘falling off the wagon’; phrases often used to refer to arguably more severe addictions to

alcohol and other drugs. Dr Neal Barnard, author of *Breaking Food Seduction*, claims that “the most commonly desired foods [like sugar] affect our brains like drugs” (Vangerwen, 2004: 113). What is confusing is that the article also claims that “some cravings are a genuine response to hunger...[so] your body is calling for a quick charge...most easily found in high-glycemic, calorie dense foods [sugar]” (ibid). This statement suggests that there *are* times when sugar is a good choice. However, this statement is not highlighted, instead the emphasis is on not eating *any* refined sugar.

Muscle and Fitness Hers (June/July 2004) provides another example of confusing dietary advice in women’s magazines (Ragland, 2004). The cover page of this magazine claims to give women the “low-down on low-carb foods”; however, the related article fails to address the question adequately. Instead of providing the ‘low-down’ the article offers women a one-column outline of low carb foods, which concludes that if you eat more calories than you burn you will put on weight, regardless of carb content. Although this appears to be a logical statement, it falls short of meeting the promise of providing the ‘*low-down* on low-carb food’. Furthermore the article claims that low-carb foods contain fewer carbs than their regular counterparts, but it is up to the consumer to read the labels, which may often be:

[A] numbers game [since] the manufacturers don’t count ‘non-impact’ carbs like fibre, glycerine and other factors that usually make it into the carbohydrate counts, [or] they [may] simply reduce the serving size, which reduces carbs (Ragland, 2004: 56).

So, rather than giving the ‘low-down’ on low carb foods this article leaves the reader still questioning whether eating a lower carb product is important, and if so (given the

apparent mis-representation of information on nutrition labels) how they are then meant to select the most appropriate low-carb food.

In contrast, the dietary information in the men's magazine I looked at suggests a totally different approach. The men's magazines encourage men to fuel their bodies for their workouts and to "bulk up with [menus] for maximum muscle growth" (Inceldon, 2004: 110). Men are not made to feel afraid of food or eating, rather they are encouraged to utilize food as a tool to achieve the perfect body not by avoiding it, but by consuming it. For example, the January issue of *Men's Fitness* instructs readers to "Get Jacked this morning [with] eight breakfasts to crank your energy up to 10 or 11" (Ward, 2004: 44). The idea is to use food to feed the body and fuel the day's activity.

In addition, the January 2004 issue of *Men's Fitness* contains an article on 'carbs' similar to the one I discussed earlier. However, rather than taking up a whole page as the one in the women's magazine did, the article in the men's magazine is a barely-200-word expose entitled "Label Police – Not another carb scam" (Heller, 2004: 46). The article clearly states that "most low-carb bars don't contain any fewer calories than bars filled with regular carbs" and "the only way to calculate the actual carb content in the food you're eating is to ignore all claims on the packaging except for the actual number of carbs listed in the nutrition facts" (ibid). The article points out that most low-carb products are filled up with sugar alcohols, which are essentially the same as carbs, the only difference being that they are digested slightly differently from regular carbs. Further, to help readers sort out the facts, the article lists the carb 'culprits' by their scientific names so that if they aren't listed in the nutrition facts, they can be found easily in the ingredients list. After reading this short write-up, the reader is left much more

informed about ‘carb-scams’ than they would have been had they gone to *Muscle and Fitness Hers* article for advice. This sort of disparity between the men’s and women’s magazines appeared to be a common occurrence. Generally the men’s magazine took what appears to be a more straightforward approach to food and nutrition.

Navigating the contradictions

It is clear from the examples discussed above that the assessing and selecting reliable information from fitness magazines is not a straightforward task. There is a lot of interpretive work that needs to be done in order to decide which articles are worthwhile.

Amy made an astute comment about the reading of fitness magazines:

When you first read a magazine you think oh that’s such great information and you don’t think twice about it, but when you start to critique it, it really pays to pay attention to who the author is and what their credibility is...is the article going to have a flaw, or a hidden message to it? You really have to analyze, but the average person doesn’t, they just read it at face value. (Amy).

Obviously women have to learn to sort through the information in the magazines. But to add to this difficulty, the magazines do little to address the pressures and contradictions women face when trying to conform to unrealistic body images. Further, when they do, often their attempts are either flawed or made redundant because of the conflicting images that are contained within other parts of the magazine. For example, in *Beyond Fitness* magazine (a free local magazine aimed at the ‘average’ member of the health and fitness community of Calgary) there is a section entitled “tips for a better body

image in the exercise environment” (Vogel, 2004: 8). The article encourages readers to question fitness advertisements that picture the ever-present young fit and slim models that the fitness industry promotes. It notes that such images do not recognize diversity, and furthermore, they work to intimidate people from getting involved in the gym. However, the rest of the magazine is filled with women who could only be categorized as ‘models’, they are exactly what the article was being critical of –young, slim, beautiful and cellulite free². As Lynette said: (in reference to magazines that put across unrealistic images of women’s bodies) “if they were trying to help you be more realistic they’d have more medium sized people”.

I found that in general most of the women I interviewed recognized the contradictions within magazines, and very few (if any) took the magazine images at face value. However, this is not to say that they were not affected by the images. For example, some of the women I spoke to told me that they viewed the women’s bodies in the women’s magazines as unattainable for them, but at the same time, while noting the contradiction, still expressed a desire to be like them.

E: I’m also interested in how you see the women in the magazines?

M: Um, well I, it’s weird you’re skipping through it and you’re like wow you know she has fantastic abs, she has fantastic arms you know. You almost take them as reality, I know like that’s not attainable for everybody, it’s airbrushed and all that kind of stuff, but when you’re flipping through it you’re like I want that anyways, you know it’s just your logic holds back a little bit and your emotion takes over. Like I know

² I appreciate the questions of editorial control here. Advertising content may directly contradict the message being promoted editorially.

that's not exactly how they look and everything, but I'd like to believe it.

I'd like to believe that everybody can look like that even though it's not reality at all (Marie)

Here Marie clearly articulates the contradictory way she took up the images and information in the fitness magazines. The magazines show the reader the highest possible level of achievement (regardless of the fact that the image is altered). This image hooks into most women's desires to push their bodies to become closer to that ideal. So while Marie manages to dilute the images in the magazines by super-imposing her own rational knowledge about airbrushing and other tricks, the images still work to evoke an emotional response for her.

Lynette's reading of the magazines, like Marie's, demonstrated how women recognize the images as unrealistic, while at the same time being influenced by them.

L: [E]ven when you see anything to do with weight-loss or anything it's always unrealistic pictures that you see: "Oh this is what you could be!"

Okay, if you were only 20 pounds over that when you started.

E: When you see those pictures, how does that make you feel?

L: It makes me feel worse actually, it makes me increase my gym, I try to go twice as hard, just hoping you know, just trying to get rid of the frustration with them, but it is frustrating. (Lynette)

From Lynette's comments it could be argued that the magazines provide an image that is 'pleasurable'. Images in magazines represent a certain type of feminine 'look' that is recognized to be visually pleasing, so there is a certain amount of pleasure gained from

gazing at the women in the magazines. However, Winship (1987) argues that while the images in magazines are consumed as pleasurable, at the same time the pleasure is also pain, because women are forced to recognize that more often than not, they do not look like the images in the magazines. So, while Marie and Lynette suggested that they enjoyed looking at the women in the magazines, their comments point to a certain amount of difficulty, because while they are reading the magazines they are forced to come to terms with the fact that they do not look like the women pictured.

Some women of the women I interviewed managed the psychological tug of war between the emotional pull to be like the models in the magazines, and the opposing more rationalized push away from such unrealistic images by actively choosing to emulate models that had body shapes more similar to their own. Laura was one woman who expertly navigated her way around the pressures to conform to the fictitious images promoted by the fitness magazines. Although Laura admitted that at one point she had unsuccessfully attempted to emulate the stick thin models, she explained that now she chose to focus on the models and celebrities who had similar body-types to her.

L: I quite like the actress Kate Winslet, because I think she has a similar body to mine, which makes me just like her more so if she's...wearing a dress at the [British Film and Television Awards]...I will pay attention to what she wears, because I think anything that looks nice on her, will probably look nice on me. So it's shifted from looking at people like Charleze Theron and Nicole Kidman, people I could never be, not even with all the bust surgery in the world, to being a bit more realistic and thinking well, Kate Winslet's very beautiful, she's not very thin, she's

quite normal and she still manages to look beautiful, so I will emulate her as opposed to some of these unrealistic women...(Laura)

Another way in which Laura tried to manage the conflict between the ideal body and her own body, especially when she was bigger, was by choosing to buy magazines that were for bigger women.

L: And oh once when I was really quite big, I bought a magazine for bigger people. Coz I thought, they'll tell me where to get clothes and they'll tell me how to hide, because some of the magazines will say wear these jeans if you've got a big bum, and the model will be you know basically dead she's so skinny and I'll just think where's your arse! Either you have a really big bum and those jeans are miracle workers, or you don't have one, so any jean will make you look like you have a smaller bum. So I didn't like that so, so I liked the big girl magazines, only for the fact that they would have models that did have big bums, or did have big tummies or big arms or whatever. But I only bought those once or twice, because I was embarrassed to buy them, because I felt ashamed and you know people would always say to me, you have such a pretty face, it's such a shame about the rest of you...it was almost a way, I felt that it was sort of accepting defeat instead of doing something about it. (Laura)

By buying 'big girl' magazines Laura effectively opted out of the societal push to be like the skinny models. However, her comment that she felt as though she was accepting defeat points to the shame some women may feel for failing to live up to the moral imperative of self-improvement. Dominant discourses of femininity suggest that if a

woman isn't striving to improve herself she is morally, as well as physically, lazy (Ferguson, 1983). Also, Laura's comment that "people would always say to [her], you have such a pretty face; it's such a shame about the rest of you" almost exactly echoes Duncan's (1994) example of how the panoptic gaze works in practice.

Realistic Unrealistic

Here it is worth briefly discussing the work that women do when interpreting whether an image or information is realistic or not. Most of the women I spoke to commented that the women in the magazines did not look like the women they knew in their own lives. There was therefore a certain amount of work that went into assessing whether a model's body was something to which they themselves could aspire.

This sort of assessment required the women to draw upon other resources besides the magazines in order to make an accurate judgement. For example, some of the women told me that they would assess whether a certain body was realistic for them based on their own body type.

I have a, my bone structure is bigger, like I'm bigger boned thanks to the grandparents, so I know I will never be poker thin, so I'm just going for a body figure that doesn't have any excess flub anywhere and that's healthy.
(Lynette)

Other women I spoke to assessed whether an image was realistic based on the diversity of bodies they saw around them, such as their friends, co-workers, or just women they saw in the malls. Often they were critical of magazines that did not recognize this diversity.

These women [in the magazines] are beautiful, gorgeous women...they're airbrushed, but I mean...what's wrong with any woman? Of any shape

size and whatever...what is wrong with looking at a full-figured woman,
what is wrong with looking at a bean-pole woman, flat-breasted? (Susan)

Women using men's magazines

Some women I spoke to tried to manage the contradictions and gendered stereotypes in women's magazines by choosing to look at men's magazines. Alix was one woman who opted to read men's magazines, she said:

[T]hey [the women's magazines] are too wussy...you know, they're all about losing weight or how to tone down. I think they are a lot less healthy. I think the men's ones have a lot better attitude towards health.

The women's are all about toning or losing fat in certain areas. (Alix)

A few of the other women I interviewed expressed similar views to Alix. They also said that the women's magazines were not serious enough for them. As mentioned earlier, Teri explained that she had started to read men's magazines because she found that the women's magazines were too 'light':

[J]ust you lift this weight, you'll be fine, you'll be ready for spring and the bikini, erch! I'm all about grunting, I'm just supposed to be a guy I'm sure! (Teri)

This distinction between men's and women's fitness magazines in some ways echoes the discussion in the previous chapter, where some women chose male trainers over female trainers. It could be argued that reading men's magazines accords a certain amount of status to those women who opt to read them, and perhaps also demonstrates a higher level

of commitment and seriousness to fitness, since (as mentioned earlier) in the fitness world, men's expertise is more highly valued than women's.

In this chapter I noted that fitness magazines play an important role in shaping women's gym-going. I argued that reading fitness magazines was a social process that had generalizing effects on what women do in the gym. The women I spoke to selected and attended to the same kinds of information in the magazines, and although they took it up in slightly different ways, they still constructed their workouts in a comparable fashion and did similar exercises in the gym. I argued that in order to understand how the information in the magazines is taken up it is important to understand the way women read these magazines. I noted that most of the women I interviewed used the magazines for advice on routines to do at the gym (the most obvious example of the magazines' generalizing effect), what sort of diet they should follow, and/or to keep them motivated to go to the gym. However, I also argued that reading the magazines involved a lot of 'work'. The women needed not only to have an understanding of fitness jargon, they also had to have some sort of experience with fitness and health. In addition, I noted that there was a certain amount of 'work' involved in interpreting what information and/or images were realistic. I claimed that fitness magazines contain many contradictions. For example, on the one hand they encouraged women to be more realistic with their body goals, but then at the same time they displayed images of bodies that for most women were impossible to attain. However, it was clear that the women I interviewed recognized these contradictions and in response had various strategies for managing them. Most of the women I spoke to resisted the restrictive gender stereotypes in the magazines by

either striving for an ‘ideal’ that was more attainable for them, or by opting out of the discourse altogether by reading men’s magazines instead.

In the next chapter, I bring together this discussion of fitness magazines with findings from the interviews described in Chapter Four. I also reflect on my research by pointing out some of the contributions of this study, as well as some of the limitations. In addition, I critique my methodological approach and make some suggestions for future research.

Chapter Six: Discussion and Conclusions

This research examined, using an institutional ethnographic approach, the work involved in being a woman at the gym. It shed light on the way dominant discourses of gender underpin this work and highlighted the links between the ‘ruling’ and ‘extended’ relations of the fitness industry. It established the inter-connectedness between these broader relations and demonstrated how they coordinate the work women do at the gym.

I noted that the men at the gym were part of the extended relations of the fitness industry and I argued that they both directly and indirectly shaped and constrained the work women did in the gym. However, I also suggested that other extended relations of the fitness industry, such as friends and family, influenced their work too. For example, Laura’s comment that “people would always say to [her], you have such a pretty face; it’s such a shame about the rest of you” was one example I gave of how other extended relations, not immediately related to the fitness industry, influenced women’s participation in the gym.

I also discussed the role played by fitness magazines (part of the broader ruling relations of the gym) played in shaping the work women did in the gym. I argued that underpinning both the women’s experiences of the gym and their use of the fitness magazines, was the over-riding theme of women constantly needing to negotiate and (re)construct their femininity. I argued that the women were faced with many contradictions, and as a result were caught up in a continual push-pull situation: on the one hand most women were pulled towards conforming to traditional stereotypes, but on the other hand they were simultaneously pushed away from them.

Conforming or resisting dominant discourses of gender

Women's experiences of the gym

I argued that the women's accounts of their gym-going called into question the categorical distinction between a man's and a woman's body. I recalled how many of the women explained that they worked on their bodies in same way as men, and in some cases they showed the men that they were physically just as capable at lifting weights, thus disproving assumptions that 'feminine' women cannot be muscled or strong. However, it was obvious that despite these contradictions, they still considered themselves and their bodies to be 'feminine'. This supports other researchers' claims that understanding the social construction of bodies requires an emphasis on agency (Frye, 1983; Kessler and McKenna, 1978; Kane, 1995; Cox and Thompson, 2000). Clearly the women I spoke to were active in resisting dominant discourses of gender, and although their acts of resistance were directed and informed by gender stereotypes they consciously chose when and to what extent they would contradict the dominant discourse.

The women's simultaneous conformity and resistance to gender stereotypes also provided support for the suggestion that femininity is not fixed; rather it is dependent upon, and determined by, social circumstances. I noted that many women said that they would change their behaviour and appearances in order to come across as more 'feminine'. For example, I noted that some women did not mind if they did not look particularly 'feminine' when they worked out at women's only gyms, but that when they went to co-ed gyms they felt pressure to conform. I also recalled how some women said that they felt they could not work out as hard when they were at co-ed gyms, because

they did not want the men to see them as ‘unfeminine’. It is therefore obvious from these women’s accounts that the extent to which they conformed to gender stereotypes was in part shaped by social circumstances; they monitored and adapted their ‘femininity’ to suit the situation.

Fitness magazines

In the discussion of the women’s use of fitness magazines I argued that the fitness texts inspire women to strive for an unrealistic ‘ideal’. I also noted that this representation of the ‘ideal’ created an internal conflict for the women because while they acknowledged that the ideal in the magazine was unrealistic for them to achieve, they also wanted to be like the ‘ideal’. I argued that this was one of the contradictions presented to women in fitness magazines and I pointed out how the women I interviewed negotiated and constructed a body image for themselves that was partially directed by this dominant discourse (in that it recognized the ‘ideal’ in some way) but was at the same time realistic for them to achieve. For instance I spoke about those women who mentioned that they consciously aspired to look more like models who had figures more like their own. In this way these women still emulated a socially acceptable feminine ‘ideal’ even though it was not *the* ‘ideal’.

Magazines and women’s ‘work’ in the gym

The decision in this research project to examine both the visible and invisible work women do in the gym, and some of the fitness magazines they use as a resource, was informed by the principles of institutional ethnography. As noted earlier, one goal of institutional ethnographic work is to explicate the linkages between different institutional settings. So, in Chapter Four I examined the work women did in the gym, and in Chapter

Five I discussed the women's use of fitness magazines. I therefore now turn to an examination of the linkages between these two sections of my research, and explore the ways the magazines may have informed the gym work.

Clearly there was a very direct and clear link between the workout *routines* women did in the gym, and the workouts contained in the magazines. However this was the only obvious connection. There were *some* other connections, but these were much less obvious.

It was clear from my discussion that all of the contradictions the women faced, both in the magazines and in the gym, were underscored by dominant discourses of gender. But it was not clear whether these gender stereotypes originated in the gym, or in the magazines. However knowing the origins is not so important, especially from an institutional ethnographic perspective, which (as noted earlier) focuses on explaining the links between settings, rather than determining any exact hierarchical flow of information. Therefore in this discussion I will not address the origins of the discourse; instead I will seek to tease out the inter-connectedness between the gym and the fitness magazines.

It was obvious that the fitness magazines informed the women's choices to structure an exercise routine that either resisted or conformed to dominant discourses of gender. I noted that the women I interviewed tended to choose between reading women's fitness magazines or men's fitness magazines. Those who read men's magazines tended to do workouts that were more 'masculine'. Alternatively, those who read women's magazines tended to work on their bodies in a way that was regarded as more suitable for

women. So the magazines obviously coordinated the women's gendered behaviour in the gym.

Further, and in light of the above comment, it was plain that the kind of magazine women chose to read influenced whether the women developed bodies that conformed to, or resisted, the 'ideal' female body. Those women who read women's magazines shaped their bodies to be more in line with the slim, toned, feminine 'ideal'. In comparison, those women who read men's magazines tended to develop a more traditionally 'masculine' body. So clearly the fitness magazines played a role in determining the physical appearance of women's bodies in the gym.

I argued that both the fitness magazines and the gym evoked within the women an emotional push-pull response. I noted that in the gym some women were pulled towards meeting some of the restrictive definitions of femininity, but at the same time they were also pushed away from them. In a similar vein, I recalled how some women were pulled towards emulating the models in the fitness magazines, but at the same time were pushed away from them, mostly because they saw the models' bodies as unrealistic for them to achieve. So, just as women had to manage the fine line between femininity and masculinity in the gym, they also had to learn to define the line between what was a realistic body for them to aspire to and what was an unrealistic one.

Reflections on the research

Contributions

The major contribution of this research is its use of institutional ethnography to study elements of the fitness industry not usually combined in one project. As I noted in Chapter Two, work on women's bodies and their presence in sport has usually been removed from the broader institutional context. Institutional ethnography made it

possible to make visible the many different intersecting institutional levels that influence women's participation in the gym. Further, by bringing to light these reflexive relationships it was possible to begin to explain, in an operational way, why the women did what they did at the gym.

Most significantly institutional ethnography made it possible to highlight the generalizing effects fitness magazines had on coordinating women's activities in the gym. Fitness magazines are resources that are produced under the broader umbrella of the fitness industry and are made available to women to inform their gym-going. Clearly their influence is profound, since as I noted, *all* of the women I spoke to used fitness magazines (to varying degrees) to get advice on new exercises to do at the gym and how to structure their routines. This meant that most women did similar routines and exercises at the gym, thus pointing to the responsibility of the fitness magazine industry in coordinating and directing women's workouts at the gym. Also because these fitness magazines are reproduced all over North America, it is reasonable to assume that their 'generalizing effects' reach well beyond the women in my study.

Institutional ethnography also made it possible to bring to the fore the unobservable work involved in being a woman at the gym. I noted in the discussion that there was a lot of work involved in reading the magazines, designing exercise routines and navigating the male dominated environment of the gym. But if one were only to *observe* the women in the gym, none of this work would be seen. The institutional ethnographic focus on work helped guide my investigation towards a discovery of these usually invisible work practices and in turn a sense of how this work coordinated their activities in the gym.

The use of institutional ethnography also provides a new and innovative approach to the study of fitness magazines. As stated earlier, many researchers have looked, in a *theoretical* way, at how gender stereotypes are reproduced in fitness magazines.

However, to my knowledge, no studies have looked in a *concrete operational* way at the relationship between women's activities in the gym and fitness magazines. My study therefore provides a new angle to the study of fitness magazines in that it discusses how women's gym-going is informed by the gendered images they present. It therefore bridges the gap between women's activities in the gym and the role magazines play in shaping those activities.

Further, I mentioned earlier that previous studies have researched groups of women who participate in male-dominated physical activity. I also noted that other studies have investigated the experiences of women who use the gym to train for body-building or aerobics. But I also pointed out, that to my knowledge, no studies have looked at women who go to the gym to workout out independently. My research therefore expands this current body of literature by focusing on this previously unstudied group of women.

Limitations

As a piece of institutional ethnographic work this study was very limited in its exploration of the 'extended relations' and 'ruling relations' of the 'fitness industry'. By selectively focusing only on men 'members', and fitness magazines among other text-based resources, it tackled only a very small slice of the institutional context.

Revisiting my choices of which institutional elements to investigate, it could be argued that I should have paid more attention to men as part of the extended relations of

the gym – the fitness industry. Although this research examined the role men played in shaping the women's participation in the gym, arguably (especially given how influential men were) this exploration could have been taken further. However, there are two reasons why I did not include a deeper exploration of men in the gym context. First, the significance of men's relationship to women in the gym only became clear once the interviews progressed. Second, once I had discovered the significance of this relationship it was, by then, logistically impossible to build it into my project.

Two other more general criticisms might also be levelled. Firstly, as noted earlier, the women who participated in this study were relatively homogenous. On the whole they were well educated, exclusively white, and predominantly middle-class. However, I noted that this homogeneity was in some ways expected and not too problematic because of my methodological approach. Secondly, some might also question (especially given my own personal interest in exercise and the body) the degree to which my findings accurately reflect the views of the women I interviewed, and not my own biases or perspectives. However, as I mentioned earlier, I was fully aware of my closeness to the research topic; I never tried to hide my involvement or deny that my own experiences shaped some of my methodological decisions. However, I also pointed out the view of many researchers that it is actually valuable to be a part of what you are studying (Emerson, Fretz and Shaw, 1995; De Vault, 1999; Hertz, 1995)

Revisiting the method

Earlier I claimed that the use of institutional ethnography was a contribution of this research, because it allowed me to make visible the invisible work involved in being a woman at the gym, and it also highlighted fitness magazines as common resources

responsible for generalizing processes. However, it is worth noting what this choice also foreclosed. The heart of this question is the interview style and topic focus.

Because institutional ethnography emphasizes a conversational style, questions tend to change slightly from one interview to the next (De Vault & McCoy, 2002; Smith, 2002). As a result it is difficult to generalize from these findings, or say with absolute certainty that these same findings would be replicated if I were to interview women similar to those that I interviewed. However, as intimated earlier this lack of generalizability is not really a problem given my methodological approach. Institutional ethnographers are not aiming to make any ‘truth claims’ about a population, nor are they seeking to standardize the questions they ask in the interviews; rather the purpose of each institutional ethnographic interview is to build and develop questions based on the one before it (De Vault & McCoy, 2002). Questions, though, do have a particular concrete focus on what is being *done*. What might a different interview format and focus have yielded?

Because my interviewing style focused so closely on work it excluded an examination of other aspects of the women’s gym-going that might have led to a richer exploration of this world. In hindsight this topic area was perhaps more suitable to a type of interviewing style that was less directed towards work, and more able to include, for example, an exploration of the meanings women attach to their involvement in the gym.

Suggestions for future research

The limitations noted above lead to ideas for new research. Obviously from an institutional ethnographic perspective it would be worthwhile to expand the scope of this

study to investigate how femininity and the 'ideal' female body is negotiated, constructed and coordinated by other extended or ruling relations within the fitness industry. This kind of study could focus on health food suppliers, advertisers, fitness magazine businesses or sports clothing retailers. Alternatively, future research could look at other social institutions that are implicated in the social construction of the 'ideal' body, such as schools and governmental institutions.

I noted earlier that men's perspectives are notably lacking from this research project; this is also an area that future research could address. Obviously men are not only implicated in the perpetuation of gender-appropriate behaviours in the gym, they are part of the on-going social (re)construction of the 'ideal' female body. Including a men's perspective would provide greater insight into the reflexive processes involved in creating a gendered identity in the gym. In addition, it would seem logical to assume that men, as well as women, are faced with pressures to conform to gender stereotypes and work on their bodies in a way that corresponds to definitions of 'masculinity' and the 'ideal' male body. Future research could therefore investigate how men work to negotiate and construct 'masculinity' within the environment of the gym, and how men work to conform to, or resist, dominant discourses of gender.

I observed earlier that the group of women in my study were unique in their high level of commitment to health and exercise. As a result, they were generally closer to the 'ideal' female body than most women. I argue that it would be valuable for future studies to investigate over-weight or physically disabled women who go to the gym. It would be valuable to understand how these women work to navigate and negotiate dominant discourses of gender, and manage information and images that mark them as deviant or

‘other’. Through this kind of research it might be possible to understand some of the barriers that prevent women from participating in exercise.

Conclusion

Without a doubt fitness magazines, and the fact that the gym is still mostly a male domain, influence women’s experiences of the gym. I argued that using institutional ethnography as a methodological approach (although it was noted to have some shortcomings) allowed for a fresh and innovative examination of women’s experiences of their gendered bodies in the gym environment. The main contribution of this research was that it uncovered the invisible work that was done by women who go to the gym, and it showed how dominant discourses of gender underpin much of this ‘work’. In addition, it demonstrated that the women I spoke to were not passive dupes to this discourse, since most of them actively modified this discourse in different ways, at different times.

In summary, although I am acutely aware of this study’s limitations, I believe that it was a worthwhile exercise. This research problematized some of the invisible work done by women in the gym, and in doing so exposed some of the unique knowledge that gym-going women possess. Also, from a personal point of view it gave me a deeper understanding of the way I myself work to navigate gendered environments. It also made me realize the amount of invisible work I do behind the scenes, that in turn works to guide and improve my training programmes.

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Appendix A

Recruitment poster

Are you a dedicated gym-goer?



If so then *I* would like to talk to *YOU*!

I am doing a study as part of my Masters Thesis at the University of Calgary on the activities women do at the gym. I'm interested in understanding how women learn to use the gym and also women's use of mass-media as it relates to their gym going.

I am interested in interviewing women who are 18 years of age or older, who go to the gym 5 times a week or more for at least an hour or more at a time.

The interviews will be held at a time and place that is convenient to you, and will take around an hour and a half to two hours. Participation is entirely voluntary and you are free to withdraw at any time.

If you are interested in being part of this study, or would like more information please contact:

**Emily Baird
Email: ekbaird@ucalgary.ca
Phone: 220-3209**

Appendix B

Consent Form

Research Project Title: Learning body-work: women, gyms and fitness centres.

Investigator: Emily Baird.

This consent form, a copy of which has been given to you, is part of the process of informed consent. It should give you a basic idea of what the research is about and what your participation will involve. If you would like more details about something mentioned here, or information not included here, you should feel free to ask. Please take time to read this carefully and to understand any accompanying information.

What is this research about?

This research centres around the activities women do at the gym. It aims to discover how women learn which activities they should do in the gym to shape their bodies in certain ways. The aim of the research is to learn how women learn to use the gym including women's use of the mass-media related to sport and fitness.

The expected outcomes of this research include a Masters Thesis, written reports, conference presentations, book chapter and articles in scholarly journals.

What will your participation in the research involve?

Your participation will involve one interview that will typically last between an hour and a half and two hours. The interview will cover involvement in the gym, the routine followed in the gym, the decisions that are made as to what to do at the gym each day, aspects of body-care such as diet and clothing and will also discuss the use of mass-media as it relates to gym-going. With your permission the interview will be tape-recorded so that it can be transcribed. In addition, there is the possibility that you may be asked to do a follow-up interview. Once again your participation in this interview will be entirely voluntary and you will be free to refuse or withdraw at anytime.

Risks and benefits

Participating in this research poses no known risk to you. It is not expected that you will be harmed in any way by participating in this study. However you should be aware, that because the topic area being discussed is of a personal nature, there is a minimal risk that some of the questions may have potential to upset you. But, as mentioned below in more detail, you are completely free to refuse to answer any questions (for *any* reason) and/or withdraw from the study.

Further, it cannot be guaranteed that you will benefit directly from participating in this study. However, people who take part in interview studies often say they appreciate have the chance to reflect on their experience and talk about it with an interested listener.

Protecting your rights and privacy

In taking part in the interview it is understood that you agree to participate in an interview on women's participation in the gym undertaken by Emily Baird of the Department of Sociology, University of Calgary.

It is also important that you understand that your initial agreement to be interviewed obligates you in no way. You can withdraw from the interview at any time or refuse to answer any questions that you feel uncomfortable answering for *any* reason..

Further, you should be aware that only the investigator and her supervisors will listen to the tape-recorded interviews. Some of the information you give us might be quoted in the writing up of the research findings. However, the research is designed to protect your anonymity as much as possible. In all final reports of the study no-one will be identified. All information will be reported so as not to reveal the interviewee's identity. So although some quotations from your interview may be used real names will not be used. Pseudonyms will be used for you and other people in your life, and some details about your situation may be changed to hide your identity even further.

Your signature

Your signature on this form indicates that you have understood to your satisfaction the information regarding participation in the research project and agree to participate as a subject. In no way does this waive your rights to withdraw at any time. You are free to refuse to answer any questions or discontinue the interview. Your continued participation should be as informed as and as willing as your initial consent. Please feel free to ask for clarification or new information throughout your participation. If you have any further questions specific to the research please contact my supervisor, Dr. Gillian Ranson (email: ranson@ucalgary.ca, or phone: 220-6511). If you have any questions or issues concerning this project that are not related to the specifics of the research you may also contact the Research Services Office at 220-3782 and ask for Mrs. Patricia Evans.

Participant's Signature

Date

Investigator's Signature

Date

Appendix C

Interview Guide

Background Information (END)

What is your occupation?
Highest level of education?
How old are you?

I Entry into the gym

Describe to me how you first became interested in going to the gym?
How did the initial interest continue?
Which people might have played a role in influencing your involvement in the gym?
How were they instrumental?
Did you have fitness/sport interests beforehand?
What has your involvement been like since you started going to the gym?
How long have you been going to the gym for?
What motivates you now? What are the rewards?
What are your dislikes?

II Routine of the gym

Run me through your daily routine at the gym.
Run me through a day at the gym?
How do you decide what to do each day?
How has your routine changed over time?
Why has it changed?
Where might you get new ideas from as to what you do at the gym?
How often do you change your routine at the gym?
What might influence you to change your routine at the gym?
What are your goals? Tell me what you are working on when you go to the gym.
How many reps do you do?
How did you learn what to do at the gym?
Do any aspects of the gym environment frustrate you?

III Gender

Describe to me what it is like to be a woman in the gym?
Can you recall any incidents where you felt your status as a woman affected your involvement in the gym? Positively? Negatively?

IV Body Work

What do you wear to the gym each day?
Has what you wear to the gym changed over time?
Where do you learn what to wear to the gym? What criteria must your clothing meet?
In what ways do you pay attention to your diet?

Where do you get dietary information from?
What sort of body are you working for?
Describe to me how you look after your body. Where do you learn what you need to do in order to care for your body?

V Family Spouse and Partners

Is any family member also involved in going to the gym?
Were your parents either active or gym-goers themselves?
How do you manage to fit your gym-going around other commitments such as family, work and friends?
Is your partner accepting of your gym-going? Does he/she encourage and support it?
How long have you been together?

VI Text Information

Do you read magazines?
Which ones?
How often do you read magazines?
How do you select a magazine?
Do you have a favorite magazine? If so, why is it your favorite?
Do you get ideas about what to do at the gym from the magazines?
What constitutes a good magazine?
What constitutes a bad magazine?
Are the people in magazines like real people? In what way are they? In what way aren't they?
How would you describe your magazine reading to me if you were to meet me at a party?
What do you do with your magazines when you are finished with them?
Based on Radway (1991: 224).

Radway, J. (1991). *Reading the Romance: Women, patriarchy and popular literature*. University of North Carolina Press: Capitol Hill.

Follow-up interview

In this interview I would ask women to bring some of their magazines, or I might bring some for them. I would ask them to walk me through how they would read the magazines. For example, which bits are they most interested in and why. I would also ask them to describe to me which aspects (e.g. ads, feature articles etc) are most helpful and why. I would also ask them to talk to me about their favorite magazine and tell me what it is they like about it. I would ask them to point out the particular features they find most appealing.

Appendix D

Interview Sheet – demographics

What year were you born? _____

What is your occupation? _____

What is your highest level of education? _____

Length of relationship (or date of marriage if applicable): _____

Date(s) of birth of child(ren): _____

Names and date (s) of birth of sibling(s): _____
